

## Can a Democrat be elected president?

In 1988, Republican candidate George Bush won 53.4 percent of the popular votes cast in the presidential election against the Democratic challenger, Michael Dukakis. Bush carried 40 states to Dukakis's 11, receiving an average of 53.7 percent of the vote cast in every state. In the Electoral College, he received 426 electoral votes to Dukakis's 111. Bush's electoral vote victory computes to 79 percent of the total electoral vote of 538.\*

Bush's victory as a Republican candidate in 1988 merely reflects the Republican Party's dominance of presidential elections over the last three decades. In the last eight presidential elections since 1960, 30 states have voted Republican at least six of the eight times. These states in 1992 account for 291 of the 270 electoral votes needed to win the presidency. By comparison, Democratic candidates carried only five states plus D.C. in these elections, with a combined total of 38 electoral votes.

Accordingly, it would seem that Bush would be guaranteed reelection in 1992, even though he is at a low point of his popularity before the election. We can test the security of his electoral position by proposing a series of alternative scenarios, based on his 1988 performance in each state.

① *Bush in 1992 runs exactly as he did in 1988:* The population shifts recorded by the 1990 census tend to favor the Republican Party. If George Bush were simply to repeat his victory by carrying the same 40 states, his electoral vote would increase slightly to 431.

② *If Bush runs one percentage point lower in each state:* If the electorate were to swing against Bush uniformly in every state by one percentage point, his mean vote would drop to 52.7 percent, but he would lose only two states — Illinois and Pennsylvania — with a combined 45 electoral votes. He would still carry 38 states

and 386 electoral votes. Outcome: Bush wins.

③ *If Bush runs two points lower in each state:* His mean vote over all states drops to 51.7 percent, and he loses five more states: New Mexico, Missouri, California, Maryland and Vermont. But he still carries 33 states and 303 electoral votes. Outcome: Bush wins.

④ *If Bush runs three points lower in each state:* His mean vote drops to 50.7 percent, but he loses only three new states — South Dakota, Connecticut and Montana. He retains 30 states with 289 electoral votes. Outcome: Bush wins.

⑤ *If Bush runs 4 points lower in each state:* His mean vote falls to 49.7 percent, and he loses only 2 more states — Michigan and Colorado. Although he still carries 28 states, they have only 263 electoral votes. Outcome: Bush loses.

Of course, this simple "what if" game supposes a uniformity in voting behavior that is unlikely to occur. But when voters in a presidential election are confronted with a candidate from a previous election, the vote by states does tend to swing rather uniformly. For example, the vote by states for Reagan in 1984 correlated .90 with the states' votes in 1980. Even when Carter lost in 1980, his vote by state also correlated .90 with his vote in 1976. He just ran about nine points behind in every state. Moreover, it is not unreasonable to suggest that Bush may do worse everywhere in 1992 than he did in 1988. With Bill Clinton as the candidate, Bush might lose even more in southern states. Even if that does not occur, if the electoral swing against Bush is as much as four points, a Democrat could be elected president in 1992. ♦

\*One Democratic elector, Margaret Leach of West Virginia, did not vote for Dukakis but for Lloyd Bentsen, his Democratic running-mate.

By  
Kenneth  
Janda

Department of  
Political  
Science,  
Northwestern  
University