A Single Time in a Single Place

Lawrence J. Grossback, West Virginia University
David A. M. Peterson, Texas A.M. University
James A. Stimson, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Contents

List of Figures .......................... vii
List of Tables .......................... ix
Preface ................................ xi
Acknowledgments .................... xv

1 A Single Time in a Single Place .......................... 1
   1.1 Mandates as Social Constructions .......................... 14
   1.2 The Study of Mandates .................................. 17
   1.3 Telling the Larger Story of Mandate Politics ............... 24

2 The Evolution of Mandates .................. 27
   2.1 The Media Spin: On the Declaration of Mandates .......... 27
   2.2 Before the Election .................................. 34
   2.3 Election Night .................................. 35
   2.4 The Buildup to Taking Office .......................... 52

3 Members of Congress Respond ................. 63
   3.1 Mandated Congresses? .................................. 65
   3.2 Setting up a Test .................................. 77
   3.3 Modeling Mandates .................................. 84
   3.4 Who Responds to Mandates? .......................... 87
   3.5 Duration of Mandates .................................. 90
   3.6 Members and the Mandate Signal .................. 102

4 The Pattern of Congressional Response .......... 106
   4.1 Congress in the Aggregate .......................... 107
   4.2 Pivotal Politics .................................. 114
## Contents

4.3 Movement Back toward Equilibrium:  
A Longer View 124

5 Consequences 131  
5.1 Institutional Politics 131  
5.2 Turning the Mandate Off 144  
5.3 Mandates and the Flow of Public Policy 154  
5.4 Appendix 157

6 The Irresistible Meets the Unmovable 161  
6.1 The Return to Normal Politics 161  
6.2 The Subsequent Election 166

7 Conclusion: A Mandate View of Normal American Politics 179  
7.1 The 2004 Mandate? 179  
7.2 Thinking About Normal 183  
7.3 The Efficiency of Democracy 183  
7.4 Dramatic Beginnings 186  
7.5 Elections in America: A Reinterpretation 187  
7.6 The Democratic Dilemma of Mandates 189

Bibliography 195  
Index 199
On the morning of November 5, 1964, Arthur Krock of the New York Times posed a problem for newly elected President Lyndon Johnson. How would he answer the "great question created by the most emphatic vote of preference ever given to a national candidate: How will he use the mandate to lead and govern that has been so overwhelmingly tendered by the American people?" (1964, p. 44). Krock’s words capture the reaction of many to the landslide that had brought victory to more than Johnson. In the upcoming Congress, the Democrats would hold a two to one margin in both chambers. Thirty-eight new House Democrats extended their majority to 295 seats while two new Democratic Senators gave them a total of 68, the second largest majority the Democrats had ever held in both chambers (Morris 1965). If there ever was a partisan surge, this was it.

There was, as always, a debate over whether the Democratic surge constituted a mandate for Johnson’s policies. Most Republicans attributed the defeat to the rejection of Barry Goldwater’s brand of conservatism. Some Democrats argued that the victory was rooted more broadly in support of liberalism than in support of Johnson. There was some truth to this last notion. Outside the South, liberal Democrats replaced conservative Republicans. In the South, conservative Republicans replaced equally conservative Democrats. The liberal gains thus went beyond additional Democratic seats. Still, many in the media and in politics saw this as a mandate, and many of them ranked it as among the most significant in history. Even reluctant Republicans had
to concede defeat and admit that voters had expressed their support for the major parts of Johnson’s program. One Republican congressman summed up the meaning of the election well. “He’s got the votes. There’s not much we can do to stop his program if we tried” (“Great Society” Editorial, p. E1).

Johnson’s answer to Krock’s question came the following January in his State of the Union Address. Johnson (1965a) would seek the creation of a “Great Society [that] asks not how much, but how good; not only how to create wealth but how to use it; not only how fast we are going, but where we are headed.” The Great Society included calls for health insurance for the elderly, the federal funds to support secondary and higher education, a department of housing and urban development to lead a war on poverty, and efforts to fight crime and disease. Johnson also touched on his desire to build on the passage of the Civil Rights Act the year before. The statement was brief, promising “the elimination of barriers to voting rights,” but it would come to have major consequence for American politics.

Voting rights were on the agenda of others as well, and well they should have been. In 1964, only about 43 percent of Southern blacks were registered to vote, but the figure was as low as 7 percent in Mississippi (Davidson 1994). One week after the Democratic landslide, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference decided that it needed a rallying point around which to build support for voting rights across the nation (Davidson 1992). The rallying point would be Selma, Alabama. Selma and surrounding Dallas County had 30,000 blacks eligible to vote, of whom only 355 were then registered. Soon the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. would request a meeting with the president to discuss voting rights proposals. The election results played a role in the renewed drive to pass a voting rights bill. One reporter noted that “passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the outcome of the Nov. 3 election had the effect of crumbling much of the massive white opposition to change that existed in the Deep South states” (Herbers 1965, p. E5). It did not crush all the resistance, and it had little effect on the white leaders of Selma. It was they who on March 7, 1965 – hence forth known as “ Bloody Sunday” – led a group of men on to Edmund Pettus Bridge to attack civil rights marchers, wounding close to a hundred.
The violence of Bloody Sunday led members of Congress from both parties to call on the Johnson administration to quickly send the anticipated voting rights bill to Congress. The mandate made it time to act. Johnson had wide public support outside the South, and he saw the need to take advantage of the Democrats’ massive advantage in Congress before Southern support for the party eroded further (Davidson 1994). On March 15, the president spoke to the country about the need for a voting rights bill. He spoke of an American promise that had to be kept and of the destiny of democracy. He also spoke of Selma. His words were eloquent:

...at times history and fate meet at a single time in a single place to shape a turning point in man’s unending search for freedom. So it was at Lexington and Concord. So it was a century ago at Appomattox. So it was last week in Selma, Alabama. (Johnson 1965b)

As critical as Selma was, it was not enough to ensure passage of a forceful voting rights bill. The bill had to get through the U.S. Senate where Southerners controlled key committees and where they could filibuster the bill to death. The first challenge was the Senate Judiciary Committee. Since 1953, James Eastland (D-MS) had chaired the committee. In that time, 122 civil rights bills had been referred to the committee. Of that number, only one was ever reported back, and that case required the entire Senate to overrule the chair (Kenworthy 1965a). The mandate consensus, however, had strengthened Johnson’s hand and the hand of the Senate leadership. To get past Senator Eastland, the Senate leadership required that the bill be reported back in fifteen days. If not, the party leaders would cancel the Easter recess. The mandate effect also lowered the threat of a filibuster. A number of Southern Senators who had opposed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 appeared ready to allow a bill to come to a vote. Their ranks included J. W. Fulbright of Arkansas, George Smathers of Florida, and Albert Gore of Tennessee. Of them, only Gore would join four other Southern Senators who – along with sixty-five others – would vote for cloture.

