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The '80s Want Their Politics Back – the 1880s

By JOSHUA SPIVAK

Many Americans may feel that on their lifetime the country has never been more closely divided. And they would be right, at least on the national electoral front. Our politics are now going back to the '80s — the 1880s.

There hasn't been a string of elections this close since the end of the 19th century.

Our presidential elections are frequently both Electoral College and popular vote blowouts. Of the 21 races from 1900 to 1984, 11 saw one candidate win by more than a 10 percent margin of the popular vote. In nearly half of those victories, candidates great and small, like Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon, won by more than 20 percent.

In the 20th century before 1988, there was only one stretch of as many as three elections without a 10 percent popular vote margin of victory — and those were the Democratic victories from 1940 to 1948.

But clearly the blowouts have ended. No candidate has had a victory margin above 8.5 percent of the vote since Ronald Reagan's trouncing of Walter Mondale in 1984. Obama's victory in 2008 may have seemed large, but he won by 7.3 percent — historically speaking, not that impressive.

There has also been a similar, though nowhere near as pronounced, drop in the Electoral College. The Electoral College frequently magnifies victories, so in running up big popular vote wins, F.D.R. lost two states, Nixon one and Reagan lost just Minnesota and the District of Columbia. George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton both won by margins of more than 200 electoral votes. In fact, 14 of the 21 races from the earlier 84-year period ended with victories of more than 200 electoral votes. If this race ends closely, however, only three of the elections since 1984 will have produced a margin like that.

As others have noted, the closer results suggest that our politics are coming closer to mirroring an earlier time period in American history — the post-Reconstruction era known as the Gilded Age. Already, the Congressional elections have been aping those of that period. From 1894 until 2001, we have repeatedly seen one party in ironclad control of both houses of Congress for long stretches of time. Since 2000, both the Senate and House have already flipped twice.

There's something even more unusual going on. Senate-House partisan splits (one party controls the Senate, the other the House) are exceedingly rare. Outside of the first three Congressional sessions of Reagan's tenure, when the Republicans held the Senate from 1981 to 1987, it had occurred only a couple of times in the 20th century, and then only for one Congressional session at a time. If the Republicans don't take back control of the Senate or the Democrats fail to win the House, it will be the third split Congress since 2001.

As with the lack of presidential blowouts, the split Congress happened frequently in the Gilded Age — it ended only after the panic of 1893 helped lead to a Republican domination of the political sphere for the next decade and a half.

Unsurprisingly, this closely contested election landscape usually means that Congress is frequently deadlocked and simply not able to pass much in the way of legislation. The Gilded

Age was known for this. The big issues of the day were frequently ignored by elected officials, while smaller problems like distributing the spoils of government work received the most attention.

We're still seeing much more legislative and executive action. In the briefer periods, when they have gained control over the presidency and both houses, the party in power acts quickly and fiercely: Bush passed his tax cuts and Obama passed his health care reform. But they seemed to require total control of the executive and legislative branches to move.

Going forward, we probably shouldn't expect too much. Even if one party somehow gains full control of the levers of government, the closeness of the political battleground means that the political risks of serious action may be considered too high. This return to the 1880s is likely to mean a continuation of the brutalization of our politics, with hard-fought election contests that last throughout the entire presidential term.

Joshua Spivak is a senior fellow at the Hugh L. Carey Institute for Government Reform at Wagner College. He writes the Recall Elections Blog.