
COMMENTS ON PREVIOUS ARTICLES AND TOPICS

The 1992 and 1996 Presidential Elections: Whatever Happened to the Republican Electoral College Lock?

THOMAS BRUNELL

*Department of Political Science
University of California, Irvine*

BERNARD GROFMAN

*Department of Political Science
University of California, Irvine*

After Republican candidates won seven of ten presidential contests from 1952 through 1988, and five of six of the contests between 1968 and 1988, pundits proclaimed that the Republicans held an electoral college "lock." This view of a Republican lock on the electoral college was further supported by two facts.

First, it appeared that there were a number of states that the GOP could almost always count on carrying in presidential elections (primarily located in the South and the West), while the Democrats had relatively few "safe" states. For example, Schneider observes that "In the nine Presidential elections from 1952 to 1984, thirty-nine states have gone Republican at least five times. These states account for 441 electoral votes, or 171 more votes than the majority needed to win the presidency."¹

Second, it appeared that Republican popular vote shares were being disproportionately translated into electoral college gains. In 1980 for example Carter won 51.1 percent of the two-party vote, but only received 55.3 percent of the electoral college. In contrast, in 1980 with 55.3 percent of the two-party vote Reagan captured a stunning 90.9 percent of the electoral college votes. Results like these suggested that there was an inherent bias against the Democrats because their votes were distributed state-by-state in a way that was stacking the electoral college vote against them—a kind of inherent partisan gerrymander. Even after Clinton's first victory it was still being suggested that the Democrats were at such a disadvantage in the electoral college that they might capture a majority in the popular votes nationwide and still lose in the electoral college. On the other hand, since the Democrats controlled the House of Representatives for just about all of that same 1952–1988 period, pundits also proclaimed that the Democrats had their "compensating" lock on the House.

The 1994 and 1996 results suggest that American politics has turned topsy-turvy. Now we have a Democratic president and a Republican-controlled House.

Were the pundits wrong in identifying a supposed Republican electoral college lock in the earlier period? Were the pundits wrong in identifying the supposed Democratic lock on the U.S. House of Representatives in this earlier period? Or were the pundits right for the period from 1952 to 1988 but wrong now? Have previous partisan asymmetries in institutional control ended or reversed themselves due to some type of overall change occurring in American politics in the 1990s that is tantamount to the major electoral realignments of the past (such as those in 1896 and 1932)?

In this article we will only look at the first question.² We will show that outcomes in the electoral college were never inherently biased in favor of the Republicans; that is, the Republican electoral lock never existed, even during the Reagan-Bush years. The seeming empirical support for the claim that there was such a lock was based on a confusion between bias (asymmetry in the electoral college gains earned by the votes received by parties or candidates) and the swing ratio (the responsiveness of change in electoral college seat share to change in the popular vote).

Partisan Bias and Electoral Swing Ratio

To better understand party competition in American presidential politics, we need to examine closely two critical measures of the relationship between seats and votes—partisan bias and swing ratio. The standard definition of partisan bias is offered by Tufte and has been used by many other authors: in a two-party competition, partisan bias is the difference between the seat share a party with exactly 50 percent of the vote wins and the seat share that it should win if both parties were treated equally by the electoral rules, (i.e., a seat share of 50 percent).³ Thus, bias is the (dis)advantage in seat share above/below 50 percent received by a given party that wins 50 percent of the vote.⁴ If partisan bias is near zero and/or not statistically significant then we may reject the hypothesis that there is a Republican lock.

The swing ratio is a measure of the responsiveness of the electoral system to the change in the vote. Generally, the swing ratio is the expected size of the percent point increase in seats a party will get for a one percentage point increase in the share of the two-party vote. For instance, in a system of proportional representation the swing ratio will be very close to one; for every one percent increase in the vote (above 50 percent) a party gets one percent more of the seats in the legislature. If the swing ratio is high in the electoral college, then whichever party gets a majority of the popular vote will do remarkably well in terms of its share of electoral college vote. Such seeming landslides may be confused with partisan bias in favor of the winner's party.

Analysis

The swing ratio for the 1996 presidential election was 4.67; in 1992 it was 5.25. This number is rather high when compared to the same measure for the House of Representatives of 1.7 in 1992⁵ or for the Senate of 2.96 for the three elections of 1992, 1994, and 1996.⁶ The bias in 1996 was .038 (i.e., with 50 percent

TABLE 1
Swing Ratio and Bias in the U.S. Electoral College 1980–1996

Year	Swing Ratio*	Bias	Democratic Two-Party Vote Percentage	Democratic Share of Electoral College (%)
1980	5.38	.049	44.7	9.1
1984	5.57	.047*	40.8	2.4
1988	5.44	.017	46.1	20.8
1992	5.25	.025	53.5	68.8
1996	4.67	.038	54.6	70.4

* Indicates statistically significant results at $p < .05$. 1980–1992 data from CQ's *Guide to Elections*, 1995, 3rd edition, Washington, D.C.: CQ Press. The 1996 data are from the *Los Angeles Times*, November 7, 1996. Swing ratio and bias were calculated using *Judgelt* (Gelman and King, "A Unified Method.").

of the popular vote the Democratic candidate might be expected to get 53.8 percent of the electoral college vote). However, this estimate is not statistically significant (i.e., is not statistically different from zero). The bias in 1992 was .025 (i.e., with 50 percent of the popular vote the Democratic candidate might be expected to get 52.5 percent of the electoral college vote; but again, this estimate is not statistically significant). Thus, for all practical purposes there was no partisan bias in the electoral college in 1996 or 1992 for the country as a whole.⁷ We report in Table One swing ratio and bias figures for the electoral college calculated using the King and Gelman program *Judgelt* for the period 1980–1996.⁸

What the data in Table One show is that not only was there no statistically significant partisan bias in any year in which there was a Democratic presidential victory, but there was no statistically significant bias in a pro-Republican direction in any election in the period 1980–1996, not even during the years of Reagan electoral college landslides. Indeed, there was only one year in which there appeared to be a statistically significant bias, and that year was 1984—but the bias was actually in a pro-Democrat direction.

