

Hail to the (new) Chief:

Possibility of widespread reform ahead ...

It was a quirky election season. Three candidates jockeyed in a race designed for two.

The incumbent was Republican, representing the moderate wing of his party. He had tried gamely to continue the legacy of his more charismatic predecessor, but he was generating more jokes than admiration. His chief rival was a Democrat from the South, a sitting governor with no experience in Washington, but with big promises to bring change and reform. While the message appealed, the messenger tended to bore, because his very academic abilities were long on information but short on dramatic style.

The third candidate did have charisma. He was an energetic outsider, a well-known character of almost folk dimensions and appeal, who excited the American people more than either of the other two, but who scared many because of his extreme proposals and his erratic personality.

The winner, of course, was Woodrow Wilson. In a close race, he defeated Republican President William Howard Taft and third-party candidate Theodore Roosevelt. The year was 1912, but the dynamics of the race and the personalities could well fit our own recent quirky season of presidential campaigning.

History never does repeat itself, but it can help explain puzzles of the present and even suggest what to expect in the future.

Woodrow Wilson and Bill Clinton both won close elections as Democrats in times that were dominated by Republicans. Another

PAUL JEROME CROCE

DELAND

thing these men share is a Southern connection. Although Wilson spent most of his career in New Jersey, he was born and raised in Virginia. For a country only a few generations past the Civil War, that was still very Southern.

Far from being a liability, the Southern connection actually helped Wilson and set a precedent for Democratic presidential candidates for the rest of the century.

Before the Civil War, political wags had a way of describing Democratic politicians from the North who continued to appeal to Southerners because of their support for the South's peculiar institution; they called them "Northern men with Southern principles."

They could get personal support from Northerners, but their policies could gain Southerner voters. Wilson and Clinton, and a majority of Democratic presidents in between, include Harry Truman, Lyndon Johnson, and Jimmy Carter, have adopted the same strategy in reverse: they are Southern men with Northern principles.

Although hailing from a Southern state, each of these presidents adopted policies with more appeal in the North. For example, Texan Johnson became a firm advocate for civil

rights when most Southerners were crying for "segregation forever."

The South has been significantly more conservative than the rest of the country, so liberal Democrats tend to be on shaky ground there. Witness Michael Dukakis campaigning in the Deep South. But if the Democrats can put forward someone from the home ground, then even if liberal, the candidate can still gain significant support in the South. This also helps explain how Clinton could defy the rule of thumb that a presidential candidate needs to be from a large state. Clinton was not, but he was from a large region. And more than in any other region (except perhaps New England), the home state advantage applies almost as strongly to kin from neighboring states.

If Clinton continues to follow the precedents set by Wilson, his presidency will be a time of widespread reform. President Wilson inaugurated the establishment of the Federal Reserve system, the progressive income tax, and many progressive reforms easing the burden of industry on workers.

Bill Clinton will have to be as energetic in implementing change as his fellow Southerner Woodrow Wilson if he is to solve the economic and social problems that he has willingly sought to tackle.

Paul Jerome Croce of DeLand is assistant professor of American studies at Stetson University. He wrote this for The DeLand Beacon.