

Benjamin Ginsberg, Alan Stone, eds.. *Do Elections Matter?*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1996. xvi + 240 pp. \$91.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-56324-445-2.



Reviewed by Byron Hulsey

Published on H-Pol (November, 1997)

In the third edition of *Do Elections Matter?*, editors Benjamin Ginsberg and Alan Stone explore the linkages between "voting, parties, and elections on the one hand, and policy outputs on the other" (p. xv). Holding that the literature has dichotomized first how voters make their decisions and, second, the effects of elections on the policy process, Ginsberg and Stone examine the relationship between voting and public policy. Most of the articles are new to this edition and address the pivotal 1994 congressional elections. The book is divided into three parts: 1. the implications of the 1994 mid-terms, 2. an examination of the extent to which elections affect policy, 3. an assessment of the growing importance of ideology in American elections, which the editors suggest "has profound implications for how much elections 'matter'" (p. xvi). Written by political science professors and doctoral candidates, the articles, on the whole, are engaging for the profession but understandable for the interested lay reader and non-specialist. Though *Do Elections Matter?* fails to make clear the relationship between elections and policy products, the editors have made a useful contribution to the ongoing debate about the

meaning of elections and provided students with a provocative stimulant for making sense of the overwhelming unsettledness of contemporary American politics.

In "The 1994 Elections: A Debacle for the Democrats," Ginsberg offers a coherent, well-written overview of the GOP triumph. He traces the origins of the Republican victory, looking into the politics of civil rights and the Vietnam war. GOP presidential nominees from Nixon to Bush created a winning coalition made up of blue collar workers in the North and South who believed that the civil rights movement had gone too far, social and religious conservatives who applauded the GOP's opposition to abortion and its support for prayer in public schools, and middle and upper class voters who favored Republican tax cuts. Homing in on a bifurcated political process, Ginsberg also explores the "New Democratic Party" of the early 1970s and the "armies of liberal activists" that accented local issues and gave the Democrats a decided advantage in congressional elections. Even though liberal activism hurt the Democrats in presidential campaigns, Ginsberg

argues persuasively that the localization of American politics gave the Democrats a choke-hold on the Congress.

When assessing the reasons for the Democratic debacle, Ginsberg acknowledges the contributing importance of Clinton's unpopularity, the health-care fiasco, and the White House's politically ill-advised attempt to end discrimination against gays in the military. But he rightly insists that the basis for the GOP's electoral success in 1994 was the party's ability to nationalize these issues through talk radio and television programs that hammered away at what they considered to be the liberal excesses of the Clinton administration and the steady erosion of the nation's social fabric. While Ginsberg is careful to admit that not all talk show hosts are conservative, he does suggest that the GOP benefited disproportionately from the tendency of these media to nationalize congressional races. Democrats, by contrast, found it increasingly difficult "to insulate themselves from the issues and ideologies that, for thirty years, have damaged the Democratic party's chances at the presidential level" (p. 20).

Ginsberg's co-editor, Alan Stone, teams with Chris Cookson and Ross Lence in "The Question of Presidential Character" to argue that Clinton's moral delinquency cost the Democrats their congressional majority. Delving into the Founding Fathers' view of republican virtue and holding that the presidency is "a symbol of American values, goals, and commitments," the authors assert that the President is the one elected official who can reasonably be charged with representing a majority of voters (p. 26). Given their lofty standards for presidential behavior, it is not surprising that Clinton fails their every test. In addition to listing a long litany of character breakdowns that have plagued the Clinton White House in general and the First Family in particular, the authors bemoan the President's disregard for the dignity of his office. Referring unnecessarily to MTV as the "juvenile rock network" but rightly rebuking the Presi-

dent for dignifying with an answer a seventeen-year old's question about the kind of undershorts he wears, the authors contend that Clinton's flawed character is at the heart of his political problems and is at least partially responsible for the dissolution of the body politic (p. 34).