The belief in a mandate would have a direct influence on the content of the bill as well. In analyses to come, we suggest that certain elections, such as 1964, are perceived to carry a message about the will of the voters. These mandates lead members of Congress to reevaluate how
to vote on legislation to satisfy their constituents. We can assess the effect of the perceived mandate by asking what would the outcome of roll call votes have been absent these reevaluations. We rerun history (by a method to be detailed later) to observe roll call outcomes in a "normal" 1965 Senate – one in which the effect of the mandate has been removed.

Absent the mandate, two votes on amendments to the Voting Rights Act would have come out differently. One was a (Republican) amendment to limit the ability of the U.S. Attorney General to bring cases under the Act's provisions. The second was a Southern Democratic amendment that would have given federal courts in the South the discretion to hear cases arising from the Act. Both had a simple purpose: gutting the enforcement provisions of the Act. By putting enforcement in the hands of Southern state attorneys general and sitting Southern judges, the amendments would have watered the bill down to almost nothing, an endorsement of voting rights that would be without practical effect. Both were defeated, primarily because the spirit of the times led a small number of Senators to cast votes that were more liberal than would have been the case in normal conditions.

The result was a second "single time in a single place" when history and fate met to extend freedom to a long oppressed group of citizens. The moment came on August 6, 1965, in the U.S. Capitol. President Johnson entered the President's Room off the Senate chamber, the very same room that Abraham Lincoln entered in 1861 to free slaves pressed into confederate military duty. He sat at the desk he used as a Senator and at which some believe Lincoln also sat on that earlier day (Kenworthy 1965b). There Lincoln freed the slaves, and there Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Johnson (1965c, p. 8) would remark that "today is a triumph for freedom as huge as any victory that's ever been won on any battlefield."

The implication here is striking. The Democratic gains in Congress were not enough to ensure an effective voting rights bill. Absent the unusual politics a sense of mandate put in place, the Great Society would have been very different, especially to black voters across the

\^ And we don't need to rerun history to know that numbers weren't enough. That same 89th Senate would turn balky the following year, denying Johnson much of what he wanted.
South. Mississippi may not have seen the percentage of blacks registered to vote increase from 7 percent in 1964 to nearly 60 percent in 1968. Nor would the South see the number of black elected officials rise from fewer than 100 to over 3,265 by 1989 (Davidson 1992). Absent the mandate, the history of racial politics and, indeed, partisan politics might have been very different (Carmines and Stimson 1989).

1.0.1 “Our Enemy is Time” – Budget Politics and the Reagan Revolution

On May 7, 1981, two roll call votes took place in the House of Representatives. The first sought to replace the Fiscal 1982 Budget Resolution prepared by the (Democratic) majority Leadership with a substitute resolution written by Ronald Reagan’s budget director, David Stockman. The second would be on the adoption of the resolution that emerged. The substitute resolution was the Reagan revolution. It called for nearly $37 billion in spending cuts for fiscal 1982, another $44 billion in cuts by fiscal 1984, and left room for a 30 percent cut in individual tax rates that would cost nearly $50 billion in its first year and over $700 billion over five years. The goal was simple; fundamentally scale back the scope of the federal government. Victory for Reagan was not assured. The Republicans had 192 members in the House, 26 short of a majority.

In scheduling the two votes, the Democratic controlled Rules Committee had imposed an up or down vote on the revolution. The Reagan White House framed the vote in simple terms (Stockman 1986, p. 174): “Are you with Ronald Reagan or against him?” In the end, 253 members were with Reagan on the first vote, 270 on the second. Sixty-three Democrats joined 190 Republicans to defeat the Democratic alternative. As members prepared to vote on final adoption, the easy victory led Minority Leader Robert Michel (R-IL) to proclaim, “Let history show that we provided the margin of difference that changed the course of American government” (CQ Almanac 1981, p. 253).

Six months earlier, in October 1980, historic change in the course of American government was not inevitable, in fact, it seemed unlikely. Opinion polls showed that President Jimmy Carter had eroded the lead Ronald Reagan had held since early summer (Pomper 1981). Just before the two candidates debated on October 28, Carter opened a
narrow lead. The revolution was in jeopardy. For a number of reasons, Carter’s lead did not hold. Reagan won a majority of the popular vote (51.7 percent, a ten-point margin), and dominated the Electoral College, winning nearly 91 percent of the votes.

Because the election was expected to be tight, Reagan’s victory surprised few. A solid debate performance and a final embarrassment of Carter by the Iranian government allowed Reagan to regain his lead in the polls a week out from the election. The extent of the victory, however, “did surprise nearly everyone,” and “real surprise, indeed astonishment” came in the congressional elections (Jacob 1981, p. 119, emphasis original). The newly elected 97th Congress would see the exit of twelve incumbent Democratic Senators (many among the most liberal), Republican control of the Senate for the first time in twenty-eight years, and a Republican gain of thirty-three seats in the House. Mandate or not, the election was a clear victory for the Republican Party.

