

# How history, geography will inform election

The modern era in American politics began in 1896. With the election of William McKinley, the United States left behind a century of intra-continental expansion and began to act as a world power. McKinley took us to war with Spain, our first war against a European nation other than Great Britain. In victory, we inherited the remnants of the Spanish Empire and our first colonies. The United States has been a major 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 contests in this modern era that fall into five distinct geo-historical eras:

1. America Enters the World, 1896–1928. In addition to McKinley's adventures, this era saw the United States build a powerful navy, enter World War I, and emerge as a major world military power. The GOP was dominant in this era, winning 7 of 9 elections.
2. 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, the Dems made major inroads into the northeast states that had been solid Republican votes for a generation.
3. The Early Cold War, 1948–1968. The nation was in a state of flux in these years, with the GOP winning 3 contests and the Democrats another three. This era featured three of the closest races in history — Truman in 1948, Kennedy in 1960 and Nixon in 1968. This era also saw the fraying of the Democrat's Southern stronghold — independent runs by the Dixiecrats and George Wallace hurt, respectively, Truman in 1948 and Humphrey in 1968. In between, Barry Goldwater became the first Republican to win any of the core states of the old Confederacy when he swept the deep south states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina in 1964.
4. 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 with over 400 electoral votes in 4 of the next 5 elections. With the exception of Jimmy Carter's post-Watergate victory 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.
5. The Post Cold War, 1992–present. With the fall of the Soviet Union, national security issues became less relevant in national campaigns. Even in the wake of 9/11, the GOP was not able to use the issue with the effectiveness of the Late Cold War era, with George W. Bush able to just barely scrape together meager electoral 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. The election of 2008 may offer crucial information. However, there are 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 the Dems in three of four elections, bringing their 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 four times, plus five states with 64 votes that went Republican in three of four elections, bringing their base total to just 199. That leaves just eight “swing” states remaining, and the GOP in this era has to be just about perfect in sweeping these states in order to win the election. These eight states (Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Nevada, Ohio, Tennessee and West Virginia) were each carried two times by Bill Clinton, then twice by George Bush, providing him his margin of victory.

Given their current structural advantage, 2008 looks like it should be a relatively easy victory for the Democratic Party. However, the Dems cannot be confident. No Democrat has won the presidency in the modern age without carrying the South. Even LBJ, who lost five core states of the Confederacy to Goldwater, nonetheless carried the other six Confederate states and the majority of Southern electoral votes. It remains to be seen how the Democratic frontrunners Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama will play in the South in a general election. 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 will once again re-define electoral politics and usher in yet another geo-historical era.

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