But Stone, Cookson, and Lence show little of the subtlety and sophistication that marks the majority of essays in this volume. The central problem with their argument is that defining "character" and establishing its importance in the electoral arena is an extremely difficult endeavor. The reviewer grants that he has the luxury of hindsight, but one cannot help but wonder, given the central importance of "character," how the authors would explain Clinton's triumph in the 1996 election. Did Clinton finally clean up his act and establish a moral basis for his presidency? No one questioned Bob Dole's character. He was a war hero whose integrity and candor were respected on both sides of the aisle. The strength of his character served Dole well in the legislative crusades of his distinguished career on Capitol Hill and may have contributed slightly to his ability to secure the 1996 GOP presidential nomination. But his character got him nowhere in the general election. In fact, some Republican diehards were suggesting that Dole would have been better off with a little less statesmanship and a little more bare-knuckled combativeness. While "character" must surely count on the margins of a closely contested race, lofty visions of unsullied, virtuous leadership matter far less in the electoral arena than many voters would like.

In the last of the essays dealing specifically with the implications of the 1994 mid-terms, Kenneth Woodside ("The Decline and Ascent of Political Parties in Canada: The Collapse of the Conservatives and Rise of Reform) compares the 1993 defeat of the Canadian Conservatives to the 1994 demise of the Democrats. Acknowledging that the North American neighbors share a social, economic, and political interdependence, Woodside

spends an appropriate amount of space detailing the many differences between Canada's parliamentary system of a general election and America's federal form of government and staggered elections. In the end, he asserts, "the experience of the Conservatives in Canada is not particularly relevant for U.S. party politics" (p. 61). On its face, this is an unsatisfying essay for American political enthusiasts. But the comparative method is instructive and puts the significance and meaning of American elections into sharper perspective. Because only a third of the Senate and the entire House is up for election in any given mid-term, "U.S. parties are somewhat less exposed at each election than their Canadian counterparts. If a Canadian party faces a hostile electorate, the results can wipe it out" (p. 61). In the American system, the protected President has an opportunity to hear the voters half-way through his term and respond to the new political environment before the presidential election two years later.

Like Cookson, Lence, and Stone, Thomas Ferguson ("The 1994 Explosion") places the blame for the Democratic defeat squarely on the shoulders of Bill Clinton. But instead of emphasizing the character issue, Ferguson charges Clinton with failing to pursue his 1992 promise to grow the economy with an aggressive stimulus package. To Ferguson, "the president embraced precisely the same program of continuing austerity that the electorate elected him to break with" (p. 94). Relying on *New York Times* exit polls, Ferguson concludes that middle class voters with a declining standard of living abandoned the Democratic party for the GOP.

David Wirls ("Busted: Government and Elections in the Era of Deficit Politics") agrees with Ferguson's assertion that Clinton mirrored Bush more than his Democratic predecessors. But Wirls presents a far more persuasive perspective for understanding Clinton's limitations. Wirls addresses the book's *raison d'etre* head on: "Elections matter insofar as they can lead to significant

change" (p. 65). Soft-pedaling issues of character and personality, Wirls conveys a clear understanding of the retrenchment politics of the debt and deficit that have dominated the presidencies of both George Bush and Bill Clinton. The "fiscal vise" and the widely-shared perceived need to reduce the deficit have created a new era in American politics. Stopping just short of budget determinism, Wirls argues that the politics of the deficit have contributed mightily to the cynicism that now threatens to overwhelm the nation's civic culture.

Wirls saves his harshest words for Ronald Reagan, who sat by unconcerned while the deficit soared through the roof. The irony is that the GOP, with its supposed commitment to fiscal responsibility, stands to benefit the most from the politics their supply side economics helped create. While ripping into the Republican party and the legacy of Ronald Reagan, Wirls makes an extra effort to empathize with George Bush, the first victim of this changed political landscape. When the 1990 recession began, the federal deficit hamstrung the Bush White House and discouraged any move toward an enterprising stimulus package, even if the President had been so inclined.