The shift in Congress caught the attention of many. On election night, future Reagan Budget Director David Stockman’s wrote that his “eyes remained fixed on the House and Senate races across the nation” (1986, p. 69). Congress was of great concern to him because Republicans “needed a substantial transfusion of conservative blood. Otherwise, the world’s greatest parliamentary institution would grind the revolution to a halt, presidential mandate or not.” The conservatives got just what they needed. David Broder (1980, p. A1) captured the consensus well: “voters ... elected the most conservative Congress in a generation. Their action strengthened the president-elect’s right to interpret his victory as a mandate for the policies of stronger defense and skimpier government.” Conservatives believed that control of the Senate gave the mandate claim an institutional component that made it credible (Fenno 1991). The mandate interpretation did not escape the Republican Senators who would lead the revolution in their chamber. Budget Committee Chair Pete Domenici (R-NM) remarked, “There is an American mandate ... the size of the budget cannot grow as fast” (Fenno 1991, p. 50). The mandate perception did not escape the Democrats either. House Speaker Tip O’Neill admitted that “some of the old ways have to change. It’s a new day. A different time” (Stockman 1986, p. 121).

The surprising victory margin, the widely shared mandate perception, and the Republican surge in Congress set the stage for the budget
showdown on May 7. The budget became the legislative embodiment of the mandate. Domenici made that clear to the Senate: “The blueprint contained in this resolution is clear. It is unequivocal. It responds directly to the mandate of the American people and the requests of our President” (CQ Almanac 1981, p. 247). The timing of the showdown, just four months after Reagan’s inauguration, stemmed directly from the recognition that the effect of the mandate might be transient.

Almost immediately, the Reagan team saw the need to move quickly. Stockman made speed a central element of the budget strategy by beginning his first strategy memo with “Our enemy is time” (Stockman 1986, p. 76). He feared “the resurgent political forces of the status quo.” He feared the inevitable change in political information flowing to members of Congress. His fear produced a plan that would see the release of the Reagan budget by mid-February, and a final budget resolution by mid-May. The Republican forces knew that they had to demonstrate their ability to govern and do so quickly. To do so, they married speed with a deft procedural innovation. They would pass budget reconciliation bills first in order to give the entire Reagan package the force of law while avoiding the long deliberations and inevitable alterations that would come if they took the normal path of first passing nonbinding resolutions.

The dramatic Republican surge in Congress offered the final element of a strategy rooted in mandate politics. The revolution would begin in the Senate. Control of the Senate offered the opportunity to use the new majority to push the budget through the Senate and then use it as leverage against the House (Rattner 1981; Fenno 1991). The strategy worked, but not without its share of setbacks. The initial budget package was defeated in committee when three Republicans voted with Democrats because they thought the budget abandoned the principle of a balanced budget. Victory came after an additional $44 billion in unspecified future budget cuts was included. The changes were superficial, but they succeeded in winning back the three Republicans and three Southern Democrats (CQ Almanac 1981). It didn’t hurt that President Reagan had lobbied members from a hospital bed where he was recovering from a would-be assassin’s bullet.

A recovering Reagan also played a crucial role in the House. There, the strategy focused on assembling a coalition of Republicans and conservative Southern Democrats, called Boll-Weevils, to get the votes for
the budget. Stockman (1986, p. 173) clearly believed that members were engaging in representation by responding to the electorate's signal. He noted that by the time of the House vote on the budget they could count on enough Boll-Weevils because after the assassination attempt Reagan's "already imposing strength in the Boll-Weevils' districts had reached never-before-recorded levels." Stockman was right. Reagan's lobbying proved effective. He equated his budget with the will of the people, a signal few in Congress could afford not to acknowledge. Reagan's efforts prompted Tip O'Neill to concede defeat: "I can read [members of] Congress. They go with the will of the people, and the will of the people is to go along with the president" (Dewar 1981).

In the end, Reagan would have to compromise in the House. A slightly revised budget with smaller deficit numbers passed the House with the support of eighty-four of O'Neill's Democrats. Republican gains in Congress were not enough to pass the bill that would guide the revolution, nor was Democratic control of the House enough to defeat it. As we will demonstrate later, the victory was the result of members voting more conservatively than we would expect under normal conditions. Absent the mandate effect, many of the Democrats and a few Republicans would not have voted to support the revolution. They took the mandate consensus as a signal of public opinion and voted to protect themselves in the 1982 election.

The erosion of that consensus ensured that the final budget enacted by Congress did not contain all of the elements of the resolution passed on May 7. But it would contain most of what Reagan wanted. Close to $38 billion in spending cuts became law, cuts that would total $52 billion by 1986, a 9 percent reduction in the federal budget. The budget cut food stamps, child nutrition programs, rent supports, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, student loans, and some Social Security benefits. By one calculation, the budget cut $12 billion from Great Society grants and services by 1986, a 25 percent cut in the welfare state (Stockman 1986).

Stockman was right to see time as the revolution's enemy. Not long after the final budget victories in late June, the sense of mandate began to unravel. During the August recess, many members of Congress received "a dose of constituency reaction" that included the idea that the social spending cuts had gone too far (Fenno 1991, p. 58).
media, too, would sense the change and switch its tone to suggesting that the mandate was overinterpreted. Reagan would eventually be forced to raise taxes and make additional cuts to deal with a ballooning deficit; mandate politics would give way to politics as usual. The policy changes were already in place. The Great Society had been scaled back, taxes lowered, and a decade of deficit politics lay ahead.

1.0.2 “We Heard America Shouting” – The End of Welfare as We Know It

In January 1995, President Bill Clinton stepped into the House Chamber to deliver his third State of the Union Address. It had been nearly fifteen years since the Reagan mandate had scaled back the welfare state, and it was now evident that a second round of changes was at hand. The president admitted as much in his speech. He summed up the recent midterm election, noting that “... we didn’t hear America singing, we heard America shouting” (Clinton 1995). It was clear from his speech that the president thought the shouts were a call to change how Washington worked. In an attempt to downplay the Republican victory, he interpreted the meaning of the election as a renewal of the call for change that helped drive his victory in 1992. “We must agree that the American people certainly voted for change in 1992 and 1994,” he said. But the election of 1992 was not at all like that of 1994.

President Clinton’s explanation fell on deaf ears. By the time of his speech the idea that the 1994 elections were driven by an anti-incumbent mood had been dismissed by the Washington community. It is easy to see why. The Republicans gained fifty-two seats in the House, assuming control of the chamber for the time since 1952, a feat reminiscent of their taking control of the Senate in 1980. A loss of fifty seats by the president’s party is not unheard of; conventional wisdom sees midterm elections as a referendum on the sitting president, but something happened in 1994 that made this election different. Not a single Republican incumbent – Senate, House, or gubernatorial – lost. All 177 survived. Democratic incumbents fared much worse. In the House, thirty-five Republican challengers beat incumbent Democrats. In the Senate, Republicans challengers beat three incumbent Democrats and won all six open Democratic seats. The day after the election Senator

Richard Shelby of Alabama switched parties to give the Republicans a nine-seat gain. The magnitude of the victory led David Broder (1994, p. A1) to acknowledge that “The center of power in American politics moved sharply rightward yesterday.” The damage to the Democrats went further. Broder noted that “voters gave the GOP an expanded mandate to govern by its own principles” by defeating five incumbent Democratic governors, reelecting Republican governors in California, Illinois, Michigan, and Ohio, and by giving Republicans control of statehouses in New York, Pennsylvania, and Texas. Call it what you want – a landslide, a sea change, realignment, or a revolution – this was no mere call for change.

Mandate interpretations cannot be based on mere claims; they require palpable evidence of change in the electorate. The election of 1994 offered such evidence, but a mandate consensus was not inevitable. A number of competing explanations arose. Democrats, in a clear effort of damage control, placed the blame on anti-incumbent feelings and the Clinton administration’s failings on health care reform, gays in the military, and civil rights. Political scientists, too, downplayed the idea of a mandate. They saw little change in the partisan or ideological makeup of the electorate and too diverse a group of issues at play to signal major change. What they saw was a partisan victory rooted in standard midterm losses, an unfocused antigovernment mood, Republican gains in the South, and a strong mobilization effort by conservative groups (Wilcox 1995). They also discounted the importance of the now famous “Contract with America.” The Contract was the Republican’s vehicle to nationalize the effort to gain control of the House by uniting their candidates behind a set of clear conservative principles and proposals. Skeptics cited as evidence polls that found that fewer than 20 percent of the public had heard of the Contract, only one in four of those planning to vote Republican knew of it, and fewer than 5 percent of voters approved of it (Wilcox 1995, p. 21).

These interpretations were not the view that pervaded Washington in the run up to the president’s speech. The deans of the Washington pundit community weighed in heavily in favor of a conservative Republican mandate. David Broder (1994, p. A1) called it “A historic Republican triumph fueled more by ideology than anti-incumbency.” Richard Wolf (1994, p. 1A), writing on the front page of USA Today, called it a “romp to the right,” “a Republican revolution of historic proportions,”
and added “at least for now they have a mandate.” Charles Krauthammer (1994, p. A31) argued that Republicans “gratuitously decided to advance an ideological program and seek an ideological mandate,” and that the result was an “epochal political change.” William Safire (1994, p. A17) echoed this sentiment, noting that Newt Gingrich had nationalized the local elections, shifted the “center of power in domestic affairs,” and was now “keeper of the voters’ mandate.” Safire also coined a new word, “disentitlementarianism.” This, he argued, was the “hard part” of the new Republican mandate—welfare reform. Where the Reagan revolution sought to scale back the welfare state, the Gingrich revolution sought to do away with it all together by ending the sixty-year-old entitlement to unlimited welfare benefits. This was not the original goal of the Contract. The welfare plank did not call for an end to the existing entitlement program, but the conservative tide swept even the Republican victors farther to the right.

Bill Clinton put welfare reform on the national agenda during the 1992 campaign by calling for an “end to welfare as we know it.” The Republican mandate and the “Contract with America” not only took over the national agenda from Clinton but also drastically altered the course of welfare reform. President Clinton’s 1994 proposal required that after two years of benefits AFDC recipients would have to work to continue receiving benefits. To help facilitate the transition from welfare to work, the proposal sought an additional $9.3 billion for job training and child care assistance. Welfare reform languished on the national agenda, taking a back seat to health care, until the Contract put a Republican version on the fast track. The Republican version pushed far more dramatic changes, more conservative than those in the Contract. It sought to end the entitlement by putting a lifetime limit on benefits, it transferred most power to the states by turning welfare into a block grant, and some versions sought to reduce funding by limiting benefits to families who have new children, unwed mothers, immigrants, and some disabled children. The shift in the agenda led one journalist to note that “many liberals seem downright stunned by how fast the debate over welfare reform has moved to the right” (Toner 1995, p. A22). Representative Charles Rangel (D-NY) summed up the liberal position well, noting that “Two years ago, I thought my biggest fight would be against Clinton’s proposals” (Toner 1995, p. A22).
The Republican success forced President Clinton to try to reassert his relevance in the welfare debate (and in national governance in general), but he dropped his proposal all together, perhaps realizing that electoral conditions necessitated that he work with congressional Republicans. During the 104th Congress, the president did not ask anyone to reintroduce his welfare bill and no one ever did (Pear 1995). He ceded near total control of the debate to the Republican leadership and was forced to rely on Democrats and moderate Republicans in the Senate to forestall a complete Republican victory. Recognizing the transient nature of their mandate, and the ability to set the tone for upcoming negotiations, House Republicans moved to quickly pass a bill within the first 100 days of the new Congress. The House bill sought $62 billion in cuts over five years by shifting most benefits to block grants, imposing strict time limits for benefits, imposing a cap on benefits to families to discourage out of wedlock births, denying cash benefits to unwed teen mothers, most legal immigrants, drug addicts, and alcoholics. By moving quickly, Republican leaders in the House were able to capitalize on the mandate perception by forcing a Democratic president to the sidelines and presenting the more moderate Senate with a very conservative bill that would set the tone for the conference committee negotiations.

The sense of mandate went beyond shifting the terms of the debate; it contributed directly to the final passage of the House bill and the content of the Senate bill that went to conference. The Republican leadership in the House pushed a welfare reform bill through the House on March 24. For the most part, it was a partisan affair, with only nine Democrats voting for the bill. Without the sense of conservative mandate in Washington, however, passage of the bill would not have been so easy and its contents surely would have been more compromised. Mandate politics came into play when the House considered the rule for floor debate. The rule allowed consideration of 31 amendments out of more than 150 proposed. It excluded most of the contentious ones, including several proposed by Republicans who were strongly antiabortion.

The antiabortion members raised concerns that the bill would promote abortions by penalizing unwed teenage mothers and awarding states for reducing their out of wedlock birthrate. This group of conservative Republicans wanted to liberalize the bill by allowing unwed
teenage mothers to receive welfare checks through guardians or to pay for baby supplies and housing. A bare majority of 217 voted for the rule, which allowed the leadership bill to come to a vote. Absent the sense of mandate, the rule would have failed and the leadership would have been forced to accept votes on far more amendments. With it, the House passed the most conservative version of the bill.

The Senate would have a moderating effect, with the moderation increasing as the mandate perception eroded over time. The Senate would not act until mid-September, and although the final bill chipped away at the conservative edges of what the House had passed, the core reform of ending the welfare entitlement remained. Even nine months into the year, belief in mandate still led to a more conservative bill. One vote stands out. Conservative Democratic Senator John Breaux (LA) proposed an amendment that would have imposed a penalty on states that did not continue to spend 90 percent of their fiscal 1994 total on welfare. This was an attempt to ensure that states would not gut their own programs when they took control of the new federal block grant programs. The House required no specific spending level; states were free to spend as much, or as little, as they chose. The Breaux amendment was defeated, eventually replaced with a 75 percent requirement pushed by moderate Republicans.

It would take until August 1996 for welfare reform to become law, but not before Republican leaders sought to end the Medicaid entitlement along with it. In the end, they would settle for a compromise between the House and Senate bills of 1995, bills that ended welfare as we knew it, but on Republican terms. Washington had indeed heard America shouting and responded with the most dramatic reversal of the welfare state since the Reagan revolution. The election had given Republicans the majorities in Congress to seek major change. The sense of mandate that flowed from the election produced the impetus to do it.

There is a common element in the three stories of politics we have told. It is that politicians behave differently when they come to the belief that a recent election has signaled a voter mandate. Also in common is the idea that these changes in behavior are highly consequential for the essential outcomes of government. Important things happen, that is, not only from the election itself but also from the interpretation of what it meant. We are in need of a theory that comprehends how
interpreting an election outcome can in and of itself produce changes in behavior and outcomes. That is where we turn.

1.1 MANDATES AS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS

The idea of voter mandate has two facets. One is that voters consciously use their votes to send a signal to government about their preferences. We have an immense literature on that issue that tends, on balance, to be dismissive of it. The second is that public officials receive the signal—and then act on it. It is this second piece that is the focus of this book.

We have no particular interest in whether voters consciously signal their preferences. Indeed, it does not matter to us whether or not they do. Politicians do sometimes believe that voters have sent a message. They tell us so in their words and, more important, in their deeds. Much evidence of that is to come. This belief is a social construction, a shared conclusion that derives from the public interaction over the interpretation of an election. A shared conclusion is a will of the wisp kind of reality, not tangible like percentage of the vote or seats won and lost. But undeniably humans do act on beliefs. And so beliefs about the political world—which or not they are correct—do matter.

Electoral mandates might be real or might be merely misperceptions, social constructions of an election outcome that install a message never in the minds of voters. Perceptions of mandate do occur; that is a simple matter of fact. Whether those perceptions reflect reality we leave open for the moment.

The mandate in either case is a message about voter preferences for policy change. We ask here what to expect of the impact of that message. To answer the question we need a theory that gives context to these particular messages. We wish to explain why political actors (members of the U.S. Congress, for example) respond to the message. To do so, we begin with the micro decision model of dynamic representation (Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995).

We assume that politicians have preferences over policy choices and also that they seek to be reelected. Their situation in general is that particular issues are likely to present them with some options that are expedient for the reelection goal and others which better satisfy their preferences. Confronting a sequence of such tough choices, they develop a strategy for dealing with them. On issues that present themselves on
the main left-right division of American politics this strategy becomes a normal trade-off between where they would prefer to be and where electoral concern forces them to be. In the typical situation, in which professional politician preferences are more thoughtful, consistent, and intense than those of the amateur electorate, that means that politicians will typically compromise between a more extreme preferred position and a more moderate expedient one. This trade-off between safety and electoral security can be thought of as an equilibrium choice strategy, what politicians would do if there were no particular information flow about the issue at hand that would move them from their normal positions.

Politicians care about elections yet to be held. And career politicians would be wise to think beyond just the next one. Information that might leverage their difficult trade-off decisions would of course be valued. But such information is scarce. The problem is that public views are not crystallized about issue specifics and there is great uncertainty about which issues will shape the future electoral agenda. Thus, politicians have a considerable need for information of a generic sort—specific information has a very high likelihood of being irrelevant to the electoral future—that can guide their ongoing decisions. They acquire mountains of information from the buzz of politics, the inside the beltway conversations that constitute the professional life of national politics. This might be systematic as in poll results but also might be the shared reflections of professionals in face to face conversations, all intensely concerned with tracking the public pulse.

Politicians attend to the conversations, make inferences about the public mood, and use those inferences to update their decision strategy. Of particular importance is information about movements in general tendencies, “Mood” in the Stimson (1991, 1998) formulation. Information about general movements in public preference give one some ability to forecast future elections. In this view, the most expedient position is variable over time, not constant. It depends on where public views are going. Thus, the equilibrium choice strategy is also dynamic; the trade-off point shifts as estimates of where the public stands change.

Thus, we expect politicians in the aggregate to shift with public opinion. Where professional politicians concur on the direction of change in public attitudes, then the shift in individual positions will be unidirectional. And a shift wholly (or at least largely) in the same direction will
shift outcomes. The distribution of politicians will respond to the public opinion signal. Thus current public opinion, acted on by politicians anticipating future elections, shifts political choices.

