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From Realignment to Dealignment: The Changing Electoral Behavior in the United States

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This article provides a critical survey of the literature concerning the notion of realignment and examines to what an extent this theory can still account for electoral changes in present-day United States. Specifically, it checks the views of the major works on this topic against political developments and argues that, despite significant revisions, such a formulation no longer holds and a*dealignment* perspective better reflects the contemporary dynamics of the American party system.

When V.O. Key Jr. elaborated the concept of realignment in 1955, he offered a model to interpret the history of US voting behavior in terms of cycles of election outcomes. By causing a sizeable and persisting alteration in the partisan alignment of voters under the stimuli of cross-cutting issues, what he called "critical elections" determine a long-term turnabout in the existing power relationship between the two major political parties and influence voting trends for about one third of a century ("A Theory of Critical Elections").

The realignment theory placed the analysis of US politics within a new perspective. The prevailing interpretation in the mid-1950s emphasized continuity. Key himself initially shared this approach. In the first edition of *Politics, Parties, and Pressure Groups*(1942), he maintained that US electoral history could be divided into different periods on the basis of the changes in the names of the two major parties that shaped the political system. However, variations in partisan labels did not imply relevant discontinuities in the polarization of the electorate because each new party generally relied on the great bulk of the same cohorts of voters of its predecessor (263, 270, 272).

Politics, Parties, and Pressure Groups came out when the majority of the American electorate had not yet revealed its long-term Democratic allegiance of the New Deal and the post-Depression years. Only in 1948 did the extension of the Democratic hold over the presidency to one quarter of a century highlight the role of the entrenchment of voters' partisan loyalties in shaping US politics. The

mechanics of the creation and the persistence of the Roosevelt coalition paved the way for the elaboration of the realignment theory. This latter draws on the concept of the long-term durability of the new polarization of the voters after a major switch of party affiliations, as happened for the lasting cohesion of the New Deal majority (Key, "A Theory of Critical Elections" 4-11).

The Failure of a Post-New Deal Realignment

Since the New Deal party system provided Key with a model to shape the concept of realignment, it is hardly surprising that his theory has undergone increasing criticism after the demise of the electoral coalition that Franklin D. Roosevelt aggregated in the 1930s and Harry Truman revitalized in 1948 (Ladd, "Like Waiting for Godot"). The main challenge to the realignment theory has been the failure of the dynamics of the New Deal party system to represent the whole course of the twentieth-century American electoral history and to serve as a paradigm to analyze contemporary US politics.

In the mid- and late 1930s, unified government ruled American politics and the Democratic Party even succeeded in making inroads into pre-Depression Republican strongholds in state and local elections (Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System* 240-268). Key assumed that a remarkable sense of party allegiance characterized US voters because the existence of cycles of election outcomes needed consistency in voting trends. Yet the New Deal witnessed only a short-lived reversal of the rise in ticket-splitting and the decline in partisanship that had emerged at the turn of the century and have reappeared since the 1960s (Burnham, "The Changing Shape"). Such phenomena have led to divided government as the norm in contemporary American politics, have blurred voting trends, and have made it troublesome to identify a clearly recognizable post-New Deal realignment. This latter was overdue by the late 1960s according to the periodization of US electoral history through cycles of about thirty-four years (Burnham, *Critical Elections* 11-33).

The recapture of a majority in both the Senate and the House by the Democratic Party in 1972, despite Richard M. Nixon's reelection, and Jimmy Carter's 1976 successful bid for the White House impaired Kevin Phillips' claim that the 1968 presidential race marked the establishment of a conservative new majority of white fundamentalist Protestants, white southerners, and suburbanites that replaced the New Deal liberal coalition. Similarly, the failure of the GOP to succeed in congressional and state elections in the years of the Republican hold on the presidency in the 1980s challenged the thesis that Ronald Reagan's 1980 victory over Carter brought about a post-New Deal Republican realignment (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde, *Change and Continuity in the 1980 Elections* 231-34; Miller, "The Election of 1984" 303-10; Ginsberg and Shefter).