From the beginning, Clinton necessarily shared more in common with Bush than Franklin Roosevelt, John Kennedy, or Lyndon Johnson. Whereas Wirls's colleagues lambaste Clinton's character and deride his unwillingness to fight for a national investment program reflective of the New Deal Democratic party, Wirls insists that the politics of contraction conditioned Clinton's initiatives. The first two years of his presidency were characterized by the politics of the deficit. Aside from the crime bill, the White House's legislative triumphs (family leave, the Brady bill, NAFTA, and GATT) involved minimal government spending. Not surprisingly, Wirls interprets the health care fiasco from the budget perspective: "The problem was that the deficit was such a tight po-

litical vise that we could not afford short-term costs, no matter what the eventual gains" (p. 80).

In "Issues, Elections, and Political Change: The Case of Abortion," Timothy Byrnes agrees with Wirls that the importance of elections can be exaggerated. Byrnes applies the early 1970s work of Kevin Phillips's *The Emerging Republican Majority* and Richard Scammon's and Ben Wattenburg's *The Real Majority* to contemporary politics to determine if the so-called social issue can compete with economic interest to predict party identity and voting behavior. He focuses his analysis on the issue of abortion and frames his article around the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision to legalize abortion and the 1992 *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey* ruling that affirmed it. Because the Reagan/Bush appointees to the Supreme Court did not join together with other conservatives to overturn *Roe* in *Casey*, Byrnes argues "that abortion policy was relatively unaffected by the great ferment of abortion politics. Opponents of abortion 'won' elections in the 1980s, but they derived little policy satisfaction from their victories" (p. 102).

Despite the fact that the Reagan/Bush triumphs did not lead to illegalization of abortion, Byrnes persuasively asserts that Republican strategists used the social issue of abortion to create an electoral majority of conservative Democratic Catholics and Evangelical Protestants. Conservative tacticians responded to the rapid social change of the late 1960s and early 1970s by redefining the priorities of the GOP. Abortion became the key wedge issue that lured socially conservative Roman Catholics and Evangelical Protestants into the same political tent. Byrnes admits that he can't calculate the number of votes that the single issue of abortion garnered for the GOP, but he sees abortion as a powerful rhetorical symbol that social conservatives employed to undercut the New Deal coalition and realign the U.S. party system. Byrnes implies but doesn't say that the incendiary nature of the abortion issue and

the GOP failure to satisfy this socially conservative constituency may ruin the party's carefully crafted coalition.

Unlike Wirls and Byrnes, Bruce I. Oppenheimer's "The Importance of Elections in a Strong Congressional Party Era: The Effect of Unified vs. Divided Government" holds that elections have become more consequential in the last twenty years. Oppenheimer takes on David Mayhew's well-regarded argument (*Divided We Govern*) that there are few substantial differences in policy output during periods of unified and divided party control of Congress and the White House. While he acknowledges the persuasiveness of Mayhew's thesis from 1937 to 1980, Oppenheimer asserts that with a movement toward unified parties in the congressional arena, effective governance has become more and more difficult when Congress and the White House are held by different parties.

Oppenheimer opens his analysis by detailing the increasing cohesion and accelerating nationalization of the Democratic and Republican parties. Pointing to the effects of the 1965 Voting Rights Act and the leftward movement of the Democratic party after the retirement of the older generation of Southern bourbons, Oppenheimer discusses the break-up of the Southern Democratic/conservative Republican coalition. He would have strengthened his thesis by referring to the growing literature that examines the decline of liberal and moderate Republicans that accelerated after Kennedy's 1960 victory.

Oppenheimer uses *Vital Statistics on Congress* and *Congressional Quarterly Weekly* to show that the Democratic and Republican caucuses became more cohesive from 1971 to 1994. Taking a swipe at Mayhew, Oppenheimer suggests that the Reagan/Bush years failed to generate substantive policy, mostly because national parties had become more powerful and government was divided. Not surprisingly, Oppenheimer contrasts the Reagan-Bush years with the 103rd Congress and its legislative productivity with a Democrat in

the White House. Oppenheimer's scheme for comparing the Reagan-Bush era with Clinton's first two years, however, does not allow for major pieces of legislation like health care that never made it to the floor of Congress.

More important, recent events show that Oppenheimer may have written off the productivity and popularity of divided government too soon. Perhaps fearing unified GOP control and hoping that a sobered Bill Clinton would apply a necessary parking brake to keep the ship of state from careening over a cliff, the American voters supported divided government in 1996. Aside from the Senate's acrimonious investigation into campaign finance, positive relations between the White House and the 105th Congress suggest that there remains a core of leaders on both sides of Pennsylvania Avenue who are willing to ease off the ideological accelerator in favor of bi-partisan compromise at defining times. The White House-Congressional budget deal is the latest and most significant indication of the relative efficiency of divided government. In a recent Wall Street Journal/NBC News survey, almost seventy percent of those polled favored divided government.

Oppenheimer is on firmer ground when he argues that divided government hampers the conduct of routine business between Congress and the White House. Even while they cooperate with the White House on the most public issues, GOP congressional leaders like Utah's Orrin Hatch now openly admit to delaying White House nominations of federal judges because of party disregard for the liberal judicial activism that they say characterizes the Clinton appointments. Even while Oppenheimer exaggerates the lack of productivity and unpopularity of divided government, he is right to conclude that in an era of unified, national parties, elections become more important.

With its emphasis on unified government and its assertion that more and more Americans will identify with a single party, Oppenheimer's article serves as a useful transition to the third section of

the book, which explores the increased importance of ideology in the American political arena. Richard Joslyn's "Candidate Appeals and the Meaning of Elections" examines select presidential and senatorial campaigns from 1964-1988. Because the article is not updated to include an analysis of the 1992 presidential campaign and the 1994 congressional elections, its overall effect is muted. Even so, Joslyn concludes that there is substance to candidate appeals and that candidates do offer voters a clear choice, even though they continue to resort to the "benevolent leader" and "ritualistic" approaches. Joslyn's focus on the "rhetorical behavior of political candidates during election campaigns" is innovative, but because his approach does not consider change and or continuity over time, the reader is left hanging as to the extent to which ideology has increased in importance in American electioneering (p. 144).

In a more sophisticated article entitled "Does Ideology Matter?", Kathleen Knight and Carolyn V. Lewis address whether ideology determines voter choice. They analyze both "ideological sophistication" and "ideological sentiment" and develop quantitative models to support their findings. Though careful to emphasize that the United States is not a nation of ideologues, Knight and Lewis conclude that "ideology matters more than it did three decades ago, and that it has become more polarized" (p. 176). Whereas Daniel Bell (*The End of Ideology*) and other post World War II scholars seemed to celebrate an apparent consensus in American political life, Knight and Lewis embrace the re-emergence of ideology in politics and applaud the clearer choices that voters enjoy.

While most of the articles in *Do Elections Matter?* examine the national political scene, John Frensdreis, Alan R. Gitelson, Gregory Fleming, and Anne Layzell address the common assumption that state legislative assemblies are less issue oriented than their counterparts on Capitol Hill. In "State Legislative Elections: Choices or Echoes?," the authors surveyed 1992 candidates from Flori-

da, Illinois, Missouri, South Carolina, Washington, and Wisconsin to determine whether or not voters had an opportunity to support candidates of competing ideologies. The authors also asked a more penetrating question: do the choices voters make lead to state assemblies with particular ideological leanings?

The authors polled candidates on government's role in the following issue areas: guaranteeing good jobs; ensuring equal rights for women; cutting government services to balance the budget; safeguarding equal rights for minorities; and protecting the right to abortion. The survey revealed clear ideological differences between candidates. Party slates diverged most sharply over abortion rights and the government's role in managing the economy. The authors also found regional variations of ideological conflict: "The differences in the overall scores indicate that Republicans and Democrats differed most in Arizona and Colorado, while the two parties' candidates were closest in Illinois and South Carolina" (p. 196).

