

THE POLITICS OF REALIGNMENT

PARTY CHANGE IN THE MOUNTAIN WEST

edited by

**PETER F. GALDERISI, MICHAEL S. LYONS,
RANDY T. SIMMONS, AND JOHN G. FRANCIS**



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The Politics of Realignment

About the Book and Editors

The landslide reelection of President Ronald Reagan in 1984 prompted political analysts to consider the possibility of a national realignment of the electorate toward the Republican party. The 1986 elections, however, proved any predictions of a national realignment to be premature. A major shift in voting patterns had not taken place—except in the Mountain West, where a realignment was already in place.

Once second only to the southern states in Democratic attachments, these western states (Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming) now compose the most Republican region in the nation. The contributors to this volume assert that this substantial change in electoral patterns, which has spanned nearly forty years, resulted not from a westward migration but from a widespread conversion among those who are born and remain in the region.

In analyzing this realignment, these writers—some of the nation's best electoral scholars—provide historical and contemporary overviews and assess the important issues not only for voters but also for party organizations and members of Congress. Their focus in *The Politics of Realignment*, however, is on the Mountain West's role in contemporary American politics. The authors present a comprehensive investigation into the meaning of this regional realignment for national politics.

Peter F. Galderisi (associate professor), **Michael S. Lyons** (assistant professor), and **Randy T. Simmons** (associate professor) are on the faculty of the political science department at Utah State University. **John G. Francis** is associate professor of political science at the University of Utah.

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Peter F. Galderisi

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1

Realignment Past and Present

*Peter F. Galderisi
and Michael S. Lyons*

With the landslide election and reelection of President Ronald Reagan, political analysts are once again discussing the possibility of a major electoral realignment, a realignment that would establish the Republicans as the national majority party. The evidence grows that such a realignment is in progress. Republicans won decisively in four of the last five presidential elections, all but the post-Watergate election of 1976. In 1980 they gained control of the U.S. Senate, holding it until 1986. They converted a Democratic stronghold, the South, into a highly competitive region. Their national party organization developed and disseminated modern campaign technology so effectively that even national Democratic leaders readily admit to Democratic inferiority in this area. In Gallup polls of voter party identification, which in the 1960s and 1970s typically suggested at least a 3 to 2 Democratic advantage, the Republicans now trail the Democrats only 38% to 33%. And the Republicans are clearly the majority among young voters entering the electorate.

But as compelling as the evidence of national realignment may appear to be, it is hardly conclusive. The residual strength of the Democratic party remains impressive: to paraphrase Mark Twain, the reports of its death are greatly exaggerated. According to the widely accepted critical elections theory, the realignment should have occurred in 1968 or 1972. Yet in 1986, despite the presidential landslides, despite Ronald Reagan's personal popularity, despite superior Republican campaign resources, despite the legacy of the troubled Carter presidency, and despite five consecutive divisive battles for the Democratic Presidential nomination, by most measures the Democrats continue to be the national majority party. The most

conspicuous evidence of the continuing viability of the party is in U.S. House elections, won by Democrats 243-192 in 1980, 269-166 in 1982, 253-182 in 1984, and 260-175 (or thereabouts depending on recounts) in 1986. These elections have established since 1981 an average Democratic margin in the House of 256-179, almost precisely equal to the average Democratic margin of 258-177 from 1933 to 1970. The 1986 Democratic recapture of the U.S. Senate by a surprising 55-45 margin further indicates party support. Equally significant is the continuing Democratic domination of state governments, especially the legislatures. Gaining about 187 seats nationwide, Democrats emerged from the 1986 elections controlling 27 state legislatures compared to only 7 for Republicans. And despite a net loss of 7 races in 1986, Democratic governors remain a 26-24 majority.

