

Political Realignment and Congressional Deference to Donald Trump

Abstract

Congress under the Trump administration is seen as compliant with Trump because he is intimidating members. This neglects the increased congruence of presidential and congressional electoral bases. Donald Trump is the beneficiary of a realignment that took decades and has brought about a high degree of geographical overlap of the two bases. This analysis tracks that process from 1948 to 2024. It has produced a situation in which policy concerns overlap and encourage congressional compliance.

Congress is accused of having surrendered to President Trump, conceding its institutional powers to the presidency (Bendavid, 2025). Republicans have so thoroughly capitulated that they passed his “Big, Beautiful Bill,” even though it is unpopular (Glasser, 2025). We read essays that Republicans in Congress should “grow a spine.” They are abandoning their constitutional role as a separate and independent branch. The constitutional system is at risk.

The presumption is that this is occurring because Donald Trump has an “iron grip on his party” (Jimson, 2025). “Republicans have shown extraordinary deference to Mr. Trump” (Edmundson, 2025). Members fear opposing him because he has a devoted base and he has an insatiable drive for power (Edsall, 2025). He is willing to use social media to get that base to turn on dissenters and destroy the careers of any doubting Members. “When Trump sets a loyalty test today, Republicans fall in line” (Rutenberg, 2025). A Senator who will not vote for his legislation is engaging in “betrayal” (Parker, 2025). Lisa Murkowski says “we are all afraid” (Ewing, 2025). Republican Senators who resigned rather than work with Trump liken the following to a cult:

... in today’s Republican Party, anything short of complete and unquestioning loyalty to President Trump — then in his first term — was deemed unacceptable and suspect. [Now] Any deviation from his dictates is treated as apostasy. It’s no longer about ideas or governing philosophies. It’s about personal allegiance to a single man, whose positions can shift by the day (Flake, 2025).

Why is this happening? Does Trump have some magical powers? Is it his willingness to punish dissenters that is creating this situation? There is no doubt he wants considerable power, will go after Members of Congress who oppose him, and can influence public opinion about Members. Or perhaps he is the beneficiary of a more polarized public in which policy differences morph into personal animosity to the opposing party (Mason, 2016, Iyengar, et al., 2018). Partisans increasingly see the opposing party in negative terms (Abramowitz and Webster, 2016; Webster, 2020). Trump can mobilize this increased polarization and hostility to Democrats within the

electorate to get congressional Republicans to vote for his priorities (Cohen, et al., 2013; Bond, et. Al., 2015).

As important as these factors are, they focus on national electorates. Members of Congress are elected in states and districts. The important issues are how much geographical alignment of presidential and congressional electoral bases exists and is this overlap different from the past. The important matter about the current situation is that Donald Trump is the beneficiary of the culmination of a long geographical realignment of the Republican party that began in the late 1940s. That realignment brought him what no other post WWII Republican president has had: a clear geographical partisan alignment between his base and that of congressional Republicans. He has very, very few party members elected in states or districts won by the Democratic presidential candidate of 2024. The reason congressional Republicans support him so much is because they have the same constituencies.

The realignment process that has given Trump his current support has been lengthy and gradual. A geographical realignment began in the late 1940s-early 1950s and has brought the Republican Party a very different base (Bullock, et al., 2006; Abramowitz, 2018; Stonecash, 2006, 2024). It was a realignment that proceeded faster for presidential than for congressional races. The party was struggling to win presidential elections after five straight Democratic wins from 1932-1948. They won the House in 1946 and 1952 but quickly lost the majority. The party needed a new base. The wins by Eisenhower in Southern states suggested possibilities for the future. Then the Barry Goldwater-George Wallace-Richard Nixon elections indicated the party could win in southern and interior states in the West with a more conservative message. The party changed many positions, moving away from supporting civil rights and embracing gun owners and conservative Christians (Mellow, 2008; Karol, 2010; Stonecash, 2024). The last two decades have brought about the culmination of these separate trends and brought Trump his supportive base.

