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Continue with the old or start anew? An examination of Congressional election theories in the context of the 1946, 1948, 1994 and 1996 elections

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Continue With the Old or Start Anew?
An Examination of Congressional Election Theories in the Context of the 1946, 1948, 1994 and 1996 Elections

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Senior Honors Thesis
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May, 1998
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Lizzie Ivry
May, 1998
Waterville, ME
The 1994 and 1996 congressional elections were unprecedented watershed events in recent electoral history. In 1994, the Republicans gained control of both the House of Representatives and the Senate for the first time in 40 years. Not only did the Republicans sweep control of both chambers of Congress, but they did so overwhelmingly. Not one Republican incumbent seeking reelection lost in the House, the Senate, or in state governorships. The new Republican leadership of the 104th Congress, particularly Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich (R-GA), led a wave of conservatism through legislation in the Contract with America and the budget debate of 1996. In the 1996 elections, despite the reelection of President Bill Clinton to the White House, the first Democrat to be reelected to a second term since Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Republicans kept control of the House and Senate. They did so giving up only five seats in the House and gaining two in the Senate.

The closest historical elections to 1994 and 1996 were those during the Harry Truman presidency in 1946 and 1948. As happened in 1994, the Republicans triumphed in 1946, taking control of both chambers of Congress. However the Republicans in the 80th Congress, nicknamed the "Do-Nothing Congress," were less successful in 1948 when the Democrats rebounded and recaptured control.

The differences in these election results raise several questions about the role and purpose of congressional elections in our democratic society. What factors could explain why two such similar elections, those of 1946 and 1994, were followed by two such different elections, those of 1948 and 1996? Has the relationship between congressional elections and congressional behaviors changed in the past 50 years? Are congressional elections still a referendum of the previous Congress and the incumbent presidency, or are other factors influencing the electorate's voting patterns? Were the midterm elections of 1946 and 1994 just extreme examples of what political scientists and politicians have come
to expect in off-year elections? And finally, what do these periods indicate about the future of divided government in the United States?

The remainder of this thesis will answer these questions in order to understand more thoroughly the relationship between congressional elections and congressional behavior. The first section provides a brief history of the purpose of congressional elections as designed by our Founders, followed by a literature review discussing post-World War II theories of congressional campaigns, elections, and divided government. Section II describes the Truman experience between 1946 and 1948, the congressional elections of 1946 and 1948 as well as the record of the 80th Congress. Section III follows a similar format, discussing the Clinton experience, the congressional elections of 1994 and 1996, and the record of the 104th Congress. Section IV is an analysis comparing the data presented in Sections II and III and answering the questions raised above in addition to a conclusion.
I. Literature Review

In order to understand the particular elections of 1946, 1948, 1994 and 1996, one must have a clear understanding of the purpose of elections in a democratic society and how they were designed by our Founders to fulfill that role. Paul Herrnson, a political scientist specializing on congressional elections, explained the purpose of elections as:

the centerpiece of democracy. They are the means Americans use to choose their political leader, and they give those who have been elected the authority to rule. Elections also provide the American people with a vehicle for expressing their views about the directions they think this rule ought to take. In theory, elections are the principal mechanism for ensuring "government of the people, by the people [and] for the people."¹

Herrnson's explanation of elections stems from the historical debate over the structure of democracy in the United States, as was discussed by delegates at the Constitutional Convention in 1787.

At the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, it was easily agreed that the United States would have an elected legislature. However, the organization, the powers, and the selection process of the legislative branch were topics open for debate. The Founders were punctilious in creating a Constitution for the nascent government. They deliberated extensively over the timing and structure of congressional elections. The basis of representation, such as how the seats in the legislature were to be apportioned, and the extent of popular participation in electing officials, was most controversial.² Delegates from large states naturally wanted representation to be apportioned by population, while delegates from smaller states feared that their interests would be outweighed if only population size mattered, thus they naturally preferred equal representation. This initial conflict was

resolved through what is today known as the "Great Compromise," a political agreement to establish a bicameral legislature, which had been exemplified in Britain, and had the support of 10 of the 13 colonies. The House of Representatives, as established in Article I, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution, apportioned seats by population to meet the demands of the larger states. Article I, Section 3 of the U.S. Constitution met the demands of the smaller states by establishing the Senate, in which each state would have equal representation by choosing two senators.

Delegates also debated the extent to which the election of representatives and senators should be conducted through popular participation. A bicameral legislature certainly allowed for different levels of popular involvement in choosing members of Congress. Anti-Federalists supported annual elections in the House of Representatives, however, this concept was starkly opposed by Federalists, led by James Madison, who favored three-year terms for members of the House. In Federalist No. 37, Madison argued for less frequent elections. While he conceded that liberty demanded frequent elections, he advocated that the stability and energy of a government required longer terms of office. As Madison explained in Federalist No. 37:

The genius of republican liberty seems to demand on one side not only that all power should be derived from the people, but that those intrusted with it should be kept in dependence on the people by a short duration of their appointments; and that even during this short period that trust should be placed not in a few, but a number of hands. Stability, on the contrary, requires that the hands in which power is lodged should continue for a length of time the same....whilst energy in government requires not only a certain duration of power, but the execution of it by a single hand.4

The Founders agreed that biennial elections were the compromise between annual elections and three-year terms. As Gary Jacobson explained, "Broad suffrage and short terms were

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meant to ensure that one branch of government, the House, remained as close as possible to the people.  

By contrast, the Senate was designed to be more isolated from likely shifts in public sentiments. The term of office was set for six years, again a compromise from three, four, five, six, seven, and nine years that had all be proposed. Continuity was stressed by having one third of the Senate's membership elected every two years. In addition, senators were to be chosen by state legislatures rather than by voters, thus acting as what Gary Jacobson describes as a "stable and dispassionate counterweight to the more popular and radical House." Furthermore, this Senate selection process was expected to protect the new government from the volatility thought to be characteristic of democracies. This selection process changed to popular statewide elections of Senate members through the 17th Amendment, ratified by the states in 1913. Thus, the final design of the Constitution ensured the separation of powers, bicameralism, and federalism by requiring that candidates for the House, the Senate, and the presidency be chosen by different methods and constituencies. House members elected directly by the people, Senate members selected by state legislatures (before 1913) and in statewide elections (after 1913), and presidents selected through the electoral college.

The rules and requirements of congressional elections and candidates has changed little from how they were designed by the Founders. Requirements to be a candidate in the House of Representatives are outlined in Article I, Section 2: candidates must be 25 years of age, a U.S. citizen for at least seven years, and an inhabitant of the state in which he/she is elected. Requirements for Senate candidates are outlined in Article I, Section 3: candidates must be 30 years of age, a U.S. citizen for at least nine years, and an inhabitant of the state in which he/she is elected. In Article I, Section 4, the Constitution gives state legislatures the power to decide the time, places, and manner of holding elections for Congress.

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
While the Constitution carefully outlined the rules and requirements for congressional elections and candidates, little was discussed about what the campaign process to become a part of this newly designed institution would resemble. Like so many parts of our democratic government, the campaign process in both congressional and presidential elections has evolved since 1787. In addition, theories of congressional elections have also developed as political scientists have observed common trends over the years.

Aspects of the electoral process help to provide insights about the functioning of the U.S. political system. For years, political scientists have agreed that the aggregate outcome of congressional elections provides national politicians with a sense of public sentiments, particularly in regards to the state of the U.S. economy, the handling of the nation's foreign policy, as well as satisfaction by Americans on their own standard of living. In addition, results of congressional elections have been described as referenda on the incumbent executive's job performance, either punishing or rewarding members of congress in the president's party. The President's party virtually always loses some seats in midterm elections. They frequently gain seats when the President is elected and the extent of the midterm losses reflect the President's popularity. Furthermore, the quality of candidates who challenge incumbents is also a function of the President's popularity. For example, if the President is unpopular, weak congressional candidates will most likely run for office from the President's party to challenge incumbents. Since 1946, the average loss by President's party in midterm elections has been 27.5 seats, ranging from four to 52 seats. Moreover, campaigns matter a great deal in the outcome of congressional elections. Thus, the results of congressional elections are affected not only by perceptions of the performance of the government, but also by the campaign process itself.

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8 See Herrson, Congressional Elections: Campaigning at Home and in Washington, 1.
Paul Hermson carefully explains the campaign process of congressional elections. In his book, *Congressional Elections: Campaigning at Home and In Washington*, Hermson describes how individual candidates, not political parties, are the center of congressional campaigns. While political parties may contribute money or elections services to congressional candidates, the political parties do little to recruit candidates. Most congressional candidates are self-selected political entrepreneurs who raise their own money, put together their own campaign organizations, and run what has become referred to by political scientists as "candidate-centered campaigns." By holding elections for individual offices, the political success of one member of Congress is separated from another and from other government officials elected to office. This system does little to encourage teamwork in campaigning, but rather encourages House, Senate, state, and local candidates to campaign using issues and messages that they perceive to be popular in their districts, regardless of whether or not these issues and messages differ from those advocated by their party’s leader. This type of system is entirely consistent with the expectations of the framers of the U.S. Constitution. As James Madison wrote in *Federalist No. 46*:

> A local spirit will infallibly prevail...in the members of Congress...Measures will too often be decided according to their probable effect, not on the national prosperity and happiness, but on the prejudices, interests, and pursuits of the governments and people of the individual States.

While years later, former Speaker of the House, Thomas P. (Tip) O’Neill, Jr. (D-MA) interpreted Madison to mean that "all politics is local," the effects of candidate-centered campaigns do in fact extend well beyond district borders. As Gary Jacobson describes:

> The electoral politics of Congress may center on individual candidates and campaigns, but the collective results of congressional elections are what shape the course of national politics. The possibility of responsible

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representative government in the United States depends on the capacity of congressional elections to influence the course of public policy.\textsuperscript{14} While the Constitution, state laws, and the political parties do little to prohibit individuals from running for Congress, other factors related to the candidate-centered nature of the congressional electoral system favor individuals with particular personal characteristics. Strategic ambition, which is "the combination of a desire to get elected, a realistic understanding of what it takes to win, and an ability to assess the opportunities presented by a given political context," is one such characteristic that separates successful congressional candidates from the general public.\textsuperscript{15} Since there is minimal party recruitment for congressional candidates, most successful candidates must be self-starters. Ambitious candidates, often referred to as strategic, rational, or quality candidates, are those political entrepreneurs who make calculated judgments about when to run. Scholars have developed an opportunity-cost model that posits the likelihood that a candidate will run for office such that the expected value of running is equal to the sum of the expected value of winning and the expected value of losing.\textsuperscript{16} In determining the expected value of running for Congress, strategic politicians consider a number of institutional, structural, and subjective factors. The institutional factors include filing deadlines, campaign finance laws, prohibitions for or against preprimary endorsements, and other election statutes or party rules. Structural factors include the social, economic, and partisan composition of the district, its geographic compactness, the media markets that serve it, the degree of overlap between the district and lower-level electoral constituencies, and the possibilities that exist for election to some alternative office. Other subjective factors such as the political climate of the district and nation are also assessed in deciding whether to run.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{14} Jacobson, The Politics of Congressional Elections, 148.
\textsuperscript{15} Herrnson, Congressional Elections: Campaigning at Home and in Washington, 31; Also see Gary C. Jacobson and Samuel Kernell, Strategy and Choice in Congressional Elections (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), chapter 3.
\textsuperscript{17} Herrnson, Congressional Elections: Campaigning at Home and in Washington, 31.
Incumbents usually have a much easier time deciding to run for reelection than nonincumbents. Congress offers its members many incentives to want to stay in office. According to Herrnson, these advantages include the ability directly to affect policies and issues that they care about, a challenging environment in which to work, political power, and name recognition. Incumbents have an enormous advantage over their challengers because they begin the general election with greater name recognition and higher voter approval levels, greater political experience, more money, better campaign organizations than their opponents, and they have already proven to be a successful candidate at least once. In addition, incumbency advantage offers official resources including salary, travel, office, staff, and communication allowances. The franking privilege which provides members with the right to use the mails free of charge for "official business," which is broadly interpreted to include most kinds of communications to constituents, is one of the most important congressional perquisites. The name recognition, paid staff, and franking privileges that incumbents receive are often strong enough factors to deter strong opposition. Given the strong incumbency advantage, it is not surprising that there has been an average of over 90% reelection rates for incumbents seeking reelection since World War II.