Further complicating the realignment debate is the apparent detachment of many voters from either party, often called dealignment. One indication of dealignment is the growing proportion of self proclaimed independent voters. Since the 1950s, this proportion has increased from about 20% to about 35%, with as many as 42% claiming independent status in a September 1986 *Time* survey. A second indication is the strength of the third party presidential candidacies of George Wallace and John Anderson, especially the Wallace candidacy which at one point in 1968 had the support of over 20% of the electorate. The most impressive indication of dealignment, however, is the increased incidence of split ticket voting, which has more than doubled from a rate of less than 30% in the 1950s to more than 60% in recent elections (Ladd, 1982, p. 78).

Some analysts believe the current dealignment simply to be a transitory phase within a realignment, of longer duration perhaps, but otherwise similar to periods of instability associated with past realignments (Beck, 1974). Other analysts disagree (Burnham, 1975). They argue that issue voting, television, direct primaries, the advantages of incumbency, and other factors have permanently reduced the saliency of party identification in voting, making the whole concept of partisan alignment much less meaningful. To these analysts, as the columnist David Broder (1971) has suggested, "the party's over."

In an effort to sort out the contradictory patterns and differing interpretations of the evidence on national realignment, many analysts have focused on regional evidence, especially evidence from the South (Converse, 1966; Bass and DeVries, 1976; Campbell, 1977), which some consider critical to the formation of a new Republican

majority. But the evidence of realignment in the South is quite mixed. The evidence is also quite mixed in the Northeast, Midwest, in every other region of the country save one: the Mountain West. In the Mountain West--the states of Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming--the case for a Republican realignment is almost irrefutable. Fifty years ago more Democratic than any region but the South, the Mountain West is today the most Republican region and the only region in which registered Republican voters constitute a majority. So strongly do Mountain West voters prefer Republican presidential candidates that no Democrat has carried a single state since 1964. So sweeping has been the Republican capture of the Mountain West congressional delegation that the 1974 Democratic majorities of 11-8 and 9-7 in the House and Senate respectively had by 1985 become Republican majorities of 17-7 and 11-5. In 1986 the Democrats reduced these margins slightly to 15-9 and 10-6, a Republican triumph given the historical pattern in second midterm elections.

Understanding the causes and conditions of the Mountain West realignment can reveal much about the prospects for a national realignment. It can also help analysts predict the character of a national realignment, if one does occur, and if one does not occur, it can help to explain why. In addition, the Mountain West realignment is of considerable interest in its own right. It has influenced the national political agenda, especially on public lands and natural resource policies. It has also had a major impact on the composition of the U.S. Senate. Even though the Mountain West has only about 5% of the national population, it elects 16 Senators, and change in the regional Senate delegation since 1974 can account entirely for creating the 1980-1986 Republican majority.

The Politics of Realignment is a collection of essays discussing Republican realignment in the Mountain West. The essays in the collection describe the shape of the realignment, examine its idiosyncracies, hypothesize about its causes, and explore its implications for national politics and for our understanding of realignment generally. We introduce the collection by considering the concept of realignment itself, creating a theoretical framework for the subsequent essays. We survey the established realignment literature, presenting the various concepts of realignment and suggesting ways in which the subsequent essays relate and contribute to this literature.

THE CONCEPT OF REALIGNMENT

Simply defined, realignments are major shifts in the partisan orientation of the electorate. They generally have been viewed as cyclical events, occurring roughly every forty years. Whether explained mainly as a conversion of older voters shifting their partisan allegiance in response to new issues or to changes in their social or economic environment (Ladd and Hadley, 1978; Erikson and Tedlin, 1981), or explained instead as a mobilization of new voters previously disenfranchised by reasons of age, race, gender, citizenship, or plain disinterest (Sellers, 1965; Beck, 1974; Andersen, 1979; Campbell, 1985), realignments result in dramatic and far reaching political change. They have been described both as "fundamental turning points in the course of American electoral politics," and as "the chief tension-managing device available" to our peculiar political system (Burnham, 1970, p. 1, 181). Creating new voter coalitions and new political agenda, realignments transfer the power of government to different groups and to different applications: they are the closest that our political system comes to revolution.

