

The New York Times Reprints

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)



November 6, 2010

Throwing the Bums Out for 140 Years

By DAVID M. KENNEDY
Stanford, Calif.

SO we have had three “wave” elections in a row: control of both chambers of Congress changed hands in 2006, as did the presidency in 2008, and the House flipped back to Republican domination last week. All this apparently incoherent back-and-forth has left the political class reeling and set the commentariat aflutter.

Explanations for our current political volatility abound: toxic partisanship, the ever more fragmented and strident news media, high unemployment, economic upheaval and the clamorous upwelling of inchoate populist angst.

But the political instability of our own time pales when compared with the late 19th century. In the Gilded Age the American ship of state pitched and yawed on a howling sea of electoral turbulence. For decades on end, “divided government” was the norm. In only 12 of the 30 years after 1870 did the same party control the House, the Senate and the White House.

The majority party in the House — intended to be the branch of government most responsive to swings in popular sentiment — shifted six times in the era’s 15 Congressional elections. Three of those shifts in power entailed losses of more than 70 seats by the majority party (at a time when there were roughly 100 fewer seats than today’s 435). In 1894, Democrats shed more than 100. Today’s electoral oscillations, for all their drama, seem modest by comparison.

And yet there are features of the Gilded Age that suggest some disturbing parallels with our own time. Generations of American scholars have struggled to find a coherent narrative or to identify heroic leaders in that era’s messy and

inconclusive political scene. The history books give us a succession of Lilliputian presidents often described as “bearded, bland and boring.”

These men left but the faintest of tracks in the historical record. Chester A. Arthur? He is best remembered, if at all, for reportedly possessing more than 80 pairs of trousers. Benjamin Harrison? Of him can be said virtually nothing memorable at all. The likes of the monumental figures who strode the national stage in the early years of the Republic — Jefferson, Jackson, Calhoun, Clay, Webster, Lincoln — were nowhere to be found in the years after the Civil War. Nor were there any leaders of the caliber that would emerge in the 20th century — from the two Roosevelts to Ronald Reagan.

It is not as if the Gilded Age did not have plenty of urgent and potentially galvanizing issues: healing the wounds of the Civil War; managing enormous nation-building agendas in the conquered South and the dauntingly arid West; navigating the enormous and rushed transition from an agricultural to an industrial economic base, and from countryside to city; quelling the labor unrest that repeatedly erupted into bloodshed; accommodating the millions of immigrants who streamed ashore in the century’s closing decades; and defining an international role for an increasingly prosperous and powerful country, just to name a few.

Yet the era’s political system proved unable to grapple effectively with any of those matters.

What’s instructive to us now is the similarity between the Gilded Age’s combination of extraordinary social and economic dynamism and abject political paralysis. We face a no-less-formidable array of issues, and there is little mystery about their nature. Some have a familiar face: unemployment, sadly, as well as immigration and the quest for an appropriate national security strategy and foreign policy.

Others are almost wholly novel: the passage to a post-industrial information age; mounting competition in virtually all the world’s marketplaces; worsening educational achievement; giddily levitating health costs; a looming fiscal apocalypse in entitlement programs like Medicare and Medicaid; environmental degradation and climate change; and the search for sustainable energy supplies.

In the face of all those challenges, like our Gilded Age forebears, we have a political system that manages to be both volatile and gridlocked — indeed, it may be gridlocked not least because it is so volatile. And, like their 19th-century forebears, today’s politicians have great difficulty gaining traction on any of those challenges. Now as then, it’s hard to lead citizens who are so eager to “throw the bums out” at every opportunity.

Yet the Gilded Age was but a chapter in American history, and we are permitted to hope that the sorry spectacle of our own time may well come to a similar conclusion. The pent-up demand for some kind of meaningful approach to the great issues that hung so heavily on the land more than a century ago eventually produced the Progressive Era.

Eventually, leaders emerged in both major parties — most conspicuously the Republican Theodore Roosevelt and the Democrat Woodrow Wilson — who breathed vitality into the wheezing political system and effectively initiated the tortuous process of building institutions and writing laws commensurate with the scope and complexity of the society over which they presided.

So perhaps the stasis of the Gilded Age and the stalemate of our recent years reflect not so much the defects of our political structures as the monumental scale of the issues at hand. From that perspective, “wave” elections mark a necessary stage of indecision, shuffling, avoidance and confusion before a fractious democratic people can at last summon the courage to make tough choices, the creativity to find innovative solutions, the will to take consequential action and the old-fashioned moxie to put the ship of state again on an even keel.

David M. Kennedy teaches history and is co-director of the Bill Lane Center for the American West at Stanford.