Some scholars have nonetheless tried to rescue at least the framework of the realignment theory. It has been suggested that a "split-level" realignment resulted from the consolidation of the Republican majority in presidential elections and the pro-Democratic polarization of voters in congressional races (Chubb and Peterson; Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde, *Change and Continuity in the 1984 Elections* 287). Conversely, Walter Dean Burnham has argued that the American electorate did in fact realign between 1968 and 1972. But this later realignment was "non-partisan-channeled." The enduring transformation in the present-day political system has not been a massive shift in the traditional party loyalties of the participating electorate with the ensuing emergence of a new majority party, as happened for previous realignments. Rather, the seismic change in contemporary US politics has arisen from the very demise of the partisan roots of voting behavior following the erosion of voters' sense of partisanship ("Critical Realignment" 106-07, 115-16, 125-27).

As the ratio of the participating electorate in presidential races fell from 62.8 percent in 1960 to 49.0 percent in 1996 (Doppelt and Shearer), the thesis of the disenchantment of the American people with politics has become conventional wisdom (Dionne). Yet the last two decades have witnessed a substantial gridlock in the decomposition of partisanship. The balance in political allegiance has overall remained stable (Miller, "Party Identification") and shifts have affected less changes in affiliation than the degree of loyalty to the same party (Rice and Hilton). Moreover, the ratio of the independents in party identification in 1992 (38 percent) was as high as it had been in 1978 (Flanigan and Zingale 63). It fluctuated below that level in the intervening years and reached a low of 33 percent in 1996 (Weisberg and Mockabee 47). Larry M. Bartels has even estimated that the impact of partisanship on the 1996 presidential election was almost 80 percent higher than in 1972.

In addition, party voting persisted notwithstanding the decline in partisan identification in the post-war period. The number of independent and third-party congressional candidates in a single year rose from 32 to 532 for the House and from one to 78 for the Senate between 1948 and 1996. But only one was elected in both years. Congress has never had more than two independent members since the end of World War II. It has often had none (Berg 214-215). Furthermore, most independents cast their ballots for either major party when they went to the polls. Significantly, H. Ross Perot—the most successful independent presidential candidate since 1912—received only 30 percent of the independent vote in 1992 and as little as 16 percent in 1996 (Keefe 201).

Reinstating his views on the secular collapse of partisanship in the twentieth century, Burnham has hailed the 1994 elections as a major step toward the meltdown of party politics in the United States ("Realignment Lives"). Two years later, however, even Perot chose to establish a party of his own to run for president. This decision ended Perot's alleged momentum as a viable alternative to conventional party politics and his share of the popular vote dropped from 19

percent in 1992 to 8 percent in 1996. Furthermore, Perot's Reform Party hardly scored any significant success below the presidential level except for Jesse Ventura's election to governor of Minnesota in 1998.

Election results for the 1990s also marked a setback for the original "split-level" thesis. The United States elected a Democratic president in 1992 and 1996, but a Republican Congress in 1994, 1996, and 1998. It is also unlikely that recent voting trends have precipitated a new cycle in the alleged "split-level" restructuring of the party system which, contrary to the previous one, has ushered in a period of Democratic domination of presidential contests and Republican lock on congressional races. A Democratic realignment did not occur in 1992 because the change in the partisan balance among voters was all but massive and short-term forces determined the election outcome (Pomper, "The Presidential Election" [1993] 150; Ceaser and Bush, *Upside Down* 179-80; Nelson 183). Moreover, Bill Clinton hardly enjoyed considerable support among younger voters, who are usually a key cohort to consolidate the partisan orientation of a critical election in the long period (Beck, "A Socialization Theory"). He won a mere 53 percent of the vote of individuals aged 18-29 in 1996 and even attracted fewer voters in this age range in 1992 than Michael Dukakis had done in 1988, that is 43 percent as opposed to 47 percent (Pomper "The Presidential Election" [1993] 138; [1997] 180). Receiving only 43 percent of the popular vote in 1992 and 49 percent in 1996, Clinton was a minority president. He has benefited from economic stagnation under the administration of George Bush and from economic growth during his own first term, but failed to forge a stable coalition of his own (Lacy and Grant).