Not surprisingly, analysts do not always agree over what constitutes a realignment or how and when realignments occur. Deciding whether, and at what point, a realignment takes place depends upon which aspects of realignment one considers most relevant. As James Sundquist notes: "after a quarter century of study, the concept of party realignment is still far from clear...it is difficult to find any two works that give (realignment) the same definition" (1983, p.4). One reason the meaning of realignment has become so muddled is that use of the concept has evolved over the years, with the newer concepts expanding upon, refining, and changing the emphasis of the older concepts. Yet inasmuch as the various concepts of realignment may differ, they do not always conflict or compete, and one can apply more than one concept to a particular realignment. We consider first realignment as a concept of process, then, realignment as a concept of outcomes.

THE REALIGNMENT PROCESS

Critical Elections

In his pioneering article, "A Theory of Critical Elections," V.O. Key characterized critical elections as

"short, sharp, dramatic movement of voters away from one party" (Key, 1955). A series of dealigning phenomena, all consequences of a decline in the perceived relevance of politics, particularly partisan agenda, precede a critical election. These dealigning phenomena include: a decline in turnout, an increase in split-ticket voting, and an increase in partisan vote-swing between elections. Critical elections generally arise as a consequence of severe economic or social stress in the political system and are triggered by some cataclysmic event (usually a depression), that forces a sizeable portion of the electorate to reevaluate its views on the role of government. Characteristics that differentiate critical elections from more temporary and less consequential electoral deviations include: an immediate, long-lasting alteration in the attitudes *and* behavior of voters (Campbell, 1966), a permanent reconfiguration of the coalitions in the electorate and in all levels of the government, and a concomitant change in the agenda of politics around which those coalitions are organized (Ginsberg, 1976; Sinclair, 1977). Following critical elections are periods of high voter intensity and turnout, high issue salience, increased ideological polarization between the parties, and close correspondence between voter attitudes, partisan identification, and voting behavior. The incidence of split-ticket voting, partisan vote swing between elections, midterm election turnout, drop-off, and roll-off from different elections within any given year decreases, as partisanship assumes more central importance to the electorate.

One view of critical elections centers upon a shift in the agenda of partisan politics, with the electorate adapting to a changed economic or social environment in a way that creates what Schattschneider calls a "new mobilization of bias"--a new issue cleavage that cuts across the old cleavage separating political parties (Schattschneider, 1960; Sundquist, 1983). When such a new issue cleavage does appear, voters are forced to reevaluate their partisan attachments, and many eventually shift to form a new majority party coalition. In the transition stages of such a realignment, third parties serve as half-way houses for partisans not quite ready to join forces with the traditional opposition (MacRae and Meldrum, 1960).

Critical election realignments may not, however, be totally or even predominantly explainable as the result of partisan conversion. Because they often are acquired during intensely politicized historical periods, and because they

are reinforced through habit and transmitted from one generation to another, established partisan attachments do not change readily. Thus, even major national crises do not necessarily lead to large scale voter conversion; and depressions, or at least severe recessions, have occurred, as in the 1870s, without precipitating national realignments. Crises may be necessary for a critical election, but they are not sufficient.

What may also be necessary is the appearance in the electorate of a large block of unaligned voters, a block of voters "ripe for realignment." Removed by age, lack of interest, or legal barriers from the lines of partisan affiliation defined by the previous realignment, such voters may be more inclined than aligned voters to see a national crisis as an indication of a failure of the established partisan order. As a consequence, such voters may be more disposed to seek new governmental solutions and to form new political coalitions. Referring specifically to young voters entering the electorate, Paul Allen Beck notes that such voters provide "the dynamic element to American electoral politics. They are the ones most likely to break the partisan continuity between past and future and to force comprehensive changes in the policy agenda" (1974, p. 205). For newly franchised or newly activated voters, third parties serve less as half-way houses as they do vehicles for the transmission of new ideas.

Secular Realignment

Like the critical elections concept, the concept of secular realignment was introduced by V.O. Key. Key viewed secular realignment as a series of processes that "operate inexorably, and almost imperceptibly, election after election," to change the agenda of politics and the coalitions formed around that agenda (1959, pp. 198-199). Thus, the result of a secular realignment is the same as that for a critical election, but it is achieved far more gradually and much less dramatically.