While the party system provided the electorate with a clear ideological choice at the local level, voters did not opt indiscriminately for either liberals or conservatives. The varied ideological composition of state legislatures made it difficult for the authors to establish a clear relationship between public opinion and policy outputs. Because the article was written on the 1992 elections, there is no examination of change over time, which discourages any rigorous exploration of the connection between voter opinion and public policy. Still at issue, therefore, is the extent to which elections really do matter.

In "Fresh Troops and Hardened Veterans: Religious Activists and Party Realignment in the 1990s," James L. Guth, John C. Green, Corwin E. Smidt, and Lyman A. Kellstedt delve into the politicization of American religion. The authors base their conclusions on their 1990-1991 Religious Activist Survey, which polled 5002 members of eight

prominent religious citizens organizations. In order to address the issue of change over time, each activist was asked not only to identify her current party identification, but also her partisan affiliation at age twenty-one. Even though the authors focused on the Evangelical Protestant community, they also polled liberal religious activists from Mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic traditions. Identifying the ways that religious change has contributed to shifts in party coalitions among activists, the authors argue for the existence of a "new religious order" in the body politic (p. 211). Members from all three religious traditions who reported an intensification of religious faith moved toward the Republican party. Agreeing with their colleagues about the increasing importance of ideology in America's political culture, the authors insist that "specific religious beliefs ... have influenced the realignment" (p. 217).

For the authors, the crucial element of change is the concept of social theology, which they define as "a fundamental set of beliefs about the nature of the social and political world and how Christians ought to behave in it" (p. 217). Evangelicals have historically promoted an individualistic theory of social change that assumes the depravity of human nature and argues that society can be improved not by governmental activism, but only through the religious conversion of individuals. American Catholics, influenced by their communitarian social theology, and Mainline Protestants, inspired by the Social Gospel of the Progressive Era, enjoy a more optimistic view of human nature and embrace the possibility that society can be improved through institutional change. Historically, Evangelical Protestants have absented themselves from party politics in order to concentrate on soul-saving. Lately, however, they have decided to enter the electoral arena in order to create a "Christian America" which will protect their imperiled values and cherished beliefs. At the very least, Evangelicals expect their political leaders to maintain a "moral climate that fosters individual responsibility" (p. 218). More liberal

and secular Christians sympathetic with Bill Clinton's notion of a "New Covenant" have worked to block the Evangelical advance, and the ensuing battle of wills has contributed to the nation's increasingly partisan political culture.

Even though the authors are unwilling to establish a clear connection between elections and public policy, they make a convincing case for their argument that religious activists of varying ideological stripes have altered American electoral politics. Like their colleagues, they too celebrate the intensification of ideological combat, and insist that the sharpening divide between Evangelicals and Mainline Protestants and secular Roman Catholics provides voters with a clear choice. Noting that the Evangelicals gravitate naturally to Newt Gingrich's new economic conservatism and that more secular Christians side with liberal factions in the Democratic party who envision an activist role for government, the authors conclude by asserting that "few issues are immune to the absorptive power of these respective social theologies" (p. 228).

Taken together, these articles are engaging and lively. Written by political scientists but accessible to scholars in other disciplines and interested laymen, *Do Elections Matter?* contributes to the ongoing dialogue about the evolving meaning of democracy in American culture. The authors write persuasively of the nationalization of American politics and the increasing importance of elections, but fall short of their stated goal to establish a clear relationship between public opinion and policy outputs. While most of the authors suggest that the party system is healthy and offers a viable choice between candidates, we will debate the significance of elections in American political life until scholars are able to connect what happens at the polls to what policies are produced.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the au-

thor and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu. [The book review editor for H-Pol is Lex Renda <renlex@csd.uwm.edu>]

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-pol>

Citation: Byron Hulse. Review of Ginsberg, Benjamin; Stone, Alan, eds. *Do Elections Matter?*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. November, 1997.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1463>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.