What of the elections themselves, what signal do they provide? In the rational expectations view to which we subscribe, events that can be forecasted convey no information when the forecasts prove to be accurate. Only surprises, the difference between forecast and actual outcome, matter. Only surprises convey information. Thus, elections, to the extent that their outcomes are expected, provide no signal to politicians for how they should choose differently.

Politicians in this formulation project likely election outcomes from uncertain information about public preferences. Ambition dictates that they should try hard and that they should do it well. But uncertainty is inherent. A public that is usually tuned out of politics becomes hard to predict on the rare occasions when it tunes in. Thus, no matter how hard they try and no matter what skill and knowledge they bring to the issue, professional politicians will sometimes be surprised by election outcomes. These will be the elections declared to be mandates. When the confident expectations of professional observers are notably wrong, then observers begin to search for a message that can explain the unexpected.

On relatively rare occasions, the arbiters of American politics — politicians, who are not particularly credible, and media commentators who are — decide that an election carries a message. When they do so, then all who seek election must rethink their beliefs about the electoral future. Mandates have potential influence, therefore, because they lead political actors to recalculate their strategies. Those on the winning side are emboldened to recalibrate their positions in the direction of their true preferences. Those on the losing side are threatened by future defeat and pressed to move toward the “message” for electoral security.

In the rational anticipation model of Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson (1995) politicians think only about the future, ignoring elections past. Here we depart by noting that mandate elections provide (or appear to provide) information as well. When elections turn out as most expect, then beliefs about the lay of the political land are confirmed. When they deviate markedly and observers find a message in the deviation, then strategy must be revised and positions rethought.
Thus, the central idea of mandates in our theory is that they carry information about the political future that causes calculating politicians to change their anticipations. The mandates that we study always turn out to be perceived mandates, views about a change in fundamental political orientations that are eventually discounted and disconfirmed by new information. Thus, the expected effect is transient, a shift of beliefs and positions that eventually decays back to an equilibrium little different from the pre-election period. However illusory the perceptions and however transient the effects, important political actions occur under the impetus of the mandate and they become established facts in law, which are neither illusory nor transient.

I.2 THE STUDY OF MANDATES

The three stories with which we began illustrate how three separate mandate perceptions changed politics and public policy. They hint at a larger story of mandate politics, a story unlike those previously told in political science. Existing work on electoral mandates is unable to explain these episodes. The existing institutional work tends to focus on presidents. The behavioral work focuses on the ability of the electorate to send a decisive policy signal, often deprecating it. Nothing in our literature focuses much on the processes that link voters and election outcomes to the behavior of representatives. Our theory of electoral mandates naturally builds on what this literature has to say, so that is where we begin.

Like many people in political science, those who focus on institutions and those who study behavior are sometimes at cross-purposes. So it is in the case of mandates. Those who see mandates from the governance perspective – from inside the beltway – take a different view than those who focus on the voters. We take up these literatures in order.

I.2.1 Institutional Perspectives

Mandates, viewed as policy directives sent from electorates to governing elites, have long been an important aspect of the evaluation of democratic electoral systems. The translation of the electorate's preferences into governance and policy is central to most conceptualizations
of representation. Shugart and Carey (1992) link policy mandates to two qualities of electoral systems: identifiability and efficiency. Identifiability refers to the voters' ability to identify competing potential governments and the policy differences that distinguish them. Efficiency refers to the extent that election results or voter intentions are translated directly into policy. In Shugart and Carey's (1992) view mandates are realistic only in proportional representation systems where a vote for a member of parliament translates directly into a clear choice for an executive government and a slate of legislation that the majority party will have the power to enact. Mandates, accordingly, are unlikely to emerge in presidential systems.

The winner-take-all system of American politics regularly results in disproportionate representation because the party winning the presidency controls the entire executive government, no matter the victory margin. Shugart and Carey (1992) argue that presidential systems are likely to produce a false sense of a mandate because the winner governs in a majoritarian manner while often having received the support of a minority of the electorate.

Despite these difficulties, observers of American politics have focused their attention (inappropriately we believe) on the existence of presidential mandates. Dahl (1990) traces the origins of the theory of presidential mandates to Woodrow Wilson's belief that the president is the only national voice, because he is the only one elected by the nation as a whole. Dahl (1990, p. 360) noted that "it has become commonplace for presidents and commentators alike to argue that by virtue of his election the president has received a mandate for his aims and policies from the people of the United States." The assumption underlying this view is that national elections carry messages about electoral preferences that are clear enough to serve as a directive to the president and to all other representatives as well.

Dahl (1990) and Kelley (1983) argue that the classic theory of presidential mandates is more myth than reality. Looking beyond the election returns to survey research, Kelley (1983) finds little evidence of widespread support for the specific policies advocated by many presidential winners, including those who won by the proverbial landslide.

Weinbaum and Judd (1970) look directly at how members of Congress perceive and react to mandates. Their study of congressional roll call votes after the 1964 and 1936 elections finds some evidence in support of a "mandated Congress," but they note that similar results
can be found after every election. Their conclusion is that the key to presidential success after mandates comes from changes in the composition in the Congress, not from members of Congress changing their views or votes.

Although Dahl and Kelley found little in election returns and surveys to validate the classic mandate theory and Weinbaum and Judd find little support for members of Congress responding to real mandates, others cite contested electoral meanings and institutional conflict. Edwards (1989) began a reassessment of mandates by noting that what matters is the perception of a mandate and not the existence of a true policy directive sent by the electorate. Edwards (1989) also shifted the discussion away from the focus on presidents to a more party-centric view of mandates. This change came as a result of his interest in executive-legislative relations and the influence of the separation of powers on national policy making.

Jones (1999) takes a similar party-centric view, identifying mandates as election outcomes that put in place the elements of a responsible party model. In spite of the realities of separated institutions of government, Jones sees the responsible party model dominating postelection political commentary and press coverage. Mandates are instances in which election returns and postelection commentary reflect the conditions necessary for responsible party government: a clear ideological difference between the candidates; significant issues debated; a landslide presidential victory; and an accompanying party victory that sees the winner's party gain in Congress in a greater than expected fashion (Jones 1999).