Secular realignments can, however, contain critical elections, and some scholars treat critical elections and secular realignment not as competing theories of change, but instead compatible and reinforcing processes. James Sundquist, for example, characterizes critical elections as "episodes in most realignments" that "do not define a type" (1983, p. 12). Viewed this way, the "critical" election of 1932 was simply the culmination of a secular realignment

towards the Democratic party, one that began with the Midwestern LaFollette Progressive Movement in 1924 and with a movement of urban Catholics attracted to the party by the 1928 Democratic presidential candidacy of Alfred E. Smith. Although not sufficient to indicate an incipient realignment of these voters, "deviations in 1928...from established patterns of partisan identification and political behavior may have increased the likelihood that a more lasting change...would occur at a latter time" (Clubb & Allen, 1969, p. 1219). Secular realignments should not therefore be analyzed as static events. Rather, again to quote Sundquist, "they necessarily have their effect on individual voters at different times--not simultaneously in any single election." (1983, p. 12)

Two Stage Realignment

Perhaps the most refined of the concepts of realignment is James Sundquist's two stage theory. Two stage theory is not incompatible with either the critical election concept or the secular concept. Indeed, Sundquist believes that part of the long-term nature of what others see as secular realignment may be characterized as a series of adjustments to a particular critical election, "aftershocks" as Sundquist states, to an electoral "earthquake."

Most of what has appeared as party realignment in the decades since the 1930s...has to be understood as simply a later phase of the realignment of the 1930s...the essential result of each change was to bring a state or locality into conformity with the alignment established in the country as a whole in the 1930s.

At least in the northern states, Sundquist adds, "a typical two-stage pattern can be described," as the barriers to change at the local level were removed, thus causing a "reconstruction of the state and local party system in the national image" (1983, pp. 240-241). The long-term process of realignment can therefore occur both before and after any particular critical election.

REALIGNMENT AS AN OUTCOME

To many the real test of whether a realignment has

occurred is not so much in the process as in the outcome. Traditionally, the method of testing a realignment outcome, whether "critical" or "secular," has been a temporal comparison of election results. Realigning "cutting points" are viewed as those years beyond which the pattern of electoral results varies significantly from the past (Key, 1955; MacRae and Meldrum, 1960; and Burnham, 1970). By this standard, no realignment of the form in evidence after 1828, 1860, 1896, or 1932 has occurred in the recent past. Instead, a period of continuing dealignment seemed to characterize the '60s and '70s.

In *Party Coalitions: Realignment and the Decline of the New Deal Party System*, John Petrocik concentrates on a social-group definition of realignment outcomes. According to this definition, "a realignment occurs when the measurable party bias of identifiable segments of the population changes in such a way that the social group profile of the parties--the party coalitions--is altered" (1981, p. 15). For Petrocik a realignment has *already* taken place, perhaps not as dramatic as realignments past, but a realignment nevertheless. The latest realignment may have gone unnoticed because it "differs from preceding ones in that it lacks (so far at least) an emerging new majority party, a reinforcement of the current majority party, or the demise of either the Republicans or Democrats." (p. 21)¹ Although the Democratic Party of the 1970s still retained the affiliation of a plurality of voters, it was a plurality of quite different social groupings than that in existence after the New Deal, relying more on the support of blacks and Northern Protestants, and far less on the support of Southern whites. In the North, he argues, the shifts were predominantly a function of cohort replacement, while in the South, conversion from one party to another (or towards independence) was most prevalent.

In their volume *Partisan Realignment: Voters, Parties, and Government in American History*, Clubb, Flanigan, and Zingale offer another view of realignment outcomes, one that "shifts the emphasis from the electorate and assigns greater weight to the performance of government and the political leadership" (1980, p.14). They also come up with a different conclusion than does Petrocik. For them, partisan realignment did not take place in the 1970s, not because opportunities weren't present, but because neither party--particularly the Republicans--could capitalize on them: