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A Realigning Election?

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It doesn't matter how many negative ads are broadcast or how many moose are slain on the tundra, candidates and their actions don't transform our politics nearly as much as outside events and circumstances do. Thus, if Barack Obama ends up winning a substantial victory next month, it may as much mark a revolutionary turning of the page in our politics as it would be a triumph for him. A decisive Obama win could have profound effects for at least a generation, ushering in a new political era marked by Democratic Party dominance (and triggered by the failures of George W. Bush).

Our presidential politics tend to be fairly consistent, divisible into eras clearly defined by national traumas that radically redraw party lines. The Civil War not only gave birth to the Republican Party, for instance. It also launched a long era during which the GOP's supremacy on the presidential level was rarely challenged. Of 18 elections held from 1860 through 1928, the GOP won 14. The Republicans lost only when the Democrats nominated an extremely conservative candidate (Grover Cleveland • who won twice) or when the Republicans split themselves in half (1912, with the effects extending to the 1916 election).

But the Great Depression redefined the political landscape (with an assist from Herbert Hoover's initial bumbling reaction to the crisis), giving the Democrats the upper hand in almost a mirror image of what had previously transpired. From 1932 through 1964, the Democrats won seven of nine elections. They ultimately lost power in that period after the GOP nominated Dwight Eisenhower, an apolitical national hero whose ideology was so amorphous that even the Democrats had sought him as a national candidate shortly before he began his political career as a Republican.

In 1968 the political map again dramatically changed, when the unrest caused by the Vietnam War • combined with conservative reaction to the civil-rights revolution • gave the Republicans another demographic and cultural advantage. Beginning in that year and continuing until our most recent election, the Republicans have won eight of 11 presidential contests. Modern Republican dominance has, in fact, been broken only when both the Democrats nominated a more conservative candidate from the GOP's southern base (Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton) and when the GOP was either split in half (thanks to the candidacy of H. Ross Perot in 1992 and 1996) or the nation was facing the aftermath of the only presidential resignation in history (1976, following the bowing out of Richard Nixon two years before).

History in the making?

Statistics confirm the uphill road Democrats have faced in every election in this modern era. Since 1968,

the party's presidential nominees have polled above 50 percent just once • in 1976, and then only barely.

If 2008 were to follow that pattern, Barack Obama • from the northern, liberal wing of his party • would seem to have little chance to win. Even if he could somehow upset the recent trend, history suggests that he couldn't garner much more than 50 percent of the vote. But that may happen this year. And if it does, it could signal that a new era of Democratic political dominance, last seen in the 1960s, has arrived.

Perhaps when historians look back at this election, they will see this one • not 2004's • as the first real post-9/11 contest, with the nation having taken several years to come to terms with the trauma and the meaning of that event. So let's posit a scenario. Over the past eight years, the reaction of the Bush administration to both 9/11 and the current financial mess has been, ironically, one that is traditionally Democratic: running huge deficits while creating vast new government interventionist bureaucracies to deal with homeland security and the credit crisis. The current administration also decided that this new era required an expensive, expansionist foreign policy, fighting "terror wars" on various fronts.

Now, the public may be in the process of deciding that, if a new era requires a more activist and expansionist government, Democrats are better equipped to handle these tasks. Voters may also decide that they are willing to accept the "risk" of a far more rapid military withdrawal from Iraq • which is, after all, the major foreign-policy difference between the McCain and Obama candidacies. Right now, Obama's alternative looks attractive, especially given that military action always carries a huge price tag in what may be a coming age of austerity.

And then there's the credit crisis which has just hit; admittedly, its effects may not be known for months or even years. But if Obama is able to win big because of it, it could serve as the final crystallizing event that allows the Democratic Party to reap the benefit for years to come. If that should happen, George W. Bush may be forever linked with Herbert Hoover. How's *that* for a legacy?

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