

In presidential politics, much rides on history, geography

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The so-called "modern era" in American politics began in 1896 with the election of William McKinley. McKinley's elevation to the presidency saw the United States leave behind a century of intra-continental expansion and began to act, for the first time, as a world power. Not surprisingly, McKinley took the nation into war with Spain, the first U.S. war against a European nation other than Great Britain.

In victory, we inherited remnants of the Spanish Empire and our first colonies. The U.S. has been a player on the world stage ever since, and foreign policy, in turn, has had a greater role in U.S. domestic politics, especially in presidential races.

Beginning with the election of 1896, there have been 28 presidential elections, falling into five geo-historical eras:

- **America Enters the World, 1896 to 1928.** In addition to McKinley's adventures, this era saw the U.S. build a powerful navy, enter World War I, and emerge as a major world military power. The Republican Party was dominant in this era, winning seven of nine elections.
- **The FDR Years, 1932-1944.** The Depression allowed the Democrats, under Franklin Roosevelt, to realign the national electorate. In addition to maintaining their Southern stronghold, Democrats made major inroads into northeast states that had been solidly Republican for a generation.
- **The Early Cold War, 1948-1968.** The nation was in a state of flux in these years, the GOP winning three contests and the Democrats another three. This era featured three of the closest races in history – Harry Truman over Thomas Dewey in 1948, John F. Kennedy over Richard Nixon in 1960 and Nixon over Hubert Humphrey in 1968. The era also saw the fraying of the Democrats' Southern stronghold which hurt, respectively, Truman in 1948 and Humphrey in 1968.
- **The Late Cold War, 1972-1988.** In the wake of Vietnam, the GOP was seen as being superior on national security issues, and the party rode this advantage to decisive victories in four of the next five elections. With the exception of Jimmy Carter's post-Watergate win in 1976, the South deserted the Democratic Party for the first time since the Civil War, and the current geographical divide in electoral politics began to take shape.
- **The Post Cold War, 1992-present.** With the fall of the Soviet Union, national security issues became less relevant. Even in the wake of Sept. 11, Republicans were not able to use the issue with the effectiveness of the Late Cold War era, and George W. Bush won only meager victories.

It is difficult at this stage to say anything decisive about the current era, as the Democrats and Republicans have each won two elections. However, some important points that can be made.

First, following a GOP electoral dominance in the five elections of the previous era, it is the Democrats who currently maintain a structural advantage in the Electoral College.

Nineteen states have gone for the Democratic candidate in all four elections of this era, worth a total of 248 electoral votes. Another three states with a total of 16 votes went for Democrats in three of four elections, bringing the base total to 264 votes, with only 270 needed to claim victory.

In contrast, the GOP had 15 states with a combined total of 135 electoral votes that went for their candidate all 4 times, plus five states with 64 votes that went Republican in three of four elections, bringing their base total to just 199.

That leaves eight "swing" states: Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Nevada, Ohio, Tennessee and West Virginia.

Though the current structural advantage would seem to favor Democrats, no Democrat has won the presidency in the modern age without carrying the South.

It remains to be seen how Democrats like Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama will play in the South in 2008. If they lack sufficient appeal in the region, the GOP may be able to squeak out another win.

On the other hand, 2008 could turn out to be another epochal election – a national Democratic victory without the South would once again re-define electoral politics and usher in yet another geo-historical era.

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