Such an election provides a rational basis for declaring a mandate and sparks short-term electoral interpretation that includes use of the mandate idea. The main policy implication is that such elections produce agenda congruity across institutions – an agreement among major policy actors as to the general orientation of the policy problems to be addressed and the specific policy alternatives to be implemented. Jones agrees that mandates are more perception than reality, and that future information often raises questions about the strength of the mandate. But Congress and the president often act, he notes, before the mandate perception erodes.

Jones (1999) believes that the president makes strategic use of the mandate interpretation and that the perception of a mandate can induce Congress to concur with the president's agenda. Mandates are
instances in which there is enough agreement among actors to reduce the bargaining tension between the two major policy-making institutions. Without such agreement, the chances of major policy change are reduced and policy becomes a function of the outcome of more contested negotiations between the president and Congress.

Conley (2001) emphasizes the president's strategic use of the mandate claim. She argues that presidents interpret election outcomes in an effort to set the national policy agenda. For the president, the question is, what does the outcome signify? Has the election provided enough of a base of support to seek large-scale policy change? The president may or may not link his or her electoral victory to a policy initiative. The main impact of the election is that its interpretation can be exploited to capitalize on a political opportunity.

Policy change, for Conley, is a function of the president first claiming a mandate and Congress then agreeing with him. If the position of Congress is close to the claimed mandate and public opinion supports the president, then Congress will capitulate and enact policies that reflect the mandate. She finds that presidents usually (but not always) declare a mandate, and that when Congress agrees with the president, or when the president fights it with public opinion, the president achieves more policy success. A mandate is thus a strategic tool employed by the president to push the presidential agenda through Congress.

The return to a focus on presidential mandates leaves us with a literature that is not far from where it began. Mandates are no longer seen as voter policy directives. Perceptions rule the day, but they remain linked to presidential election outcomes and the president's claim to be the one voice of the national electorate. Jones (1999) expands the mandate idea to include a broader view of partisan victory, but retains the need for a landslide presidential victory. Conley (2001) returns the study of mandates to a focus on presidential claims, putting Congress in a reactive mode.

1.2.2 Behavioral Perspectives: What the Voting Tradition *Really* Says about Mandates

Any discussion of election mandates within political science invariably brings forth a claim that the whole idea of mandates was disproved by
the voting behavior tradition. Mandate claims can’t be true, it is said, because we know that voters aren’t swayed by issue considerations and can’t therefore send messages with their votes. Here we reopen that conclusion by assessing what is actually known from voting research.

Beginning with The American Voter, the Michigan school of voting behavior put its emphasis on the relative unimportance of issue considerations as opposed to the claims of party loyalty and the fleeting images of the candidates. But what The American Voter did say in this case, and in many others, was far more careful and limited than the exaggerations, almost caricatures, that appeared in the ensuing debates. Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1960) were impressed by how little the issue dialogue seemed to matter to ordinary people, probably in contrast to the prevailing nonscientific view, which assumed that voters must be pretty much like the inside the beltway crowd and newspaper op-ed letter writers, who thought of nothing else.

But even this strongest statement stops well short of asserting that issues don’t matter, that citizens can’t formulate issue positions, can’t act on them, or anything of the sort. The emphasis on the lifelong stability of party identification moves in a different direction from treating elections as simple issue referenda, but it does not deny the possibility.

“The book,” John Kessel (1972) writes,

...sets up three tests for “issue-oriented partisan behavior” – expression of an opinion, perception of what government is doing, and perception of party differences. The book states that between 18 per cent and 36 per cent of the respondents pass these tests, depending upon the issue involved. And of course we now have the benefit of a half century of election experience which tells us that Campbell et al. (1960) were unlucky to have started their enterprize with two quite atypically issue-free contests.

But voting behavior scholarship in the Michigan tradition was just beginning in 1960. The American Voter is not the final statement of any of the issues raised in that provocative volume. Over the next fifteen years or so, a lively scholarship emerged. Its agenda was chiefly the claims made by Campbell et al., and its mode was that of the original, exploiting voter surveys for what they could show about the numerous important claims of The American Voter.

Under the Michigan tent, flying the banner of quantitative survey research, the community of voting behavior analysts produced a
revisionist perspective. As applied to the question of issue voting – the more general question of which the mandate issue is a special case – the revisionist perspective paid homage to Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1960), but meanwhile reached a new consensus quite dramatically different than the original. With the benefit of more issue-oriented elections, better survey questions, and the exaggerated *American Voter* claim as perspective, the revisionists found issue voting to be quite widespread and not dependent on high levels of voter sophistication (Alvarez 1997; Carmines and Stimson 1980; Key 1966; Miller and Shanks 1996).

**New Micro Understandings.** Part of the persuasive case for the unimportance of issue considerations was voters speaking for themselves. When respondents were asked what they liked and disliked about parties and candidates, the language of their replies was sobering. This view of the 1956 electorate in *The American Voter* has an emotional impact on all who read it. Theories of hidden sophistication easily gave way to graphic words, such as the respondent who said, “I don’t know much about the man. Our radio’s tore up and I ain’t heard any news lately” (Campbell et al., 1960, p. 243). More than statistical analyses, such demonstrations seemed to rule out issue understandings of politics. If voters couldn’t say why they liked or disliked the parties and candidates, the logical conclusion was that they had no reasons, or at least none more sophisticated than family tradition and candidate images.

What we now know from the better political psychology of recent decades is that failure to be able to reconstruct the facts and arguments that support a conclusion is an expected result. The theory of online processing holds that people listen to facts and arguments, are swayed by them into reaching conclusions that alter their future views but then have little recollection of the basis for those conclusions (Hastie and Park 1986; Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995). That tells us, importantly, that failure to reconstruct an issue basis for party and candidate evaluations does not mean that issue considerations played no role in forming them. It tells us only that people don’t remember much of what they hear, particularly in concerns that are not central to their lives.
Voting and Elections. The phrase "voting and elections" is so common that it is easy to regard the two terms "voting" and "elections" as synonyms. They are not. And that is part of the problem with the generalization of micro voting conclusions about why voters vote as they do to the macro question of what elections mean. When voters are aggregated into an electorate, what is typical of the former does not automatically typify the latter. Thus, even if Campbell et al. had taken the caricatured absolutist position that issues don't matter, even if there had been no revisionists who changed the conclusion to "issues do matter," the conclusion that elections aren't swayed by issue preferences would not have followed.

