

INTRODUCTION

From Dark Blue to Light Red

Four days before the 1994 election, President Bill Clinton heard a prediction from a top advisor that he didn't believe. Dick Morris, a Republican operative whom Clinton's staff found so distasteful that the president hid his relationship with him, told Clinton that Democrats were going to lose their majority in the US House of Representatives. "No way, no way," Clinton responded.¹

Few could blame Clinton for being incredulous about Morris's prediction. Democratic control of the House had been a given for decades. Save for brief two-year majorities the Republicans won in 1946 and 1952, the Democrats had held the House uninterrupted since they took a majority in a series of special elections in 1931, allowing them to capture the gavel when the House opened that year in December.²

And yet Morris, of course, was right.

The Republican Revolution of 1994 represents a transitional point between more than a half century of Democratic dominance in the House and a more recent period that does not qualify as Republican "dominance" but is certainly more than just a slight political imbalance. In the years since 1994, Republicans will have held the House majority for 20 of the 28 years between 1995 and 2023, and they appear to hold more advantages in the race for majority control of the US House of Representatives than the Democrats. But these advantages are not unassailable. Already, the Democrats have won House majorities in 4 of the 13 elections since 1994,

whereas the Republicans only won majorities in 2 elections between the New Deal and their 1994 breakthrough.

It may seem off base to argue that the nation is in the midst of a period of Republican advantage in the House while the Democrats currently hold a majority (albeit a reduced one following Democratic setbacks in the 2020 election). Yet there are a number of factors that argue in favor of looking at the House as an institution in which Republicans are generally better positioned to capture majorities than Democrats are.

Overall, there are three major trends over the course of the six decades of House elections covered in this book that transformed the House from a body dominated by Democrats to one in which Republicans enjoy an ongoing electoral advantage. Those trends are nationalization, realignment, and reapportionment, all of which are inextricably linked.

1. Nationalization: Over the course of the period studied here, House results became increasingly correlated with presidential results. In the 1960s and 1970s, which serve as the beginning point of this study, it was common for presidential elections to feature a tremendous amount of down-ballot ticket splitting. For instance, during this period more than a quarter of House districts, even in closely contested presidential elections, could for instance vote for a Democrat for president and a Republican for the House, or vice versa. More recently, there has been far less ticket splitting and more nationalization of results, which helps Republicans and hurts Democrats because of the Republicans' stronger influence over the redistricting process in the past couple of decades paired with, arguably, disparities in national population distribution that disadvantage Democrats. Additionally, some of the factors that helped sustain Democratic majorities—such as the ideological diversity of members and the advantage of incumbency—have eroded in recent years as elections have become more nationalized rather than localized.
2. Realignment: Over the last six decades, the American electorate has realigned its preferences. The South, historically the nation's most ideologically conservative region, nonetheless helped sustain Democratic control of the House even as the national Democratic Party was moving left. Over time, conservatives in the South started voting up and

down the ballot for members of the more conservative national party: the Republicans. Meanwhile, ideologically less conservative regions, like the West Coast and Northeast, have moved toward the Democrats, with the more moderate Midwest oscillating between the two parties. These overall realigning trends have generally benefited the Republicans in aggregate.

3. Reapportionment: As noted above, Republicans over the past few decades have had more success dealing with reapportionment—a term that covers not just the reallocation of House seats after each census based on population but also the process of drawing up new districts. The shifting of seats based on population changes from the slower-growing Northeast and Midwest to the faster-growing South and West helped Republicans at a crucial time, specifically in advance of the 2002 midterm, to maintain their House majority. Reapportionment may end up benefiting Republicans in advance of the 2022 midterm as well.

The emergence of a persistent Republican edge in the House has come at a time when the differences between the two parties have become increasingly stark. As political scientist Sam Rosenfeld argued in his recent history of the origins of polarization, “The two major American political parties are now sorted quite clearly along ideological lines. The most liberal Republican member of Congress has amassed a voting record that is consistently to the right of the most conservative Democrat.”³

With more ideologically consistent parties—almost all the liberals in the Democratic Party, and almost all of the conservatives in the Republican Party—there are fewer opportunities for legislative compromises. This was obvious from two of the biggest legislative fights in Congress over the past dozen years: the struggle to pass the Affordable Care Act in 2009–10, led by Democrats, and the struggle to do away with that same legislation, led by Republicans, in 2017.

Republicans decided to play no role in the passage of the Affordable Care Act (also known as “Obamacare”). Not only was it legislation that Republicans generally did not support on its merits, but they also decided they did not want to provide bipartisan cover for majority Democrats. They arguably were rewarded, electorally, for their efforts: Obamacare

became law, but the backlash from it helped Republicans win back control of the House in 2010.