The contrast between the party base of the past and now is remarkable. In the 1940s when Republican presidential candidates won they did reasonably well in 11 states and split outcomes in 18 others. They did poorly in 19 states (Stonecash, 2024: 1-13). The table below indicates how the party fared by groups of states. The 11 states where the party once did well,¹ many in the Northeast, eventually moved Democratic as the Republican Party moved to more conservative positions (Reiter and Stonecash, 2011). They also did well in another 18 states, which have not moved significantly over time.² Together these two sets of states provided almost all of Republican Electoral College votes in the 1940s. There were 19 states – southern and western interior – where the party did poorly.³

Table 1 The Shifting Republican Presidential Base: Success by State Groupings, 1940–1948 and 2016–2024

	1940–1948			2016–2024		
	R to D	Stable	D to R	R to D	Stable	D to R
Number of states	11	18	19	12	20	19
Republican avg percent vote	48.8	48.3	30.7	35.8	49.3	58.7
Percent of states won by Reps	39.4	44.4	1.8	0	51.7	96.5
Percent Rep EC votes from	32.0	65.0	2.9	0	30.6	69.4

The political leanings of two of the state groupings have shifted significantly. Table 1 indicates how presidential success by state groupings has changed over time. The 11 states have moved from Republican to Democrat (R to D), and the 19 states have moved from Democratic to Republican (D to R). For 2016-2024 (the three Trump elections) the party now wins 96.5 percent of

¹ The 11 states are: Me, Vt, Ma, Ct, NY, NJ, Md, Il, Ca, Co, and Or. For the current situation the District of Columbia is added to the 11 now heavily Democratic states, making 12 for 2016-2024.

² The 18 states are Ak, De, Hi, In, Ia, Ks, Mi, Mn, Ne, Nv, NH, NM, ND, Oh, Pa, RI, SD, Va, Wa, and Wi,

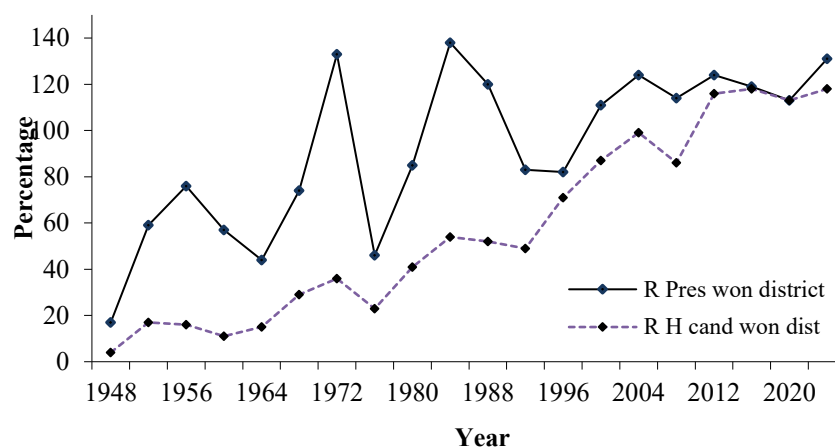
³ The 19 states are: Az, Mo, Mt, WV, Ky, Id, Fl, Tn, NC, Ut, Ok, Wy, Ar, Ga, Tx, La, Ms, AL, and SC.

the 19 states and derives 69.4 percent of its electoral votes from those states. Republican presidential candidates did not win a single of the 12 states across three elections. Trump is often characterized as unconcerned and even hostile to blue states. It is because they are not part of his base.

The crucial matter for congressional support for Republican presidents has been the coming together of winning a majority in both houses and having a congressional base aligned with the president. For decades these two did not come together. Republican presidential candidates pursued votes in areas that had previously been solidly Democratic. They made inroads well before Republican congressional candidates did. That produced the rise of split outcomes (Stonecash, 2013). A Republican president would win a House district or state but the winner of the House or Senate seat would be a Democrat. Republican presidents generally faced a Republican congressional party that was either in the minority or, if in the majority, had substantial numbers of Members who won in districts or states won by a Democratic presidential candidate.