The greatest factor that affects the strategic calculations of nonincumbents is whether or not the incumbent plans to run for reelection, and if so, how vulnerable he/she is. Fortunately, there are individuals who after weighing the strategic calculations, do

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18 Ibid., 32.
22 Herrnson, Congressional Elections: Campaigning at Home and in Washington, 31.
decide to challenge incumbents, enhancing the legitimacy of our democratic system. Almost all challengers begin at a disadvantage in that they almost always lack broad base support compared to the incumbent. Challengers must launch aggressive campaigns that allow them to become visible, build name recognition, provide voters with reasons to support them, and attract not only uncommitted voters, but also convince some voters to abandon the incumbent. In addition, they must have the resources to communicate effectively with the voters, which means spending money wisely and appealing to interest groups and media. Given these challenges, nonincumbents face an uphill battle in efforts to defeat an incumbent. Those who are successful not only have strong campaigns, but usually benefit from an incumbent's failure.

Open seat elections are often more interesting because they are usually more competitive and are won by smaller margins. Since voters lack strong personal loyalties to either candidate, the partisanship of the district, and the skills and resources that candidates and their organizations bring to the campaign have more of an impact than those races involving incumbents. Factors outside of the candidate’s control, such as national political trends, redistricting, and media coverage, are also more important in open seat races.

Senate races are somewhat different from House elections. First, there are on average, only 34 races every two years, thus making it more difficult to make any generalizations. Second, Senate incumbents not only have all of the advantages that House incumbents have, but they use them to run statewide campaigns. The only difference is that most challengers and open seat candidates are more "qualified" than those seeking the House. Many have served as a Representative, governor, or in some other public capacity. Previous political experience helps challengers assemble strong organizations, financial resources, media coverage, and name recognition, all of which are essential components to running successful campaigns. Since the field of candidates in Senate races is usually more competitive, the elections are usually closer. Moreover, senators oftentimes are more closely scrutinized than House members. This was evident in 1996 in South Dakota when
incumbent Senator Larry Pressler (R) was defeated by the At-Large Representative, Tim Johnson (D), and also in Iowa where incumbent Senator Tom Harkin (D) narrowly defeated Jim Ross Lightfoot (R). Furthermore, Senators have statewide constituencies, making it more difficult to establish personal ties with the voters. House members, however, represent constituencies of approximately 600,000 people within a smaller geographic region, thus making candidate-voter relationships more personal.

Given the theories on congressional campaign strategies and different types of races, the second component to understanding congressional elections is the voting patterns of the electorate. In order to run a successful congressional campaign, candidates must build coalitions of voters. However, for many citizens, voting decisions are not very important and are thus made with relatively little information.

From the 1950s with the publication of *The American Voter* until fairly recently, partisanship was understood to be the strongest influence on congressional voters. However, the political events of the 1960s and 1970s help to explain the decline of electoral partisanship. First, each party nominated a presidential candidate from its ideological extreme (the Republicans with Goldwater in 1964, the Democrats with McGovern in 1972); second, the Vietnam War and civil rights issues split the Democratic party; and third, the Watergate revelations hurt the Republicans' credibility. While party identification is certainly still an important influence on congressional voters, recent theories suggest that congressional voters are more readily swayed by the individual candidates and the amount of information they know about a candidate, which again supports earlier theories of incumbency advantage. Unfortunately, most voters make their congressional voting

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decisions with relatively little information. In a typical House race between an incumbent and a challenger, only about 20% of all voters can recall the names of the two major-party candidates. In an open seat House contest only about one third of all voters can remember the names of the major-party candidates. Senate races are slightly higher with 30% able to name both candidates in incumbent-challenger races and two-thirds being able to name both candidates in open seat races.27

While incumbents have enjoyed the increasing benefits of abundant resources and advertising in recent years, their advantage in familiarity with voters has not increased. In addition, voters favor incumbents even when they cannot recall either candidates name, which led political scientists to question the definition of "knowing" a candidate. Thomas Mann was the first to show that the many voters who could not recall a candidate's name, could in fact recognize the name from a list, which is always available in a voting booth.28

Thus, beginning in 1978, the National Election Studies included questions testing the voters' ability both to recall each candidate's name and the less stringent test, to recognize each candidate's name. When given the names of congressional candidates, voters recognized the names of both major-party candidates just over 50% of the time in incumbent-challenger races, and about 80% of the time in open seat races. Recognition in Senate races for incumbent-challenger races and open seat races were 80% and 90% respectively.29

Given their ignorance of candidates and issues, voters use shortcuts to help them make decisions on election day. Frequently used shortcuts include incumbency and party.30 Other voters make decisions retrospectively by holding the president responsible for the state of the nation and either voting to reward or punish the congressional candidate of the president's party accordingly.31

30 Hinkley, Congressional Elections, 37.
31 Herrnson, Congressional Elections: Campaigning at Home and in Washington, 159.
These shortcut are used by voters in all congressional elections. There are however differences in voting patterns depending on if there is a presidential election or not. The type of electorate and percentage of voter turnout differ significantly in midterm (non-presidential) election years. A study of the 1950s showed that the electorate in presidential years was found to be composed of a larger proportion of voters weakly attached to either political party and more subject to the political environment during the specific election, notably, their feelings about the presidential candidates. At midterm elections, there was strong evidence that partisanship prevailed. This study led to Angus Campbell’s theory of surge and decline in presidential elections, in which the winning presidential candidate’s party gains congressional seats (the surge) that are subsequently lost at the next midterm election (the decline) when the pull of the presidential candidate is no longer in effect. The theory of surge and decline is used to explain why, in every midterm election since 1934, the president’s party has lost seats in the House.

Voter turnout is also much different in presidential and off-year elections. Turnout has been on a continuous decline since the 1960s with slight bubbles in 1982 and 1994. Voters participate much less frequently in midterm elections; as Gary Jacobson explains: “Participation in congressional elections is strongly influenced by whether or not there is a presidential contest to attract voters to the polls; turnout drops by an average of 14 percentage points when there is not.” Even in presidential years, there is a fall-off effect in that House voting is usually about 5 percentage points lower than presidential voting.

The results of the electorate’s voting behaviors directly affect the composition of our government. Divided government, when control of the executive and legislative branches is held by different parties, has been the common trend in American history. Since 1832 when

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36 Ibid.

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the convention system of nominating presidential candidates had been established and the two-party competition had been revived, divided government has existed for 66 of the 164 years. Between 1832 and 1952, divided government was best explained by political scientists as a midterm loss of unified control gained in the preceding presidential election year. From 1950s through the 1980s ticket splitting, voting for a candidate from one party for one office and a candidate from another party for another office, almost doubled from 15% or less of the electorate to 25% or more. The increase in ticket splitting is a direct consequence of the weakening of political parties which makes voters more likely to support attractive candidates and issues rather than maintain loyalty to one party or the other. However, ticket splitting is not completely random and has followed a pattern of supporting a Republican presidency and Democratic congress.

There is also strong evidence that voters prefer divided government. There are different explanations for why voters prefer divided government. Morris Fiorina notes that until recently analyses for different political offices were isolated from one another. As Fiorina explains:

Presidential elections analyses employed one set of major concepts - parties, issues, ideology, and candidate traits, while congressional elections analyses employed a different set - incumbency, campaign spending, and the quality of challengers...The major point of contact between the two areas of work was the notion of presidential coattails: the popularity of the presidential candidates and the performance of the incumbent president have some impact on the fortunes of congressional candidates.

Recently, this impact has been declining and presidential coattails have become much shorter. Therefore, Fiorina offers what he terms as the "balancing" explanation of divided government. He claims that voters choose divided government because moderate voters

38 Ibid., 11.
39 Ibid., 58.
40 Ibid., 64. Evidence taken from NBC News/Wall Street Journal survey taken before the 1988 elections, in which 54% of likely voters preferred divided government, while only 32% preferred unified government.
41 Ibid., 63.
42 Ibid., 64.
engage in ticket splitting to steer a middle course between the ideological extremes represented by the parties. In addition, voters have difficulty trusting politicians of either party, so they choose divided government to "balance" the political system.43

Gary Jacobson offers an alternative explanation of divided government, in that voters have different expectations for presidents and members of Congress, as well as for Republicans and Democrats.44 Jacobson's model matches party and institutional strength; Republicans are more superior than Democrats in dealing with macro-economic management and foreign relations, while Democrats are more compassionate and concerned about ensuring fair distribution of national benefits and burdens. Since the presidency is preeminent in the realms of international relations and economic management, and Congress is more concerned with distribution, the electoral dilemma faced by the voters is resolved, not necessarily consciously, by voting for Republican presidents and Democratic congresses. Fiorina counters Jacobson's theory by examining divided government at the state level. He cites for example, North Dakota, a state whose recent patterns of party control are exactly the opposite from the national trend. From 1960-1980, the Democrats controlled the governorship while Republicans controlled the upper House.45

The consequences of divided government are twofold. First, divided government exacerbates the problems of efficiency and effectiveness that are inherent in the constitutional fabric. Second, divided government inhibits the accountability and responsibility issues that are already problematic in a polity of weak parties and a separation of powers.46 Despite these consequences, voters have overwhelmingly shown their support to continue divided control of our political system, perhaps indicative of the various interests and preferences of the people in our society.