Why then did it appear that the electoral college favored the Republicans from 1980 through 1988 (as well as earlier)? Well, quite simply, it was because the swing ratio in the electoral college was so high, averaging a little over five. Thus a two-party vote share of, say, 54 percent, will translate into an expected electoral college vote share of 70 percent. In 1996, Clinton won 54.6 percent of the two-party popular vote⁹ and captured a full 70.4 percent of the electoral college votes—not because the electoral college was biased in favor of Democrats, it was not, but because the swing ratio was an estimated 4.67. (Note that $50 + 4.6 \times 4.67 = 71.5$, reasonably close to the observed value of 70.4.)

As a check on our intuitions we reran the data with the ten southern states removed. In these states we would expect there to be a pro-Republican bias in that the Republicans only averaged 54.9 percent of the two-party popular vote, but on average won 8.2 of the ten southern states.¹⁰ If there is a pro-Republican bias in the southern states then removing them should increase the observed bias in a pro-Democrat direction and make it more likely that the bias estimates we do get

TABLE 2
Swing Ratio and Bias in the U.S. Electoral College,
Non-Southern States 1980–1996

Year	Swing Ratio*	Bias*	Democratic Two-Party Vote Percentage	Democratic Share of Electoral College (%)
1980	5.48	.078	42.7	9.0
1984	5.56	.089	39.9	3.2
1988	5.91	.057	46.7	27.3
1992	5.75	.074	53.3	85.1
1996	5.11	.102	54.5	84.3

* Indicates statistically significant results at $p < .05$. 1980–1992 data from *CQ's Guide to Elections*, 1995, 3rd edition, Washington, D.C.: CQ Press. The 1996 data are from the *Los Angeles Times*, November 7, 1996. Swing ratio and bias were calculated using *Judgett* (Gelman and King, "A Unified Method.").

will be statistically significant. As we see from Table Two both expectations are confirmed. Bias estimates more than double on average, and all five (rather than just one out of five) are now statistically significant. Indeed, for 1992 and 1996 the bias estimates are considerably higher in the non-South than in the country as a whole. In contrast, the swing ratio only goes up slightly when we remove the southern states from our analysis.

In 1996, just as it had done with previous Republican victories, the high swing ratio in the electoral college translated a strong (but far from overwhelming) showing by the Democratic party winner into an electoral college rout. For all practical purposes, neither party is advantaged by the electoral college.¹¹ The popular vote percentage is still the dog that wags the electoral college tail.¹² A candidate who wins a majority of the votes nationwide is very likely to capture the electoral college. For every one percentage point increase in the two-party vote above 50 percent that a candidate secures, he or she will see that percentage point gain subject to a multiplier effect of nearly five.

Notes

1. William Schneider, "An Insider's View of the Election," *Atlantic Monthly* (July 1988): 29–54.
2. Bernard Grofman, Michael McDonald, William Koetzle, and Thomas Brunell, "A New Explanation for Split Ticket Voting: The Comparative Midpoints Model." Presented at the Conference on Strategy and Politics, Center for the Study of Collective Choice, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, April 12, 1996, for discussion of the second question. Thomas Brunell and Bernard Grofman, "Explaining Divided U.S. Senate Delegations, 1788–1994." Prepared for delivery at the Annual Meeting of the Public Choice Society, Houston, TX, March 1996, for discussion of the third question.
3. Edward R. Tufte, "The Relationship Between Seats and Votes in Two-Party Systems," *American Political Science Review* 67 (1973): 540–7.
4. Here and throughout we will deal only with two-party vote share. Of course, in recent decades no minor party candidate has won any electoral college votes.
5. Andrew Gelman and Gary King, "A Unified Method of Evaluating Electoral Systems and Redistricting Plans," *American Journal of Political Science* 38, no. 2 (1994): 514–54.
6. The electoral college swing ratio in 1996 was the lowest since 1944. Indeed, the swing ratio has been declining in the electoral college almost monotonically since 1960.

7. This is true despite the fact that the geographic dispersion of third party votes in 1992 and 1996 might have been expected to induce partisan bias if it acted to influence plurality outcomes more in favor of one major party than the other.
8. Gelman and King, "A Unified Method."
9. In terms of the two-party vote, this is the biggest victory for the Democrats since Johnson in 1964.
10. These data refer to the five presidential elections from 1980 to 1996.
11. Moreover, to the extent that there was any bias in the electoral college system it has favored the Democrats and not the Republicans for a long time, so the period of alleged Republican lock was doubly mythical.
12. I. M. Destler, "The Myth of the 'Electoral Lock,'" *PS* 29, no. 3 (1996): 491–494. As Destler states, "target specific states if you like, but above all win 51 percent of the two-party popular vote."