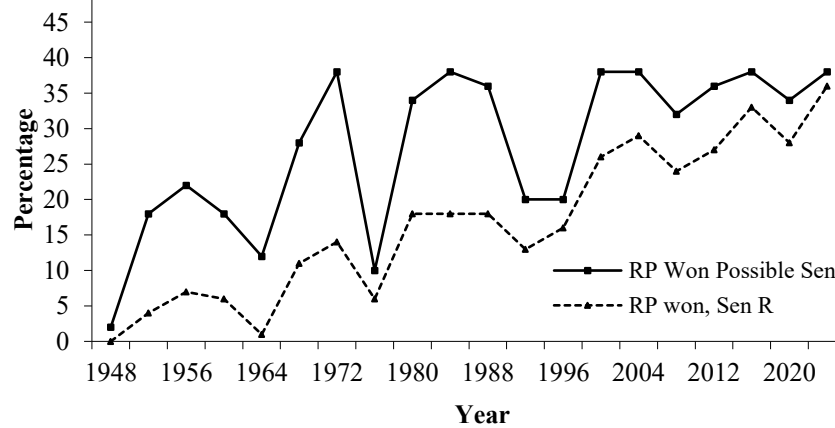
The first issue, a Republican president winning in a district or state but not have a Republican congressional member, is shown in Figures 1 and 2. The focus is on changes in the 19 states because those are where the gains for the party have occurred and where the bringing together presidential and congressional results has taken so long and become so important. In the 1950s through the 2010s the success of Republican presidential candidates in House districts ran well ahead of House candidates. The only times the two came together were in 1964, 1976, and 1992-96, when Republican presidential candidates did not fare well and their success shrank to that of the House base. When the party won the presidency in 1952-1956, 1968-1972, and 1980-1988, there was a substantial gap between presidential and House candidate success.

Figure 1: House Districts Won by Republican Presidential Candidates and Success Rate of Republican House Candidates in those districts, 19 states, 1948-2024



Senate results in the 19 states followed the same pattern (Figure 2). Republican presidential candidates won many of the 19 states but Republican senate candidates in states won by their presidential candidate did not fare as well. These numbers are presented differently from those of the House because each state has a possible two Senate seats a Republican presidential candidate could carry with him. To indicate the possible seats the presidential candidate could have won (not just states won), each presidential state win is multiplied by two. If a candidate won 10 states he could have 20 Republican Senators. The figure shows the possible seats the Republican presidential candidate winning states could have won and how many Republican candidates actually won. Again, the gap was substantial from the 1950s through the 2000s.

Figure 2: States Won by Republican Presidential Candidates, Possible and Actual Republican Senate Seats Won in states won by Republican presidential candidate, 19 states, 1948-2024



The result for both Houses is that for decades when a Republican won the presidency he had to contend with two facts. They often did not have a Republican majority in both houses. Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush faced that situation. When a Republican won the presidency and had a majority of fellow partisans in both houses, many congressional Members in the majority won in states or jurisdictions won by a Democratic presidential candidate. In 1952 Eisenhower had 221 Republican House members, but 4 were in split districts. In the Senate there were 48 Republicans but 2 were elected in states a Democratic presidential candidate won. In 2000 and 2004 Bush had majorities in both houses but significant numbers of members in Democratic presidential jurisdictions.

Figures 3 and 4 track these messy situations. For Figure 3 the solid black lines track the House seats a Republican presidential candidate could have won if presidential-House districts were aligned. The pair of dashed lines track the actual Republican congressional winners. The gap indicates the seats that a Republican presidential winner could not bring with him. That gap was considerable until the 1990s. Figure 4 indicates the same pattern for presidential – Senate results in states. The gap was large until the 1990s.

Figure 3: House Districts Won by Republican Presidential Candidates and Republican House Results in Those Districts, 1948-2024

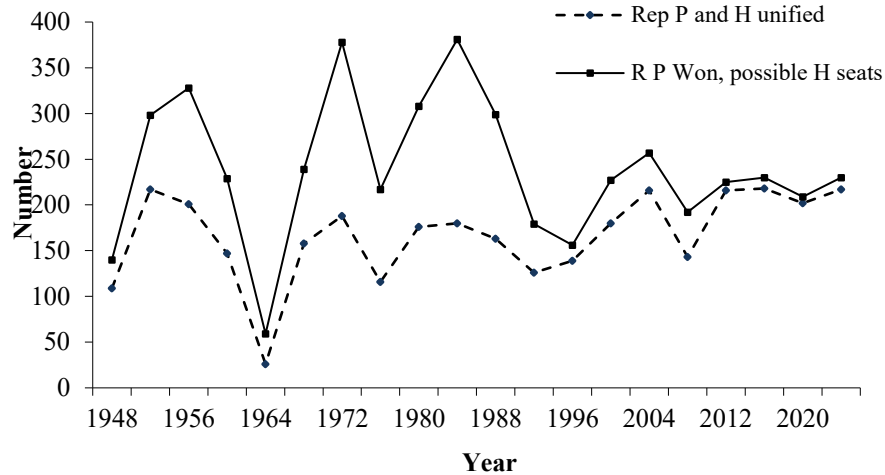
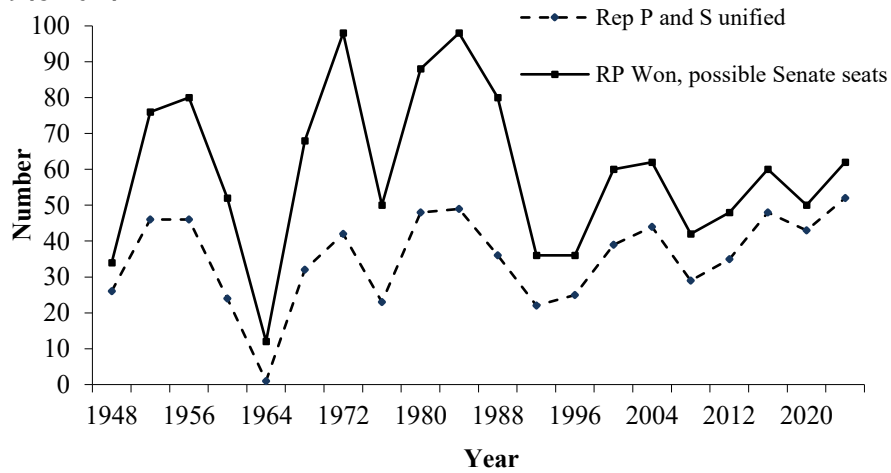


Figure 4: Republican Presidential State Wins, Possible and Actual Republican Senate Wins in in Those States, 1948-2024



The last two decades indicate two matters. Republican presidential success became confined to the 19 states plus some of the 20 states that have not changed much over time (Xxxx, 2024: 266). Split outcomes (the partisan winners of presidential and congressional elections differ) have declined steadily in recent years (Silver, 2021, 2024; Stonecash, 2013). The situation for Donald Trump is

particularly favorable for him to have strong congressional support. In 2016-2024 when Trump won House districts or states the congressional winner was likely to be a Republican. The situation for the second Trump can be summarized as follows:

In the House:

- In the years 1948 -2012 when Republican presidents won a districts Republican House candidates won 54.8 percent those districts. During Trump's three elections the percentage is 83.3.
- In 2016 and 2024 Republicans had majorities in the House. Trump had the highest number of Republicans from districts he won than any other president since 1952. His 2024 total is slightly lower and matches that of Bush II in 2004.
- He has fewer Republican House members from districts a Democratic presidential candidate won than any other Republican president

Senate:

- Trump in his second term is first Republican president post WWII who has a majority (52) in the Senate that is from states he won.
- Dwight Eisenhower and Ronald Reagan came close. Republicans had 46 in 1952 and 1956 and 48 in 1980 and 49 in 1984, but no majority consisting of members from states he won.
- George Bush had to contend with no majority from states he won and 12 (2000) and 13 (2004) from states Democratic presidential candidates won.
- Previous Republican presidents who won states had Republican Senate candidates win an average of 47.2 percent within those states. During Trump's three elections it is 88.0.
- Trump also has few Republican Senators in districts Democratic presidential candidate won (3 in 2016 and 1 in 2024).

Donald Trump clearly seeks to pressure members to go along with his agenda, but his advantage is he starts with a congressional party that shares his electoral base more than other Republican presidents experienced. Poll after poll shows his support among Republicans is strong. It is not a surrender of Congress' role for members of congress that share his electoral base to agree with him. They may have doubts about his style and comments, but they share an electoral base and see his wins as an opportunity to pursue conservative goals. As Mike Johnson, Speaker of the House, put it in March 2025: "This is the Super Bowl. This is the moment we've all been waiting

for our entire careers, and finally, the stars have aligned so we can do that better” (Hulse and Edmondson, 2025). It is less capitulation than seeing similar electoral bases and rough agreement with his objectives. The presidential and House wings of the party are tied together. Members of Congress have a shared fate and for most of them they come from districts or states that have consistently voted Republican in recent years.

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