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politics

Snapshot of US political parties since 1900

How the balance of power has shifted between the Republicans and Democrats.

By **Husna Haq** | August 18, 2009 edition

From 1894 to 1896, Republicans expand their footprint. The economic panic of 1893 ushers in rising disaffection with the administration of Grover Cleveland (D). The young leader of the populist wing of the Democratic Party, William Jennings Bryan, moves it to the left on economic issues. The realignment makes the Republicans the clear majority party through the early 1900s.

- **Teddy Roosevelt (R), who becomes the youngest president** at 42 upon the assassination of William McKinley, serves from 1901 to 1909. An ardent reformer, he fights monopolistic corporations, becomes the first president to call for universal healthcare, and promotes conservation.

In 1912, Republicans are splintered between the conservative followers of William Howard Taft and Roosevelt's progressive wing. Woodrow Wilson (D) wins the election and is narrowly voted to a second term in 1916. In 1919, Wilson is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his work in creating the League of Nations. He establishes the Federal Reserve Board and passes labor and child-welfare laws. But his tenure is an aberration in a GOP era. Prosperity during World War I turns into postwar depression. Strikes and race riots erupt. This leads to a high point for the Republicans in the 1920s. They rule the White House for the next 12 years – with large **successive victories by Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover.**

- The election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932 marks the beginning of a major realignment that favors the Democrats. The party rules both houses of Congress through Roosevelt's entire tenure (1933-45). For six of those years, the Democrats control two-thirds of the congressional seats. Roosevelt takes aggressive steps to pull the country out of the Great Depression, with New Deal programs such as the Works Progress Administration, the Civilian Conservation Corps, and the establishment of a Social Security system.

A recession in 1937, plus Roosevelt's attempt to purge the House of conservative Democrats, results in the Republicans picking up seats in 1938. Those gains, coupled with Democratic infighting, undercut Roosevelt's New Deal ambitions. By 1944, Roosevelt, who is already being depicted as a war hero, wins a fourth term and his supporters regain control of both houses of Congress.

In 1946, postwar dissatisfaction with Harry Truman (D), plus widespread labor strikes, lead to the Republicans retaking Congress. Democrats recapture control two years later, but their reign is short-lived: Concern that Truman is too soft on communism and unable to end the Korean War leads to a **landslide victory for Dwight Eisenhower (R)** in 1952 and Republican control of Congress. Ike's

tenure, though, largely represents a break in a Democratic era.

The 1960s start with Democrat John F. Kennedy's narrow win in 1960 but hit a peak for the party with Lyndon Johnson's historic rout of Republican Barry Goldwater in 1964. The Democrats also grab a two-thirds, vetoproof majority in Congress. Johnson pushes through Great Society programs – launching the War on Poverty and Medicare and ushering in the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts.

This is the time the parties begin shifting their positions on race. The Democrats become more controlled by their Northern liberal wing and change from being the conservative party on civil rights to the liberal one. This sets off a realignment that will eventually lead to a stronger GOP in the South.

Richard Nixon leads a swing back toward the Republicans in 1968 as anger over the Vietnam War mounts. The transformation of the South from solidly Democratic to Republican is well under way.

In 1972, **Nixon sets an electoral college record, winning 49 states** because of his opening ties to China, his strategic arms talks with the Soviet Union, and his promise to end the Vietnam War. Democrats still maintain a majority in Congress, though. In 1974, Nixon resigns as a result of the Watergate scandal, and Democrats expand their control of Congress. But Republicans rise again in 1980 as voter disgust over Jimmy Carter's (D) handling of the Iranian hostage crisis, a spike in oil prices, and general economic malaise leads to **the election of Ronald Reagan**. The GOP retakes the US Senate and adds seats in the House. More important, Republicans gain in party identification. Democrats are no longer the dominant majority.

In 1992, Bill Clinton (D) defeats President Bush and tilts power toward Democrats. But the shift is brief: In 1994, the GOP takes control of both houses of Congress for the first time in 40 years because of Clinton's mistakes and the unpopularity of Democrats on the Hill. The change is the culmination of the realignment that had been going on since the 1960s. **Newt Gingrich (R) pushes the Contract With America**, a 10-point policy agenda.

George W. Bush (R) serves two terms (2001-09) with a Republican majority in Congress most of the time. Opposition to the Iraq war and a scandal involving GOP congressman Mark Foley lead to Democratic control of Congress in 2006. The election of Barack Obama, running amid a deepening recession and collapse on Wall Street, gives the White House to the Democrats in 2008.

– *Compiled by Husna Haq, using the following sources: James Campbell, political scientist, State University of New York at Buffalo; democrats.org; senate.gov; clerk.house.gov.*

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