45 Fiorina, Divided Government, 30.
46 Ibid., 85.

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While political science theories vary concerning the candidates and campaign strategies in congressional elections, congressional voting patterns and behaviors, and divided government, all scholars of American government concur that elections play a vital role in the functioning of our democracy. Perhaps Richard Niemi and Herbert Weisberg best summarized the functions of elections in a democracy in the introduction of *Controversies in Voting Behavior*:

Not only do [elections] allow citizens to choose the government, but they also restrain political leaders who must behave in a way that maximizes their chances of reelection. Elections are thus one means of linking public attitudes with governmental policy. In addition, electing a government is a way of legitimizing its authority. Elections provide a peaceful means for political change. And they permit individuals and groups to resolve their conflicting needs peacefully. Along with this view of elections is a corresponding view of voters as choosing intelligently among the candidates. Although no one would argue that all voters are well informed, the view from this perspective is that voters as whole make careful and informed choices.47

In 1949, Herman Finer, in his classic study *The Theory and Practice of Modern Government* described this connection between democracy and elections:

The real question...is not whether the government decides to take notice of popular criticisms and votes, but whether it can be voted out of office or forced by some machinery or procedures to change its policy, above all against its own will.48

The remainder of this thesis will discuss these theories of congressional elections in the context of the 1946, 1948, 1994 and 1996 congressional elections to see if the relationship between congressional behaviors and congressional elections has changed in the past 50 years. The similar election results in 1946 and 1994 followed by different election results two years later, provide a context in which to reexamine congressional election theories. After case studies on the Truman 1946-1948 period and the Clinton

1994-1996 period in Sections II and III, the Analysis Section will address several particular congressional theories to determine if they still apply to recent elections. More specifically, the analysis will examine congressional theories addressing, incumbency advantage, candidate-centered campaigns in congressional elections, explanations of midterm elections, presidential coattails, and voter turnout. By examining the Truman presidency and the 1946-1948 elections and comparing them to the Clinton presidency and the 1994-1996 elections, I will conclude whether or not traditional congressional theories are still applicable. Furthermore, I will analyze other factors that must be used to explain the differences in these particular elections, or if in fact scholars of political science must develop new theories with which to analyze recent congressional elections.
II. Truman and the 80th Congress

The Wake of Roosevelt

On April 12, 1945, after just 82 days as Vice President, Harry S Truman succeeded Franklin Delano Roosevelt becoming the 33rd President of the United States. Americans were not only devastated by the loss of their New Deal champion FDR, but they were also uncomfortable with the inexperienced, former Senator from Missouri assuming control of the most important executive position. Some Americans have even gone so far as to nickname him the "accidental president." Upon hearing about Roosevelt’s death, a group of reporters in Washington responded, "Good God, Truman will be President." Truman himself was frightened and scared, and even admitted to people that he was close to "I'm not big enough for this job." In fact, while campaigning for the vice presidency in 1945, Truman had a nightmare that the sick FDR had died, and he became president. Just a few months later, Truman’s worst nightmare had come true.

The Truman presidency and the congressional elections of 1946 and 1948 must be examined in the context of the political climate of the nation at that time. As Truman ascended the presidency in the wake of Roosevelt’s death, the country was consumed by its efforts to defeat the Nazi regime in Germany and retaliate against the Japanese for bombing Pearl Harbor. Despite the unrest of the war, Americans felt secure in the leadership of FDR. Their resilient leader had not only proven that he could rescue the people from the devastations of the Depression, but he had also been able to gain their

51 *Truman* [videorecording], directed and produced by David Grubin; a David Grubin Productions, Inc. film for the American Experience (Atlanta, GA: Turner Home Entertainment, Burbank, CA: Distributed by Warner Home Video, 1997).
52 Ibid.
confidence and trust as a wartime leader. He was the first president in history to be elected to a third and fourth term (despite his deteriorating health). In 1944, people feared that FDR would not live to complete his fourth term in office, thus the selection of the vice president became increasingly important. The liberal Henry Wallace, former Secretary of Agriculture under Roosevelt, and then vice president during FDR's third term, was opposed by conservatives. Roosevelt's close friend and director of the Office of War Mobilization, Jimmy Byrnes, was a possibility but was disliked by liberals because of his labor and civil rights record. The division of the Democratic party led to the selection of Harry Truman, the compromise candidate who was liked by southerners, had conservative friends, and maintained labor contacts. Truman feared that he was not qualified enough to be vice president, especially under the circumstances of Roosevelt's poor health. His wife Bess was even less excited about the possibility of becoming First Lady. But Truman accepted and he and Roosevelt went on to sweep the election of 1944 with 432 electoral votes and 53.4% of the popular vote.

In his 82 days as vice president, Truman kept outside of FDR's circle and met alone with the president only twice.53 Truman barely knew the members of the Cabinet, and all he knew about the war was what he read in the newspapers. When Truman became president, he knew nothing of the atomic bomb, the most powerful weapon known to mankind, of which he had total control. But by May, the war with Europe was nearly over, and less than four months later he ended the war with Japan by deciding to drop the bomb. Thus, after four months in office, Truman could for the first time direct his attention to domestic issues.

Truman's most difficult challenge was managing the economic transition from war to peace. While this assignment was more compatible with his experience and expertise than was foreign policy, it proved politically much more damaging. His goal was to initiate a smooth transition to civilian production without returning to the Great Depression and

53 Ibid.
dangerous rates of inflation.\textsuperscript{54} His administration, however, had close relationships with organized labor and decided to continue its wartime controls on prices, making Truman's goal almost impossible.

From the end of the war through the first half of 1946, the economy was plagued by shortages of many consumer goods. While businessmen wanted to increase prices, the administration wanted to maintain control over them at wartime levels. The administration's efforts to protect the consumer against inflation, tended to dry up supply and force many transactions onto the black market, where a buyer paid high prices anyway. Truman was torn between his inner liberalism and experience as a businessman, and after some wavering, endorsed a one-year extension on price controls. Labor unions capitalized on Truman's decision and began a series of strikes against businesses, the most damaging being in May, 1946, when the railroad unions called a strike, putting the country at a standstill.\textsuperscript{55} Truman infuriated labor leaders by suggesting negotiations and arbitrations as an interim solution. He further exacerbated his standing with labor by forcing a settlement to the strike by asking Congress to give him temporary power to draft strikers into the army.

Despite all of the strikes, there was at least one positive outlook on the economy; the depression that people had feared had not come. In fact, employment was high, money was plentiful, and business was booming.\textsuperscript{56} But, this encouragement was darkened by the cost of living which had jumped 6 1/2 percentage points since the end of 1945. In addition, there were still acute shortages of materials people wanted such as housing, automobiles, refrigerators, nylon stockings, sugar, coffee, and meat.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{54} McCullough, \textit{Truman}, 467-471.
\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Truman} [videorecording].
\textsuperscript{56} McCullough, \textit{Truman}, 520.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
The 1946 Election and Republican Sweep of Congress

By the fall of 1946, Truman's approval rating had fallen from 87% (in June 1945) to 32% (in September 1946). The public in general perceived him as unable to handle his domestic responsibilities. His popularity plummeted and his reputation was soon tainted by the slogan "to err is Truman." Furthermore, his arbitrations with the strikes had alienated the liberal supporters of labor, usually strong Democratic partisans in elections. While Truman was not up for election in 1946, his popularity was so low that the Democratic National Committee chairman, Bob Hannegan, advised that Truman refrain from campaigning for his party in the congressional elections.

The Republicans seized the opportunity of the vulnerable Democratic party to win control of the Congress as they blamed the President for the country's problems. Few Democrats even mentioned Truman's name during the campaign, and some even resorted to playing old recordings of Roosevelt speeches to help boost their chances. The Democratic congressional campaign as a whole was lackadaisical, almost expecting to follow historical trends of midterm elections in which the president's party has continuously lost seats. In the fall of 1946, Henry M. Frost Advertising Agency (Boston) coined the two word campaign slogan for the Republican congressional candidates: "Had enough?"

The Republican slogan worked, and on November 5, 1946 the Republicans took control of both houses of Congress for the first time in 18 years. The 1946 elections showed an increased turnout from the previous midterm, with 37.1% of the voting age

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58 Ibid.
59 Truman [videorecording].
60 McCullough, Truman, 522.
61 Ibid., 520.
population going to the polls. Republicans not only took substantial control of both houses, but they also took control of a majority of state governorships. In the House, 52 incumbents, 48 of whom were Democrats, lost in their bids for reelections. In the Senate, seven incumbents, all Democrats were defeated. Cabell Phillips, in his history of the Truman presidency, described four factors leading to the Republican landslide of 1946. First, Phillips noted that the Democrats had been in power for years, and it was time for a pendulum swing; second, Americans became impatient with the postwar uncertainties as they readjusted back to peace; third, the Roosevelt coalition of southern conservatives, big-city machines, labor, and minority groups, which had been glued together by the reforms of the New Deal and held together by the necessities of war, was beginning to come undone; and finally, the Truman administration’s handling of situations including negotiations between labor and management, dealing with the strikes, inflation, black markets, and price control, and Truman’s inability to work with Cabinet officials and Congress, had made Americans weary of supporting a Democratic congress.

The 80th “Do-Nothing” Congress: Truman on the rebound

Cabell Phillips describes Truman’s return to Washington after the election:

Probably no President since Andrew Johnson had run out of prestige and leadership more thoroughly than had Harry Truman when he returned almost unnoticed to Washington on that bleak, misty November morning in 1946.

But Truman was not discouraged and was determined to establish himself as a forceful leader by building a platform on which to campaign for reelection. Describing his reactions

64 Ibid.
66 Ibid., 161.
to the election in a letter to his wife Bess, Truman explained, "I'm doing as I damn please for the next two years, and to hell with the rest of them."67

The Republican 80th Congress however, was equally ambitious and energized after 16 years as the minority. The House membership of the 80th Congress consisted of 101 freshmen (26 Democrats and 75 Republicans), including, Richard Nixon (R-CA) and John F. Kennedy (D-MA). Joe Martin (R-MA) replaced Sam Rayburn as Speaker of the House, and the leadership in the House consisted of a large percentage of anti-New Deal conservatives. As Alonzo Hamby explained in his biography of Truman:

Firmly entrenched in the party leadership by virtue of long seniority, enjoying a comfortable margin of party superiority, and ideologically compatible with the southern Democrats on many issues, the House Republicans were more openly partisan, very conservative, and combative.68

The Senate of the 80th Congress was more moderate with a narrower margin of Republican control. Alben Barkley (D-KY) was replaced as Majority Leader by Wallace H. White of Maine. Known as more of a negotiator than a debater, White was not really the leader of the majority party. He was self-effacing in the presence of more politically powerful Senators, like Robert Taft (R-OH) and Arthur Vandenberg (R-MI) who tacitly agreed to run the Senate, dividing responsibilities between the domestic agenda and foreign affairs, respectively.69 New faces in the Senate included Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr. (R-MA) and Joseph McCarthy (R-WI).

On January 6, 1947, in his State of the Union address, Truman called on members of Congress to "work together despite the honest differences of opinion."70 He emphasized five points in his address: first, harmonious relations between management and labor; second, the restriction of monopoly and encouragement of free enterprise; third, the .

67 Truman [videorecording].
continued fostering of home construction; fourth, the balancing of the budget; and fifth, the achieving of fair income for farmers.\textsuperscript{71} Other controversial programs that had been introduced in the past were reintroduced in Truman's State of the Union address, including compulsory health insurance, the protection of civil rights, and a national fair employment practices act.\textsuperscript{72} Just a few days later, Truman sent his federal budget proposal to Congress, asking for approved expenditures of $37.5 billion for fiscal year 1948. The GOP of the 80th Congress was excited about the opportunity for retribution after 14 years of Democratic governing. The Republicans now had two years to reform the Roosevelt legacy with hopes not only of keeping control of the Congress, but also of recapturing the presidency itself.

In dealing with foreign policy, Truman and members of Congress joined as allies against the Soviet Union Army. The common fear of the Soviet spread of communism blurred the differences between the Democratic executive and Republican legislature in handling foreign affairs. Truman believed in supporting free countries and preventing the spread of communism, but realized that he needed the support of both the American people and Congress before he acted. First he convinced the people that the possibility of global Soviet influence was reason to be frightened. Once Americans followed, Truman then appealed to members of Congress, by explaining how the United States was being threatened and the world was being divided into the free people and the totalitarian enslaved people, and then asking which side they were on.\textsuperscript{73} The civil war in Greece and communist pressures in Turkey led to the announcement of the Truman Doctrine, approved by Congress on May 15, 1947, which provided a political commitment of $4 million to aide Greece and Turkey. An economic commitment was also suggested by Secretary of State George Marshall, and approved April 2, 1948. The Marshall Plan, as it became known, was an economic plan that provided $13 billion to western Europe who had been

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 94.
\textsuperscript{72} Phillips, \textit{The Truman Presidency: The History of a Triumphant Succession}, 161.
\textsuperscript{73} \textit{Truman} [videorecording].
devastated economically during the war. Fearing that these nations would fall to the Communists, the U.S. wanted to help pump money into European economies so that they would purchase American food and goods. Truman’s popularity increased as the American people enjoyed the benefits of having the government pay the U.S. economy to help Europe.

Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, Arthur Vandenberg was a key player in the bipartisan foreign policy negotiations during the 80th Congress. Prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor, Vandenberg was known by his colleagues as an isolationist who opposed much of the New Deal and American involvement in World War II. After the war, he emerged as an advocate of close cooperation between the legislative and executive branches of government as well as between both parties. He became a champion of bipartisan foreign policy, leading his committee to unanimous votes in favor of the Aid to Greece and Turkey proposal, approval of the Marshall Plan, and the Rio Treaty of Mutual Assistance with Latin American Countries.

As the old adage goes, “partisanship ends at the water’s edge.” Without the common Soviet enemy, there was significantly less bipartisanship when dealing with the domestic agenda. As Truman biographer, Alonzo L. Hamby noted:

The Republicans, mostly cooperating with him [Truman] on foreign policy, would spend the next year and a half hurling themselves at his domestic program with abandon and an apparent lack of understanding of the way in which they were weakening themselves for the 1948 election.

The Democratic President and Republican Congress generally were at loggerheads as presidential recommendations to extend the New Deal social welfare concepts in the fields of education, housing, medicare, and social security were largely ignored by Congress. The most significant single piece of domestic legislation brought forth by the Republican-

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75 Hamby, Man of the People: A Life of Harry S Truman, 422.
controlled Congress in 1947 was the Taft-Hartley Act, which outlawed the closed shop, made unions liable for breach of contract, prohibited political contributions from unions, required them to make financial reports, and required their leaders to take a non-communist oath. After two weeks of deliberations, Truman vetoed the bill, calling it "an attack on the workingman," and saying that he "wanted to bring labor back into Democratic politics," though all but two members of his Cabinet urged him to sign it. The bill was eventually approved by the Congress over President Truman's veto, on June 23, 1947. Throughout the 80th Congress there were 75 presidential vetoes, of which only six were overridden by Congress. The Republican assault against some of FDR's accomplishments did however, provide an opportunity for Truman to cast himself as a protector of treasured programs rather than as an advocate for more change. The end of economic controls and easing of most consumer shortages allowed him to take credit for prosperity rather than the early blame he received from inflation and scarcity. Truman used this momentum as a catalyst to boost his popularity before the 1948 election.

The 1948 Election and Democratic Revival

Early 1948 proved devastating for the President. By late spring, Truman's popularity was so low that his own party was considering another nominee, such as Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, to head the Democratic ticket. But Eisenhower refused to consider seeking or accepting the nomination, and much to the dismay of his many admirers, said that he "had no political ambitions." Liberals were disappointed in the anti-Soviet orientation of the Truman administration and the coolness towards liberal domestic programs and organized labor. Southern Democrats were increasingly concerned with

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76 McCullough, *Truman*, 566.
78 McCullough, *Truman*, 584, 633.
the liberal direction of the Democratic Party in support of African-Americans and organized labor.\textsuperscript{80} Thus, the 1948 presidential race became hotly contested, with candidates representing all factions of the Democratic Party in the November election. The liberal Democrats nominated Progressive Party candidate, Henry Wallace to challenge Truman in 1948. Truman had so alienated the conservative Southern Democrats, that at the convention, the Mississippi delegation and half of the Alabama delegation walked out in protest. Southern Democrats were so frustrated that they formed the States' Rights Party, better known as the Dixiecrats, nominating Strom Thurmond, the governor from South Carolina, to run against Truman. Despite Truman's unpopularity within his own party, he went on to clinch the Democratic presidential nomination, and within a few minutes, Truman turned the vice-presidential decision over to the delegates who nominated, former Democratic Majority Leader in the Senate, Alben W. Barkley.

Truman's acceptance speech for the presidential nomination at 2 a.m. on July 15, 1948 ignited a spark that helped carry the Democrats through the November election. Truman not only lashed out at the Republicans as "the party of special interests" that "favors the privileged few and not the common everyday man," but he called for repeal of the Taft-Hartley Act, criticized Congress for its failure to control prices or pass a housing bill, and said that the approved tax reduction measure was a "Republican rich-man's tax bill."\textsuperscript{81} Truman went so far as to call Congress in for a Special Session to curb high prices, increase the minimum wage, liberalize immigration of displaced persons, and enact public housing and aid to education. In doing so, he immediately placed the Republicans on the defensive and left them in a lose-lose situation in an election year. The GOP would either comply with Truman's requests in which case Truman would claim credit, or they would suffer the blame of denying Truman and the public some popular measures.


The Republicans debated the proper response. One alternative discussed was to adjourn the session immediately, but Taft and his fellow Republicans did not want to seem wholly negative, especially regarding the issue of inflation. The second alternative was to meet Truman halfway. By that time, the Senate had already passed legislation to aid education and public housing, and perhaps House Republicans would do the same. But Republicans feared that this course of action would give the President credit for any legislation passed. Therefore, the Republicans were forced to accept the one, remaining option, which was to listen to Truman's requests and denounce them as politically inspired, enact a few minor measures to address the salient issue of price controls, and go home as soon as possible. Taft and his fellow Republicans carried out the third alternative, granting Truman additional power to control consumer credit and to increase bank reserves, and passing a bill liberalizing credit for private builders. Republicans did not respond to Truman's requests for an increase in the minimum wage, aid to education, displace persons, or public housing, and ended the session after two weeks. Truman seized this opportunity to catapult his reelection campaign, nicknaming the 80th Congress, the "Do-Nothing" Congress for their failure to meet his high expectations announced during his nomination speech.

As noted above, in the presidential race, Truman faced not only the popular governor from New York, Thomas E. Dewey, who had been the unsuccessful candidate against Roosevelt in 1944, but also the liberal Henry Wallace from the Progressive Party, and Strom Thurmond representing the Southern conservative Democrats from the States' Rights ("Dixiecrat") Party. Thus, President Truman's own Democratic Party had split from both the left and the right, leaving only the middle to support his reelection.

On September 17, 1948, Harry Truman set out on his "whistle stop" campaign aboard a train, covering 31,000 miles appearing before an estimated six million people in six weeks. He crisscrossed the country in his campaign train, targeting his talks toward the dominant interests at any given stop. He reminded his audiences of the benefits they had
received from the Democrats under Roosevelt, and expressed his determination to defend them from the Republicans. His battle cry became "Give-em-hell," as the "Do-Nothing" Republican Congress became his chief target. "When I called them back into session what did they do? Nothing. Nothing. That Congress never did anything the whole time it was in session," he said. If the Republicans win, he added, "They'll tear you apart." The Republicans are "predatory animals who don't care if you people are thrown into a depression...They like runaway prices." Truman gained momentum from his campaign and his speeches grew increasingly effective with each stop. He was a great campaigner and as a "quite ordinary man" he understood the American people. Truman had become a leader since the 1946 elections and was even encouraged to campaign for congressional Democrats.

As the campaign came to a close, the movements by Wallace and Thurmond were faltering. Wallace and his Progressive Party became increasingly identified with the communists, and were accused of splitting the liberal vote, in addition to organizational failures such as factionalism in some state organizations, and lack of ballot accessibility. These shortcomings led the liberals to desert Wallace for Truman. As for Strom Thurmond, his support from Southern governors and senators weakened, despite their opposition to civil rights, and they too chose to support a major party candidate and backed the President. As the election drew closer, many Southern Democrats supported Truman, especially in areas with fewer African-Americans and where race was a less salient issue. These Truman loyalists feared the loss of federal projects and patronage and a split in the Democratic Party that would only help the Republicans. Unlike Wallace, whose support had consistently diminished throughout the country, Thurmond still had strong support from a few states in the South that Truman hoped to win in November. Thus, in the final

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82 Ibid., 7.
83 Phillips, The Truman Presidency: The History of a Triumphant Succession, 1; Truman [videorecording].
weeks before the election, despite some uncertainty in the South, it was evident that the presidential battle had narrowed to a close fight between the Democrat Truman and the Republican Dewey.

Dewey's campaign was not quite as exceptional as Truman's. He skirted the issues and continuously repeated his call for "national unity." Dewey called the 80th Congress "one of the best" but failed to defend its individual programs. Instead of highlighting the accomplishments of the 80th Congress, refuting Truman's Do-Nothing claim, and his failures as the chief executive, Dewey was determined to adhere to his own strategy. Despite weak campaign tactics, Dewey was popular with the people and was confident in a victory over Truman. He was assured by pollsters, campaign strategists, advertising consultants, and newsmen that he would win. Even in the last week of the campaign, the Gallup polls favored a Dewey victory with 49.5% of the popular vote to 44.5% for Truman.

On election day, November 2, 1948, Harry Truman went to sleep before all of the ballots had been counted. He was the only one who thought he would win. Not one pollster, newspaper, or reporter had predicted the outcome of the election. The day after the election the headlines of the Chicago Tribune read, "Dewey Beats Truman." Truman, however, did triumph over Dewey in the closest presidential race since 1916. He captured 49.5% of the popular vote (only a plurality, not a majority) and won 303 electoral votes in 28 states. Dewey secured 16 states and 189 electoral votes, with 45.1% of the popular vote, and Thurmond and Wallace each only won a disappointing 2.4% of the popular vote. With only minimal support throughout the country, Wallace did not carry any states, and thus did not secure any electoral votes. Thurmond, however, had won about the same number of votes, but they were heavily concentrated in the South. Thus, he

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87 Ibid.
88 McCullough, Truman, 696.
90 Truman [videorecording].
won 4 states (Alabama, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Louisiana), and secured 39 electoral votes.\textsuperscript{92} In addition to his reelection, Truman helped carry the Democrats back into control of both the House and the Senate, with the largest turnaround in modern congressional history.\textsuperscript{93}

The results of the 1948 congressional election were directly affected by the presidential race. Democrats took back control of both the House and the Senate bringing the makeup of the 81st Congress to 263 Democrats, 171 Republicans and one Independent in the House, and 54 Democrats, 42 Republicans in the Senate.\textsuperscript{94} In all the states that had senatorial races in 1948, except Massachusetts, either Truman or Thurmond helped to carry the Democratic senatorial candidate as well. While comparable data are not available at the congressional district level, it seems likely that voters followed party line there too. Senator Taft blamed the election results on Dewey's " uninspiring campaign."\textsuperscript{95} As James Patterson explained, Taft claimed that Dewey could have won the election and the Republicans could have remained in control:

\begin{quote}
The result of the election was a tragedy, largely because it was entirely unnecessary. Dewey could have won, and we could have elected a Republican Congress if the right kind of campaign had been put on. I am absolutely certain that Dewey could have won if he had put up any kind of fight at all and dealt with the issues before the people.\textsuperscript{96}
\end{quote}

Post election data showed that Dewey received a poor showing from GOP regulars in rural farm regions, suggesting his weakness among the party faithful.

Truman however, ran an energetic campaign that not only brought him a victory, but carried coattails that cost the Republicans 74 House seats and nine seats in the Senate.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{92} McCullough, \textit{Truman}, 710-711.
\item \textsuperscript{94} The election result data that are presented throughout this paper were analyzed by the author using congressional elections results from, \textit{Congressional Quarterly's Guide to U.S. Elections} 3rd. ed. (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1994); and \textit{Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report}, November 12, 1994 and November 9, 1996.
\item \textsuperscript{95} James T. Patterson, \textit{Mr. Republican, a Biography of Robert A. Taft} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972), 425.
\item \textsuperscript{96} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
regaining both Democratic majorities. Congressional Democrats were certainly bolstered by Truman’s vehement attacks on the Republican Congress. When asked for an explanation of his phenomenal victory, Truman answered: “Labor did it.”97 When it was evident that Wallace’s support had weakened, most of organized labor coalesced behind the President before the election.98 Other election observers explain Truman’s victory not only based on labor, but also on his efforts to blame the 80th Congress for falling farm prices.99 In addition, Truman benefited from the recent voter constituency that had elected Roosevelt and joined the Democratic party.100 At that time, a Republican who hoped to win nationwide support needed not only regular party voters, but also needed to appeal to independents, ethnic voters, urbanites, blacks, and unionists, all of which formed a powerful coalition that elected Roosevelt four times.101

Congressional Democrats did not owe all of their election success to Truman however. The Democrats had been developing strategies to oust Republicans since they lost control in 1946.102 Congressional Democrats were actively supported not only by Truman, but also by the organized labor movement. Democratic unity had been created throughout the country in mayoral races up through congressional races. Unlike the presidential race in which Thurmond’s success in the South clearly hurt Truman, congressional Democrats did not suffer any losses within the House or Senate, separating them from the rest of their party. In all four states won by Thurmond, all Democratic congressional candidates were elected, again emphasizing the solid Democratic strength in the South despite the factions in the presidential race.

In the four years after Truman took over the presidency, he metamorphosed from a timid politician with little executive experience into a commanding leader of the Democratic party. This change not only helps to explain his reelection success in 1948, but also the

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100 Patterson, Mr. Republican, a Biography of Robert A. Taft, 425-426.
101 Ibid.
results of the congressional elections in both 1946 and 1948. In 1946, Truman’s low popularity made him shy away from campaigning for his party, and the Democrats lost control of the Congress. But, the postwar political climate quickly changed from one of economic instability and fear of Soviet influence, to one of economic prosperity and American dominance in foreign policy, thereby creating an environment for Democratic success in 1948.
III. Clinton and the 104th Congress


The 1992 elections reestablished unified government for the first time since the Carter Administration in the late 1970s. William Jefferson Clinton, the 46 year old governor from Little Rock, Arkansas ran an unconventional campaign to secure the executive seat. Throughout the campaign Clinton was adored by his supporters much like the vibrant John F. Kennedy in 1960. Clinton stretched his campaign across the country appealing to liberals, young voters, and southerners. He made appearances on The Arsenio Hall Show, and submitted to interviews on The Phil Donahue Show and MTV. In addition, Clinton's wife Hillary appeared on the Today show and LIVE With Regis and Kathy Lee. Like Harry Truman, Clinton also had his own "whistle stop" campaign as he toured the country by bus. His zealous campaign proved successful as Clinton defeated incumbent President Bush and Independent candidate Ross Perot with 370 electoral votes, and 43% of the popular vote.

Democrats throughout the country were excited and optimistic about their new, Washington-outsider, reform-minded leader working with a Democratic congress. Clinton's campaign theme song, "Don't Stop Thinking About Tomorrow" by Fleetwood Mac guided him into the White House as he played the saxophone with his favorite 1970s band at his Inaugural Ball. In addition, in the wake of the House Bank scandal, the 1992 congressional elections resulted in the exchange of a fourth of the lawmakers on Capitol Hill. Furthermore, the new Congress was comprised of record numbers of women.

blacks and Hispanics, leaving Democrats firmly in control of the executive and legislative branches.\textsuperscript{104}

Despite the unified Democratic control, Clinton's inexperience with politics and politicians in Washington would prove to be his most challenging obstacle in his first two years in office. Clinton quickly realized that he knew few congresspersons, press corps members, and had only an amateur sense of how power flowed in the nation's capitol. In addition, despite his popularity among Democrats, Clinton won the presidency with one of the slenderest mandates in history. No one in Congress owed their victory to Clinton; there were only five congressional districts in which Clinton received more votes than the congressperson, and only 91 congressional districts in which Clinton received more than a majority. Clinton would face great difficulty in getting support from members of Congress since virtually no one owed him their electoral success. Furthermore, even during the campaign, both the public and members of Congress questioned Clinton's character and integrity as rumors were reported about an affair with Gennifer Flowers, experimentation with marijuana, and efforts to avoid the draft during the Vietnam War.

Clinton appeared undeterred in the beginning of his presidency, despite his inexperience and unfamiliarity with Congress. He was aggressive in putting forth legislation, sometimes spreading his political resources too thinly by trying to focus on too many issues at once. Just six months into his term, Clinton's approval ratings began to decline, and for most of his second year in office, his public opinion polls were below 50%.\textsuperscript{105} Clinton however, did have a solid record in passing legislation, gaining Congress' support 86% of the time, the best legislative record since Lyndon Johnson's nearly 30 years ago.\textsuperscript{106} But Clinton's victories were darkened by some highly publicized defeats. The president put enormous effort into health care reform, which died in August 1994, before Congress had the opportunity to vote on it. A major piece of crime legislation

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{105} James G. Gimpel, \textit{Fulfilling the Contract the First 100 Days} (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1996), 2.

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.
was delayed when House Democrats sided with Republicans on a procedural vote. Later in 1994, crime legislation eventually passed, but the setbacks overshadowed the victories.

In addition to Clinton's legislative defeats, questions continued to linger about his character and competence as the country's executive leader. Senator Alfonse D'Amato (R-NY) proceeded with allegations about the Whitewater land deal, attacking the president's honesty and character, as well as the integrity of certain administrative officials who were later forced to resign. The problems during Clinton's first two years in office exacerbated feelings that the public already had about their leader. By mid-October of 1994, just a month before the midterm election, the president's approval ratings dropped to 38% among men and 44% among women. 107

Not only were the people skeptical about Clinton, but they were also losing confidence in the institutions of national government. In March 1994, surveys by the Gallup organization showed that only a mere 18% of citizens expressed "a great deal" of confidence in Congress, compared to 39% in 1985 and 42% in 1973. 108 Given the theories of midterm elections discussed earlier, the 1994 congressional elections were inevitably going to take a toll on the Democrats.

The 1994 Republican Revolution

In the context of a highly decentralized American political system, the Republicans made an attempt to avoid the candidate-centered campaign style for the 1994 congressional elections and instead nationalized the elections on a set of themes to bind all candidates together. Under the aegis of two aggressive House Republican leaders, Newt Gingrich (GA), the Minority Whip, and Richard Armey (TX), the Conference Chair, House staff compiled a package of legislative proposals calling it the "Contract with America." They were meticulous in their design to attract the attention of the increasing majority of people

107 Ibid.
108 Ibid., 3.
dissatisfied with the President, the Congress, and the government. A key component of
the sales pitch was a promise to place each agenda item at the top of the Republican
legislative calendar during the first 100 days of a Republican-led 104th Congress.\footnote{Ibid., 5.}
Issues included in the Contract varied from term limits, to crime, to welfare reform, to
deregulation and deficit reduction. Republican leaders wisely shied away from
controversial social issues such as school prayer and abortion, not wanting to divide the
party.

Republicans sought to bring about party responsibility by inviting voters to "throw
them out" if they failed to deliver on their Contract promises.\footnote{Ibid., 7.} The Contract provided
both incumbent and novice candidates with a ready-made platform that contained issues
important to the American people. Most Republican candidates chose the items in the
Contract that would most appeal to their constituencies and tailored their campaign
messages to focus on specific items rather than on the document itself. In addition to the
individual candidate's campaign themes, Republicans highlighted the Contract as a national
campaign theme on the steps of the Capitol on September 27, 1994 by signing the
document.

The success of the Republican Contract as a campaign theme was additionally
helped by detrimental factors in the Democratic congressional races. First, Democrats who
attached themselves closely with the unpopular president were inevitably doomed for defeat
in the midterm election. Several entrenched Democrats were defeated because of a
controversial vote they casted in support of the president's agenda. Second, scandals hurt
some congressional Democrats even before the 1994 election.

Despite the enthusiastic efforts by Republicans and challenges faced by Democrats,
few politicians, journalists, or political scientists predicted the magnitude of the Republican
earthquake that would shake the nation on November 8, 1994. The Republicans swept
control of both houses of Congress for the first time since 1953 during the Eisenhower
administration. Net gains for the Republicans in the House were 52 and in the Senate were eight. Thirty-four Democratic incumbents were defeated in the House (plus four who lost in the primaries) and two in the Senate, while no Republican governors, senators or representative incumbents were defeated. Dealignment in the historically Democratic South, also helped the Republicans, although the Democratic candidates who did win in the region, were more liberal than any time prior to 1992. Redistricting after the 1990 Census has been used to explain, not only the changes in the South, but also the Republican sweep across the country.111 Furthermore, expecting losses, the Democrats left many uncontested seats; for the first time in the post war world, the Democrats conceded more uncontested seats (34) than the Republicans (13) in the general election.112

Voter turnout in the 1994 House elections was 36.0%, the highest midterm turnout since 1982.113 Not surprisingly, more registered Republicans went to the polls in 1994 than did registered Democrats.114 Republicans scored the biggest gains among independents and men, winning more support in much higher proportions than previous years.115 Men favored Republicans 54% of the time, and showed only 46% support for Democrats.116 In addition, 56% of those who identified themselves as independents voted for Republicans, as opposed to 44% who voted for Democrats.117 Furthermore, in the 1994 elections, Born-Again Christians represented 20% of the voters and voted three to one in favor of Republicans.118 Thus, the makeup of the 104th Congress included new

115 Ibid.
116 Ibid.
117 Ibid.

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Republicans who on average, were more conservative than their outgoing predecessors, and the remaining Democrats who were more liberal.\textsuperscript{119}

The day after the election, President Clinton held a news conference in which he summarized what he thought the voters who went to the polls were telling him:

\begin{quote}
Look, we just don’t like what we see when we watch Washington. And you haven’t done much about that. It’s too partisan, too interest-group oriented, things don’t get done. There’s too many people up there playing politics. Democrats are in charge. We are holding you accountable and we hope you hear this, Mr. President.\textsuperscript{120}
\end{quote}

Clinton offered three explanations for the results. First, he explained that the public was dismayed at Washington business as usual, from lobbying to campaign spending to partisanship. Since the Democrats were in charge, the public held the president responsible. Second, the president cited skepticism by the public about whether the administration had really done what it claimed about crime and the deficits. Even if it had, people still felt insecure about their incomes, job stability, safer neighborhoods, etc. Finally, Clinton heard the public saying, “We don’t think the government can solve all the problems and we don’t want the Democrats telling us from Washington that they know what is right about everything.”\textsuperscript{121} According to a \textit{New York Times} article two days after the election, Republicans viewed the 1994 congressional election results as a “historic victory” in which the voters embraced “Republican ideas of smaller government, lower taxes, and more individual freedom and personal responsibility, instead of more government power and government responsibility.”\textsuperscript{122}

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\textsuperscript{120} Berke, “Asked to Place Blame, Americans in Surveys Chose: All of the Above,” B1.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
Like Harry Truman in 1946, President Clinton, previously nicknamed the "Comeback Kid," was also ready to face the new Republican congress. The staunch Republican ideologues elected in 1994 provided Clinton with an opportunity to reinvent himself before the 1996 election. He would need to become the "moderate New Democrat" he once promised, courting moderate Republicans. In addition, he would need to "morph" into as Gloria Borger described as "a president of principles, pushing for political reform and vetoing bad legislation." Now Clinton had an enemy to demonize, and he had the ability to challenge conservatives to bipartisan debate. Like Truman, Clinton could "dare the Republicans to take yes for an answer" on such issues as a world trade agreement and the budget. This became Bill Clinton's mission during his next two years.

The 104th Congress was headed by Speaker Newt Gingrich, who assumed the position from Tom Foley (D-WA), who not only lost his leadership position, but more surprisingly lost his seat in the House. Gingrich brought about a new definition of the speakership. He added to his position of institutional power, a platform for revolutionary leadership as the Congress in 1995 became an institution more active, more partisan and more willing to defy a president than ever before.

The first session of the 104th Congress opened with a marathon 14 1/2 hour session. Between the election and the convening Congress, a Task Force led by Newt Gingrich further organized the Republican agenda. On the first day alone, the House approved internal rule changes, eliminating committees and subcommittees, cutting committee staff by one-third, imposing term limits on committee chairmen, subcommittee chairmen and the Speakership. The House continued to work with similar speed, as the

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124 Ibid.
125 Ibid.
127 Ibid.
Republicans made the bold attempt to fulfill their campaign promise by voting on all items in the Contract within the first 100 days. While they were successful in bringing all of legislation to the floor for a vote, they were less successful in enacting the legislation into law.

Within 100 days, the House passed eight of the ten contract planks and the bulk of the ninth plank. These included a balanced budget constitutional amendment, a line-item veto, changes in welfare and legal systems, a tax cut and a curb on unfunded mandates. Term limits on members of Congress however, did not pass through the House. The Senate was more passive in its first 100 days, primarily because only one-third of its members were elected to the same mandate as the House in 1994. In addition, the Senate did not adopt the Contract with America, thus it took action on only a few of the its items. The Senate failed to approve a balanced budget amendment, and only voted to support the preface of the contract and one piece of a plank. The only legislation to be signed by President Clinton in the first 100 days was a law applying federal labor laws to members of Congress and a bill curbing unfunded mandates to the states.

After the first 100 days, the congressional pace slowed down significantly. Late in the summer of 1995 was a turning point at which Republicans began to slide after months in which the GOP and its contract agenda seemed unstoppable, especially in the House. By late summer, the Democrats began to set the agenda. Debate in the fall was focused around budget negotiations between the White House and Congress. The result of a tense standoff between Clinton and the GOP majority in Congress was a government shutdown from November 14-19. By that time, Congress had completed work on just five of the spending bills. The second closure began on Dec. 16, when three spending bills were still stalled in Congress and three more had been vetoed. Republicans underestimated Clinton's willingness to fight. They hoped the debate would be a redefining of the role of the federal government but was instead seen by the public as a "silly, schoolyard brawl

\[128\] Ibid., 1-11.
over whether to keep the government operating while the two sides negotiated over the budget." The GOP lost control of debate, while White House and once passive congressional Democrats grew more confident in attacking GOP priorities. Opinion polls that favored the GOP Congress earlier in the year were decreasing. By November, Congress' job performance rating on the budget was just 21% and its disapproval rating was 71%, according to an ABC-Washington Post survey.\(^\text{130}\)

The 104th Congress ended its first session with little of their ambitious agenda actually having succeeded in becoming law. The Republicans took over Congress, envisioning a smaller government, but by the end of 1995 no federal departments had been eliminated and no long-standing social policies had been reshaped. The session ended without budget resolution, after a budget reconciliation bill was vetoed and negotiations between Congress and the White House showed no signs of significant progress. In addition, the session ended facing the possibility of months of gridlock, with the Democratic White House and the prospect of having only Republican slogans, not accomplishments, to present to restive voters in the 1996 elections. By the end of the first session, 88 bills passed and became public laws, and 11 bills were vetoed by the President. Clinton only signed 85 of the bills, as one veto was overridden, and the other two became laws because the President did not take action within the allotted 10 days. The first session of the 104th Congress produced the lowest legislative output during any congressional session since 1933.\(^\text{131}\)

The confrontation which ended the first session of the 104th Congress led to compromise in the second session. Politicians on both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue were ready to talk. The public's blame of the GOP for the budget debacle sealed the GOP's transformation and the end of hard-line tactics. The "Contract with America," which led the Republican revolution in the first session, was rarely mentioned in 1996. The second

\(^{129}\) Ibid.
\(^{130}\) Ibid.
\(^{131}\) Ibid., 1-5.
session of the 104th Congress was highlighted by the passage of substantial legislation and changes in some of the nation's long-standing social policy programs. Furthermore, in June of 1996, Majority Leader Robert Dole (R-KS) resigned from the Senate to campaign full time for the Republican presidential nomination.

Speaker Gingrich dramatically changed his "all-or-nothing tactics" from the first session and played a different role in 1996. He and Majority Leader Armey, shared the leadership, with Armey running the day-to-day operations of the floor and Gingrich plotting election strategy for the fall and stepping in to resolve disputes when necessary. Democrats in the second session of the 104th Congress played the role of the minority, trying to slow or alter GOP initiatives. By spring, they became more aggressive and put GOP leaders on the defensive.

The 104th Congress and Clinton were much more successful with their legislative agenda in 1996 than the proceeding year. The White House and Congress agreed on an overhaul of the nation's welfare system which ended the federal guarantee of cash benefits to the poor; rewrote telecommunications law that affected a multitude of companies in the rapidly changing communications industry; remade agriculture policy which promised to diminish agriculture's reliance on federal subsidies; increased the minimum wage; and gave the president the power of the line-item veto.

The second session of the 104th Congress passed significantly more legislation than had the first session. By the end of 1996, 245 bills had been signed into law, bringing the total during the 104th Congress to 333. Clinton vetoed six bills during the second session, of which only one was overridden, bringing the total number of vetoes in the 104th Congress to 17. James A. Thurber, an American University congressional scholar, described the end of the 104th Congress: "I think that this Congress will be known

133 Congressional Quarterly Almanac 1996, 1-5.
134 Ibid.
a one in which the majority came in as revolutionaries and left as pragmatists."135 By end of 1996, bipartisanship had led to political success, thus the winners heading in to 1996 elections were incumbents, which boded well for both congressional Republicans and Clinton.

The 1996 Election: More of the Same

In the 1996 Democratic primary, the unopposed incumbent Bill Clinton easily secured the nomination. Former Senate Majority Leader, Bob Dole, eventually secured the Republican nomination, although it took more time, effort, and financial resources than most had originally expected.136 Dole continuously trailed Clinton in the polls throughout the general election campaign. However his ratings did increase briefly after the Republican National Convention in which his wife Elizabeth Dole rallied the party, and he announced that his vice-presidential candidate would be Jack Kemp.

Clinton’s successful campaign strategies from 1992 proved effective again in 1996; his campaign was also aided by the strong economy and relative international calm. The president’s campaign was not a change-oriented agenda as it had been in 1992, but rather one in which he took credit for the status quo and success of his first term. He highlighted the economy: four years of low inflation, the drop in the unemployment rate from 7% in 1992 to 5% in 1996, steady economic growth, and a reduction in the annual budget deficit from $290 billion the year before he became president to $106 billion in the fourth year of his term.137 In addition, he revived his presidency by moving to the center as a moderate. He accepted the Republican goals to balance the budget by 2002, declared that the “end of big government is over,” and signed a bill to end the welfare entitlements that had been part

135 Ibid., 1-3.
of the social safety net since the New Deal. His strategy was to present himself as presidential rather than as a partisan or political figure; thus he did little campaigning for his fellow Democrats in Congress, despite his constant lead in the polls.

Just as Clinton claimed credit for the successful economy and status quo, so did congressional Republicans. Unlike 1994, congressional Republicans did not make any attempts to campaign on the Contract, or even to try to nationalize the election. The political quagmire that resulted at the end of the first session in the 104th Congress quickly changed the way in which congressional Republicans portrayed themselves to their constituents; they no longer linked themselves to either Gingrich or the Contract. Had they stuck together throughout the 104th Congress, the 1996 election may have been a referendum on their collective performance as a party. Instead, potentially vulnerable Republicans did what Democrats had routinely done to retain their seats during their forty year tenure: run as “independent champions of local district interests.”

Congressional Democrats were hurt in the 1996 elections by the success of divided government during the 104th Congress compared to the failures of unified government during Clinton’s first two years in office. Furthermore, Clinton’s lack of effort to lengthen his presidential coattails when his support ratings were so favorable proved to the public that electing a democratic majority in 1996 was not on the top of Clinton’s campaign agenda. Thirty-one Democrats voluntarily left the House in 1996, compared to 22 Republicans. In the Senate, eight Democrats retired, four of whom were from the South, compared to six Republicans. The minority status for the Democrats in Congress favored Republican victories in these open seats. As the minority party, the Democrats also had a more difficult time recruiting strong candidates to run and procuring contributions from political action committees. Recently, many potentially strong candidates opt out of

Many potentially strong candidates shy away from running due to the daunting task of raising money, not only for the first campaign but for subsequent campaigns; family concerns; a sense that they could make more of a difference in local politics and avoid Washington; and frustration that the mechanic of campaigning was more important than the issues. This is true even if they seem to have a decent chance of succeeding.140

The results of the elections on November 5, 1996 were not surprising. As expected, incumbent President Bill Clinton swept to victory, as did the Republican majority in Congress. Voter turnout in the presidential race was 49%, the lowest since 1924.141 Clinton won 49% of the popular vote to Dole’s 41% and Perot’s 8%, along with 379 electoral votes to Dole’s 159. Clinton’s less than majority support made him the “first two-term president of either party since Woodrow Wilson, in the 1910s, not to win a majority of the popular vote in either of his victories, and the only one never to receive at least four hundred electoral votes.”142

As for the congressional races, incumbents did well as 95% of senators and 95% of representatives who sought reelection were successful.143 In the Senate, the Republicans won three of the seats left open by departing Democrats, two in the South (Alabama and Arkansas) and one in Nebraska, a state won by Dole. The only Republican defeat in the Senate was in South Dakota, in which the incumbent lost in the general election to the at-large representative.144 The new senators moved the congressional wing of the Republican

142 Ibid.
143 Ibid., 6.
144 Jacobson, “The 105th Congress: Unprecedented and Unsurprising,” 154. Also, it is important to note that in South Dakota the Representative and the Senator both represent the same constituents.
party even further to the right; both the three who replaced Democrats, and every one of the
nine replacing retiring Republicans are more conservative than his or her predecessor.
After the results were all tallied, the makeup of the 105th Senate was 55 Republicans to 45
Democrats.

In the House, the makeup of the 105th Congress was 227 Republicans, 207
Democrats, and one Independent. Unlike the 1994 elections in which 34 democratic
incumbents were defeated, only five lost in 1996. Sixteen Republican incumbents lost, 13
of whom were freshmen targeted by the Democratic National Party and AFL-CIO during
the campaign. In open seats, the Republicans won 29 of the 53 vacant seats, nine of which
had been given up by Democratic incumbents. Democrats won only three of the seats left
vacant by Republican incumbents. After two years of GOP control, the voters reelected a
Republican Congress, making it the first time since 1930 that Republicans controlled both
chambers of Congress for more than two consecutive years.145

The first Clinton administration can be characterized by experimentation and
change. The President was elected in 1992 as a vibrant young politician, whom many
compared to John F. Kennedy. But Clinton quickly realized that he was even less
experienced that JFK had been and that he would have to learn to adapt to Washington
politics. His "learning experience" undoubtedly hurt the Democrats in the 1994
congressional election, as Republicans took control of Congress for the first time in forty
years. The beginning of the 104th Congress was marked with aggressive Republican
leadership attempting to fulfill a campaign promise through the Contract with America.
Despite numerous efforts, the Republicans were unsuccessful in signing into law much of
their Contract, and simultaneously suffered the consequences of their stubbornness during
the budget debate. The budget negotiations were the most significant factor shaping the
changes by both the White House and Congress in the second session. Politicians at both
ends of Pennsylvania Avenue learned to negotiate and compromise in order to bring about

bipartisan political reform. The success of the legislation passed during the second session, coupled by the strength of the economy, showed the voters the advantages of divided government and asked for their support in 1996. The results of the presidential and congressional elections in 1996 confirm the continuation of a Democratic president and Republican Congress for at least another two years, if not more.
Analysis

Given the political framework of the Truman experience and the 80th Congress between 1946-1948 and the Clinton experience and the 104th Congress during 1994-1996, as discussed in Sections II and III, I will now analyze and compare these two unprecedented time periods to test the hypotheses posed in the introduction. In order to understand the relationship between congressional elections and congressional behaviors, I will examine the similarities and differences during these two periods.

Similarities

The greatest similarities during the two time periods occurred before the 1946 and before the 1994 congressional elections. The lack of executive experience and long history of democratic rule in Congress provided an opening for Republican dominance in the 1946 and 1994 congressional elections. In their first two years in office, Truman and Clinton both lacked what Richard Neustadt calls, "presidential power" or "the power to persuade."116 In Neustadt's definition he claims that powerful presidents, in their efforts to persuade, must possess both professional reputation in dealing with Congress and other Washington insiders, as well as public prestige.117 Both Truman and Clinton had little Washington experience in how to run the executive branch and deal with members of Congress as well as minimal public prestige.

Truman had been a businessman whom no one had heard of until he was elected to the Senate at age 50. Ten years later, he was President. His transition to the presidency was made even more difficult not only because of his short, 82 day tenure as vice-

117 See Neustadt, Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents.
president, but also due to his limited contact with Roosevelt. Unlike most of the American presidents, Truman had not been popularly elected. In addition, Truman was known as "go along, get along, Harry" and had not taken a leadership role during his tenure in the Senate. Thus, he could not rely on his ties to Congress to strengthen his position. Harry Truman ascended the presidency during World War II as an inexperienced leader with great challenges to end the war and bring about a stable economy. His lack of executive experience was undoubtedly damaging to his first year in office.

Similarly, Bill Clinton was also inexperienced as the national executive leader. As the young governor from Arkansas, Clinton had few close friends and mentors in Washington. Unlike Truman however, Clinton was popularly elected to his office; yet he still faced many obstacles in how to run and manage the country. Having no previous interaction with most members of Congress, Clinton struggled during his first two years to gain their respect. Furthermore, the Arkansas legislature was overwhelmingly dominated by the Democrats, thus he lacked experience in dealing with a partisan political opposition in Congress. In addition to the difficulties Clinton faced with members of Congress, he also struggled to find strong individuals to comprise his staff and Cabinet. Many of Clinton’s close staff members were individuals who had helped run his campaign. Clinton’s experience as a long-term governor of a small state did not translate well to Washington. Like Truman, Clinton struggled during his first two years in office to understand the position of the chief executive and become a Washington insider, while simultaneously trying to push forth an ambitious agenda.

The inexperience of Truman and Clinton was even more noticeable when compared to the politically experienced presidents that they succeeded. Truman replaced Roosevelt, the longest serving president in U.S. history, who had recovered the country from the Great Depression, established social services to provide for the public, and carried the nation through World War II. Similarly, Clinton’s term followed 12 years of experienced...
Republican executive leadership during the Reagan and Bush presidencies. Reagan led the country during the height of the Cold War as the United States and Soviet Union built the arms race to ensure that each country would remain a world superpower. After eight years as vice president, George Bush stepped in to the presidency to continue the Reagan legacies seeing the collapse of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War, and leading the country to victory in the Persian Gulf War. While Clinton defeated Bush in 1992, leading one to perhaps question Bush’s credible leadership, Bush undoubtedly benefited from his experience as vice-president and the Republican legacies left by Reagan, particularly in his first three years in office. Both Truman’s and Clinton’s inexperience was more evident after following eras of strong, persuasive presidential power.

In addition to the inexperience of both Truman and Clinton, the political environments in 1946 and 1994 were also similar. In 1946, the American public was frustrated with the stagnation of the Democratic hegemony from the New Deal coalition. Truman’s lack of leadership in the transition to a stable postwar economy and the lack of new ideas to attract voters, opened the door to Republican victory. In 1994, while unified government was only in its second year, the public had again become frustrated with stagnation and gridlock in Washington. Clinton had failed to achieve his ambitious goals that he put forth in his 1992 election. The congressional elections of 1946 and 1994 were both during periods of long Democratic rule in Congress, following 14 and 40 years respectively, of Democratic control in Congress. By 1946 and 1994, the public’s frustrations with the stagnation and political quagmire in Washington opened the door for change, resulting in the pendulum swing during those midterm congressional elections.

The theories of congressional elections that were explained earlier in this analysis were clearly upheld in 1946 and 1994. Turnout in the midterm election was low, 37.1% in 1946 and 36.0% in 1994 compared to 48.1% and 47.0% in House races in 1948 and 1996, respectively. As expected, turnout was even higher in the presidential races, 51.1% in 1948 and 49.0% in 1996. In addition, the midterm elections of 1946 and 1994 proved to
be referenda of the incumbent president’s first two years in office. The president’s party expected to lose seats in both 1946 and 1994. Harry Truman and Bill Clinton both had low approval ratings as Democrats headed into the midterm congressional elections. In September 1946, Truman’s approval ratings were down to 32%, Clinton’s were down to 41% in mid-October 1994. Given the low approval ratings, both Truman and Clinton did little campaigning for congressional Democrats. Furthermore, incumbent Democrats did not want to tie themselves to presidents with such low popularity.

The election results of 1946 and 1994 were also similar. Not only did the Republicans gain control of both houses of Congress in these elections, but they did so by defeating more Democratic incumbents than usual. This is particularly unusual given the theories on incumbency advantage. On average, incumbent reelection rates have been over 90% since World War II, yet in 1946 and 1994 the reelection rates of Democratic incumbents were 77.1% and 84.8% respectively. In 1946, 52 House incumbents were defeated, 48 of whom were Democrats. In the Senate seven incumbents, all Democrats, were defeated. In 1994, 34 incumbents were defeated in the House, and two in the Senate, again all Democrats. Thus, while overall, incumbents were still successful, the Democratic Party suffered significant incumbent defeats.

Differences

Two such similar elections in 1946 and 1994 led to two very different results in 1948 and 1996. The similarities between Truman and Clinton that helped bring about the results of the 1946 and 1994 congressional elections had very different effects on the 80th and 104th Congresses as well as the election results in 1948 and 1996. In the 1946 election, the Republicans did not promote their own agenda, but rather were elected as a negative reaction to Truman’s presidency. After the 1946 election, the exasperated Truman became a much more progressive president, putting forth an ambitious legislative agenda
for Congress to pass. Particularly in foreign policy, the fear of the Soviet Union enabled Truman and Congress to become allies in passing the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan. On the domestic front, Truman and Congress had a more adversarial relationship. Truman, however, had a brilliant strategy to cast himself as a protector of Roosevelt’s New Deal policies, which Republicans in Congress wanted to cut, instead of casting himself as an advocate for more change. Truman’s difficulties with Congress resulted in 75 vetoes, of which only six were overridden. Another brilliant reelection strategy was Truman’s calling of a Special Session of Congress. The failure of the Special Session which came to be known as the “Do-Nothing” Congress, greatly benefited Truman too. Moreover, the improvements in the post-war economy also helped Truman to reinvent himself before the 1948 election.

Conversely, Clinton’s progressive attempts in his first two years in office had hurt his popularity greatly. The failure of Clinton’s health care reform was devastating and proved the difficulties in dealing with a Democratic Congress. Unlike the Republicans in 1946, the 1994 Republican congressional candidates combined negative criticism of Clinton with a clearly defined agenda, which they were elected to carry out. When the Republicans took control of the 104th Congress, they brought with them their ambitious Contract with America. Under the dominating leadership of Speaker Gingrich, the Republican Congress controlled the legislative agenda, forcing Clinton either to move more to the right and support the Republican initiatives, or to veto the Republican legislation. Unlike Truman, instead of pushing forth his own legislative agenda, Clinton was forced to take a defensive position in dealing with the 104th Congress. This strategy was most beneficial when Clinton defended his proposed budget, blaming the Republican leadership in Congress for the gridlock. The second session of the 104th Congress provided an opening for Clinton. Gingrich took on a new, more passive leadership style in 1996, perhaps in response to his own low approval ratings. The Republican stance allowed Clinton the opportunity to reinvent his legislative role. The 104th Congress ended
with only 17 vetoes, of which only one was overridden. Bipartisan compromise as well as negotiations played a pivotal role in reforming the nation's welfare system, promoting the continuation of divided government as the 1996 elections approached.

Unlike 1946 and 1994 in which there were clear similarities in the presidential campaign strategies and election results, the campaigns and elections of 1948 and 1996 were quite distinct. One similarity was that both Truman and Clinton each faced not only a well-known Republican challenger in the presidential race, but also relatively strong independent candidates (two in the case of Truman). Besides the independent candidate factor, the presidential and congressional campaigns of 1948 and 1996 had little in common with each other. Truman faced not only the strong Republican challenger, Dewey, but also had obstacles within his own party to overcome with the campaigns of Wallace and Thurmond. Furthermore, Truman trailed Dewey in the polls throughout most of the campaign. Yet, as described earlier, by November, Truman had metamorphosed into a strong presidential leader, challenging Congress, promoting his own legislative agenda, and re-energizing himself before the 1948 campaign. In addition, given his increased popularity, he was encouraged to campaign for congressional Democrats as he toured the country on his whistle-stop campaign. Despite Truman's close election victory, he succeeded in bringing back Democratic control to both houses of Congress.

Conversely, Clinton's bid for reelection was less difficult than Truman's, yet he was much less successful in bringing more Democrats into Congress. Clinton was unopposed in the Democratic primary and led Dole in the polls throughout the 1996 campaign season. The factor that most hurt congressional Democratic candidates in 1996 was that Clinton ran his reelection campaign by taking credit for the status quo, instead of proposing a change-oriented agenda as he had done in 1992. This tactic hurt congressional Democratic candidates because Clinton encouraged the continuation of divided government instead of promoting the re-establishment of unified control. He presented himself as presidential, rather than a partisan political figure and therefore did little campaigning on
behalf of congressional Democrats. Congressional Republicans also claimed credit for the status quo and successful economy by promoting the continuation of divided control.

In addition to the differences in campaign styles and characters of Truman and Clinton, the party system is perhaps the greatest difference between the 1946-1948 and 1994-1996 periods. FDR's success in ending the Depression brought about a New Deal Democratic coalition in 1932. The nation as a whole leaned much more Democratic as Roosevelt introduced social policy programs to boost the economy and provide a safety net for the poor. The Democratic leaning of the country had a direct effect on voting behaviors, as the 1940s was a period when party identification was central to voting patterns and behaviors. Thus, the American people relied on the strength of the party system when casting their voting decisions. Given the strong role of the party in making voting decisions, the results of the 1946 and 1948 elections are not at all surprising. The Republican victory in 1946 was a referendum on Truman's first year in office, and the state of the economy which led voters to break away from the New Deal coalition. Had Truman been up for reelection in 1946, it is almost certain that he would have been defeated. But, Truman's success during his next two years in office, and his harsh criticisms of the Republican Congress, convinced the already mostly Democratic voters that the New Deal coalition established by Roosevelt could be revived, and that he really was a working heir to Roosevelt. Because the party system was so strong, ticket splitting was much less common in 1948 than it has been in recent years. While presidential election returns by congressional district are unavailable, one can examine senatorial races in comparison to state results in the presidential election. Of the 32 states in which there were senatorial elections, Truman won 19, and in all but one (Massachusetts), the Democratic senatorial candidate won as well. In addition, Democrats also won the Senate seats in the four southern states that Thurmond captured. Thus, the continuation of realignment of the

strong party system, and the Democratic leaning of the nation, attributed to Truman's close victory over Dewey.

The realignment of the Democratic party certainly attributed to both Truman's reelection as well as the Democratic control of the Congress. One implication of realignment theory is that partisan identification is strongest with those who were involved in politics at the time of the realigning event, in this case, the Democratic response to the Depression. As the results of the 1946 election explain, under strong party systems people stray from their party only because of short-term forces in which candidates are seen as candidates of parties, and not so much as individuals. In addition, congressional candidates did not have the ability to run individualized campaigns. Incumbent advantage in early post-war years was due more to party loyalty with one party districts rather than to running personal campaigns. Thus, the election of 1946 was an aberration; Truman was not seen as a true FDR Democrat in 1946, and as a result, congressional Democrats were punished. By 1948, however, Truman had emerged as a strong leader, the economy had stabilized, and the election results followed.

By the 1990s, the strength of political parties had decreased significantly and dealignment has prevailed. Party identification has become less of an indicator to predicting voting behaviors, and ticket splitting and divided government have since become the accepted norms. In addition, the nation as a whole is dealigning politically, and is more evenly split between the Democratic and Republican parties, with an increasing independent support group as well.

Redistricting after the 1990 census also had a great impact on recent election results. The South and West gained more seats after redistricting, and on average were more Republican in voting habits than states in the Northeast and Midwest that lost seats.

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151 See Cain, Ferejohn, Fiorina, *The Personal Vote.*
Majority-minority districts also helped Republicans by packing African-American voters, who are mostly Democratic supporters into minority districts, leaving neighboring districts relatively more Republican.\textsuperscript{153} The effects of both redistricting and the House Bank Scandal were apparent in 1992, in that despite Bush's poor showing and his inability to generate much popular partisan support, the Republicans still picked up ten seats.

Given the dealignment of political parties and redistricting in 1990, the election results of 1994 and 1996 are also not very surprising. Like 1946, the 1994 congressional elections were a referenda on Clinton's first two years in office and unified government. The Republicans made efforts to nationalize the campaign and increase the strength of the party through their Contract with America. Dealignment prevailed however, in that even most Republican candidates ran candidate-centered campaigns, appealing to the interests of their individual constituencies. While all politics in 1994 may not have been local, the electoral effect of national issues varied across districts and regions, depending on incumbency, the quality of candidates, the amount of campaign spending, the partisan makeup of the district, and the behavior of the incumbent.\textsuperscript{154} Most of the seats that the Republican's gained in 1994 were ones in which they should have held earlier, but had stayed Democratic because Democratic candidates adapted to a more conservative political environment in unfriendly areas to their party.\textsuperscript{155}

Congressional Democrats did not do as well as Clinton in 1996 because voters chose to continue the electoral politics of divided government during stable times. In addition, the changes in structure of electoral competition for congressional seats were revealed and magnified by the 1994 election results.\textsuperscript{156} In 1996, congressional candidates relied on strong candidate-centered campaigns, as Republican candidates no longer used the Contract to nationalize their campaigns, and Democratic candidates did little to align

\textsuperscript{156} Jacobson, "The 105th Congress: Unprecedented and Unsurprising," 151.
themselves with the Democratic president. Furthermore, Clinton hoped to win at least 51% of the popular vote and thought that campaigning for congressional Democrats would hurt him.\textsuperscript{157} Ticket splitting in the 1996 election was evident as 25.5\% (110) of the 435 congressional districts had split ticket results.\textsuperscript{158} Clinton carried 280 congressional districts in 1996, however he only ran ahead of the Democratic candidate in 27 districts, and trailed the Democratic congressional candidate in 174 of the races.\textsuperscript{159} Thus, the election results in 1996 proved that dealignment prevailed as voters supported the continuation of divided government with a Democratic executive and Republican legislature.

**Conclusion**

The relationship between congressional behaviors and congressional elections does not seem to have deviated significantly from post war congressional theories. By examining Truman and the 1946-1948 elections and drawing comparisons to Clinton and the 1994-1996 elections, we have seen that traditional congressional theories still seem to apply. Congressional theories that were upheld in all four elections include: incumbents still prove to have an advantage over their challengers; congressional elections are still candidate-centered; midterm elections still seem to be a referendum of the incumbent executive’s performance during his first years in office and the public’s sentiments toward the state of the economy; the President’s party can still expect to lose seats in an off-year election; presidential coattails have become shorter in recent years; and voter turnout is still likely to decrease. All of these theories applied during the midterm elections of 1946 and 1994, leading to the Republican control of both houses of Congress and a Democratic president.

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 72. Note numbers are computed on the basis of actual presidential vote with Ross Perot included.
The differences during these times were more a reflection in the character and campaign differences between Harry Truman and Bill Clinton and the strength of the political party system in the United States, than a reflection upon changes in congressional theories. The difference can been seen throughout several factors in the 1948 and 1996 elections. First, in 1948, Truman had a natural Democratic majority to rally whereas now, during the Clinton administration, the parties are evenly matched and party itself is a less influential factor in voters' decisions. Second, the New Deal policies that Truman defended in 1948 enjoyed broad public support, whereas current Republican themes of lower taxes and smaller government hold sway. Third, the dealigning of political parties helped Clinton to secure election victory by adapting to a more conservative political environment, while Truman relied heavily upon Democratic majorities to secure his close victory over Dewey. Finally, lingering questions about Clinton’s personal character have offered voters additional reason to leave Republicans in a position to keep a watchful eye on him. Truman’s 1948 election campaign was a "spirited partisan defense of the New Deal," while Clinton's campaign in 1996 was indistinguishable from that of a moderate Republican.160 Ironically, because of the nature of divided government which forced compromise between Republicans and Democrats, both sides were brought together to a more acceptable middle ground for the public to reelect.

The watershed congressional elections of 1946 and 1994 seem to be extreme examples of what political scientists have come to expect in midterm elections. The 1946 election was a blip on the radar screen, as 1948 led to a Democratic victory in Congress and the presidency, returning the government to unified control. In 1996, however, the recent trends of divided government were evident, and may in fact be more comparable to Reagan’s reelection in 1984. Like Clinton, Reagan won reelection easily in 1984, but the Republicans picked up only 14 seats in the House and lost three in the Senate. Both Reagan and Clinton ran strong campaigns, highlighting the strong economies and popular

policy successes. Both drew upon extraordinary political skills to extend their appeal beyond their party's expected electoral base, yet neither did much to help congressional candidates from their party. As divided government has become the increasing norm in American politics, it is not surprising that when times are good and the president deserves another term, voters do not choose to replace incumbents or the majority party in Congress, who claim credit for peace, prosperity, and progress.

So what do these results mean about the future of congressional elections? Well, as the 1998 congressional elections approach, it seems as if Republicans can look forward to at least two more years in control of the Congress. First, the Republican Party is on its way to building the strong congressional base in the South that once gave Democrats security in the battle to control the House and Senate. Second, incumbency advantage and the loss of congressional seats in midterm elections is likely to strengthen the Republican grip on Congress in 1998. Finally, the dealignment of the political party structure is likely to result in the continuation of divided government. Thus, it is almost certain that Clinton will face a Republican Congress for the remainder of his presidency.

Since elections are fundamental to a democracy, periodically reexamining election theories is important in assessing the stability of our democratic government. In this case, congressional election theories were reexamined to ensure that they can still be used to explain results of congressional elections; why two such similar congressional elections, those of 1946 and 1994 were to be followed by two such different elections, those of 1948 and 1996, respectively. As this thesis has demonstrated, all of the traditional congressional election theories still apply. The difference in the election results of 1948 and 1996 were more a reflection of the change in the political party system, and the different personalities and campaigns of Truman and Clinton, rather than a change in congressional theories. Nonetheless, it is necessary that these same congressional election theories continue to be tested and reexamined by scholars of political science in future years.
References