The meaning of elections is a macro level issue. It emerges in voter movements at the margin. If issue preferences change and elections reflect that change, then issue influence is present even if the modal or typical voter had no such questions in his or her mind. Election outcomes are altered by systematic influence at the margin. In an electorate in which, say, 90 percent of citizens are either blind party loyalists or altogether removed from knowledge of issue controversies, a small number of people behaving systematically can produce all the variation of outcomes that we see between one election and the next. Thus, the only micro voting conclusion that could imply no issue influence in election outcomes is that no citizen ever takes issues into account. Beyond that absolutist and demonstrably false conclusion, the micro voting tradition has nothing to say about the meaning of elections.

What then do we know of macro level issue influence in elections? We know that public mood, a generic set of liberal versus conservative issue positions, is significantly associated with all national election outcomes (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002). We know, further, that it is decisively associated with presidential and Senate elections.

It might be said, in sum, that beginning with the idea that the glass of public involvement to in policy debates was full, the authors of The American Voter discovered that it was shockingly half empty. Then followed the revisionists, who discovered that it was only half empty. Then followed the macro theorists who noted that half was way more than was needed for a meaningful aggregate signal. Interpretation has come full circle, whereas the facts have changed hardly at all.

What then do we really know? We know that mandates exist in the limited sense that election outcomes depend on shifts in public opinion.
Democrats do better when the country is more liberal; Republicans win when it is more conservative. That can’t tell us that the more decisive meaning is true, that voters actually intend to send a message. But it surely does not eliminate the possibility.

The study of mandates has advanced our understanding of election results and their impact, but it also has developed in isolation from the normative debate over mandates as threats to democracy. With the exception of Jones’s narrowing of the conditions for a true mandate, Dahl’s (1990) concerns about the negative repercussions of mandate claims continue to raise a dilemma for democratic governance.

1.3 TELLING THE LARGER STORY OF MANDATE POLITICS

This book is the story of mandate politics. It is a story of significant electoral victories, unexpected victory margins, reassessments of electoral security, and major change in American public policy. The story line touches on much that is important in American politics and political science. Mandates do not flow from every election. We find only the three in the postwar era. They are rare events, but events that explain some of the most important shifts in American public policy. We thus have three stories within the larger story of mandate politics.

The mandate story we present matters because it has governing consequences. Absent the consensual understanding that these elections were properly interpreted to carry a message, America may not have witnessed the dramatic policy and political changes that came about during these three periods. These specific episodes are not politics as usual; rather, they represent unusual politics, politics driven by the mandate dynamic. We know the endings of each of these three stories. The question we address is, how did such change come about? The changes were not inevitable. They may not even have been likely. But they did occur.

We now face the challenge of turning mandate politics into an empirically verified theory that is applicable not just to three particular bills, but applicable across many bills, across entire Congresses, and across elections. In short, we need a scientific version of the story. We lay out the story chronologically, showing how the mandate dynamic forms, influences members of Congress and Congress as a whole, and how it ends. We describe a process that begins with the electorate and
works its influence through the social construction of electoral meaning and the strategic calculations of members of Congress. The news of a mandate is important because it carries with it a powerful signal about the relevance of opinion change. To interpret usual signals about opinion change, politicians must ask, “What is the change?” and “Will it actually affect votes?” The mandate message stands apart from the norm because it is decisive, asserting both opinion change and electoral relevance in one capsule.

Chapter 2 begins our analysis with a discussion of how the mandate interpretation is formed. We focus on how unexpected electoral results are socially constructed into a mandate consensus. We look at the preelection expectations, the election results, and the spin attached to them and how it is shaped into a consensual understanding that politics has taken on a new direction. Chapter 3 offers our model of member response. The focus is on the behavioral changes that occur in response to the mandate perception. We document both the initial response and the duration of response of members confronted by news that their electoral world has changed. Our analysis shows that the behavior is real, pervasive, and conditioned by the strength of the mandate perception in the Washington community.

Chapter 3 looks at individual members of Congress, and Chapter 4 investigates the larger pattern of congressional response. It shifts the analysis from the individual member to the aggregate chamber and institution. The analysis documents how the member responses aggregate up to affect the output of an entire Congress. We show how the mandate dynamic is evident to varying degrees in the voting patterns of each chamber and how this shifts the ever important position of the median voter in Congress.

Chapter 5 extends the aggregate analysis one step further by documenting the outcome of the mandates. We show how the mandate affected the passage of major bills and how American public policy shifted as a result. The chapter shows both the immediate impact of the mandate on the political agenda and the shape of public policy as well as the longer term impact on the political system.

We finish our analyses with a look at the aftermath that mandate elections brings. Chapter 6 places our story in the larger context of political dynamics, representation, and policy change. We look at the course of American politics following such dramatic change and the
possibility that the thermostatic electorate instigates a corrective if the mandate is perceived as having gone too far. Representational politics is inherently dynamic; public preferences change and political actors shift their behavior in accordance with that change. Mandate politics is a component of this dynamic and to fully understand it, we must look at what reactions it sets in motion. Our analysis is speculative in nature because a full telling of the corrective mechanisms in American politics requires a treatment that would take us too far from the core of our analysis. Our focus is on how mandates arise and how they influence the operation of American politics.

Finally, we conclude in Chapter 7 by moving away from these three times of unusual politics. Instead of focusing on uncovering the effects and implications of these mandate elections, we ask what our theory of mandates tells us about “normal” politics. These years are in many ways distinct from other elections. Studying the unusual in politics provides us leverage over understanding the usual. We think that we have learned a lot about American politics from these three elections. In this last chapter, we put these conclusions into a broader perspective.