When Republicans tried to unwind Obamacare in 2017, Democrats—then in the minority themselves—not only disagreed with the Republicans’ health-care plans, but they were also disincentivized to provide bipartisan cover to the majority Republicans. The Republicans pushed an Obamacare repeal through the House with great effort, but those efforts died in the Senate. Democrats ran heavily on health care in 2018 and retook the majority. Political scientist Frances Lee, in her history of competition for majorities in the House and Senate, described how both parties have come to believe, with great justification, that they can win majorities not by working with the majority party but by fighting it tooth and nail.⁴ That sort of behavior also makes more sense when there’s not much ideological overlap between the two parties, which is true now but wasn’t necessarily true a few decades ago. “These developments,” Rosenfeld wrote, “have helped to give contemporary politics the distinctive character of high-stakes warfare.”⁵ This is all an elaborate way of saying that perhaps the only way the parties can truly govern is when they have unified control of Washington—that is, if the parties can govern at all. It is important to note that the ideological cohesion of the parties has not necessarily made congressional majorities more effective at passing legislation, according to research by Lee along with political scientist James M. Curry.⁶

Still, the majority party in the House has always been important, and it may be more important in a time of hard partisanship, ideological cohesion, and little bipartisan cooperation. So if in fact the Republicans have an advantage in the race for the House—an advantage that doesn’t guarantee them perpetual control of the House but gives them a better chance at control than the Democrats—that has important consequences for governing.

What follows is an exploration of how the House transitioned from a period of Democratic dominance to one of Republican advantage. This work is divided into three chapters, which together explore all 29 biennial national House elections held from 1964 through 2020: more than half a century of US electoral history. Clearly, this history cannot cover every single election: with 435 seats at stake every two years, this period features

12,615 individual elections, which would be impossible (and tedious) to cover in a single work. Instead, this book looks for larger trends and uses compelling individual results from each election to highlight them.

The starting point for this work, 1964, is not selected randomly. It was the first election after a series of monumental Supreme Court decisions that injected the principle of “one person, one vote” into the drawing of congressional and state legislative districts. Prior to these decisions, US House districts were not required to have equal populations within states. But over the course of the mid to late 1960s, states changed their district maps to comply with these rulings. So 1964, the start of the Reapportionment Revolution, seemed like a logical place to begin a study on modern US House elections.

The first chapter covers the elections held from 1964 to 1974 and traces the changing district lines forced by the Supreme Court’s reapportionment decisions. This was a period of huge Democratic majorities, and the changing lines did not seem to significantly affect that dominance. However, one begins to see stirrings of modern trends in this period, as the previously moribund Republican Party in the conservative (but at the time heavily Democratic) South began to assert itself more fully. It also offers a primer and brief history of congressional redistricting.

The second chapter brings the narrative up to 1994, when the Republicans finally won the House majority. Going election by election, this chapter traces how Republicans, despite remaining in the minority throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, did make subtle gains and, perhaps more importantly, avoided major losses while holding the White House for the entire 1980s. As explored much more deeply in the chapter, midterm elections are typically the engines of change in the House, and the sitting president’s party often suffers major losses in such elections. Democrats failed to make major gains in such elections under Republican presidents during this era and ended up losing major ground themselves in a 1994 midterm election under a Democratic president. While chapter 1 focuses on the fallout from the Supreme Court’s reapportionment decisions, chapter 2 assesses how redistricting based on race, which was pushed by the President George H. W. Bush-era Justice Department, had an impact on partisan control of the House.

Chapter 3 brings the story up to the present and describes the elections from 1996 to 2020. This was a period of consistent but not absolute Republican control, which was bolstered by stronger Republican control of the levers of redistricting power in many states, particularly during the post-2010 census round of redistricting. This chapter looks most deeply at such partisan “gerrymandering”—the drawing of district lines for partisan benefit—although discussions of districting choices and the political power that shapes them are prominent throughout this work.

The research for this project encompasses much of the key literature concerning electoral nationalization, electoral patterns, reapportionment, redistricting, and other factors. There are not necessarily “schools of thought” in studying House elections, although there are disagreements about how decisive factors such as redistricting are in electoral outcomes. This work takes something of a middle view on the redistricting question: on the one hand, there is voluminous evidence cited throughout that partisan redistricting affects outcomes and is important; on the other, this book does not go so far as to say that partisan redistricting can always guarantee outcomes or that redistricting can necessarily lock one party into majority control of the House.

If such a lock on power were possible, it might be that this work would be finalized during a Republican majority in the House that persisted despite a national preference for Democratic House control in 2018 (and, to a lesser extent, in 2020). But the Democrats did in fact win the House majority in 2018 and then held it in 2020, albeit narrowly. That does not necessarily mean that the Democrats do not have certain handicaps in the biennial battle for the House, but those handicaps are not impossible to overcome.