Likewise, the 1994 Republican landslide reflected less a conservative mandate for Congress than Newt Gingrich's capacity of turning the significance of the mid-term elections into a vote of non-confidence for an already disgraced president. The "Contract with America" provided Republican candidates with one common platform across the country that enabled them to cash in on the prevailing anti-incumbent attitude of the electorate (Little).

Gingrich's success in nationalizing the implications of the 1994 elections also sheds light on the pitfalls of other attempts to re-elaborate the notion of realignment and attune it to the contemporary dynamics of the party system. Peter F. Nardulli has identified two post-war subnational realignments: a pro-Republican reorientation of the electorate in the deep South and a pro-Democratic shift in voting patterns in northern metropolitan areas ("The Concept of a Critical Realignment, Electoral Behavior, and Political Change"; "A Normal Vote Approach to Electoral Change: Presidential Elections, 1828-1984.") Similarly, Robert W. Speel has highlighted a steady surge in the Democratic vote in presidential contests in New England between 1952 and 1996.

Yet placing realignments in a regional context clashes with the increasing nationalization of US politics. Standard deviations in state differences in the

popular vote for the president were still significant in 1970 but dropped dramatically in the following two decades (Claggett, Flanigan, and Zingale; Beck, "Party Realignment" 263-264). The 1994 elections indicated that congressional contests, too, gave in to the tides of national politics as 94 percent of Republican voters for the House cast their ballots to express their disapproval of Clinton's policies ("Electorate Swings").

If the 1994 mid-term contests challenged the endeavors to redefine the concept of realignment in a subnational perspective, the outcome of the following elections discounted the attempts to revitalize this theory in its more traditional formulation. Grover Norquist has maintained that the electorate had realigned toward the GOP by 1994, when the conservative majority established in presidential races as early as 1968 eventually crystallized in congressional and state contests, too. Yet the vote of such an allegedly leading component of this conservative coalition as white fundamentalist Protestants has been in a state of flux and is nowadays "up for grabs" (Beck, "The Changing American Party Coalitions" 38, 44). In particular, the ratio of white born-again Christians who supported the Democratic Party in presidential contests increased from 18 percent in 1988 to 26 percent in 1996 (Pomper "The Presidential Election" [1997] 180). It even reached 31 percent or 39 percent, according to different exit polls, in the elections for the House in 1994, when Perot was not on the ballot (Ladd, "The 1994 Congressional Elections" 22). Likewise, Hispanics contributed to Republican inroads in key southern states in the 1980s but defected to Clinton in the 1990s to such an extent that Bob Dole received only 20 percent of their votes in 1996 (Reichley 26).

The 1994 Republican majority itself has been unstable. Female turnout was lower in 1994 than in 1992 (Wilcox 14). But, following its increase in 1996, women's disproportionate Democratic vote contributed to return Clinton to the White House (Frankovic). The president's 1996 reelection demonstrates voters' early disenchantment with Gingrich's conservatism as well (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde, *Change and Continuity in the 1996 and 1998 Elections*). Contrary to Norquist's prediction, the "Contract with America" opened no Republican era. In 1994 support for the Democratic Party underwent a significant decline over the previous mid-term elections among such pivotal cohorts of the New Deal coalitions as Catholics, Jews, southern whites, and union members. But the Democratic identification of these groups, except for union members, went back to pre-1994 levels in 1996 (Stanley and Niemi).

Clinton's victory resulted primarily from voters' reaction to the new Republican leadership in Congress and would have been unlikely if the GOP had not taken over both the House and the Senate two years earlier (Ceaser and Bush, *Losing to Win*). That the triumph of the Republican Party in 1994 paved the way for Dole's defeat in 1996 also helps dismiss the hypothesis that the 1994 political earthquake

marked a Republican realignment with the outcome of presidential elections temporarily lagging behind (Tuchfarber et al.).

The partisan tone of the Republican impeachment inquiry into Clinton further alienated moderates and independent swingers from the GOP in 1998 (Abramowitz). Mid-term elections always harmed the incumbent president's party after 1934. But, in 1998, the Republican Party failed to profit from Clinton's impeachment proceedings and suffered a net loss of five seats in the House, although it retained a majority in Congress (Busch).

Dealignment and Retrospective Voting

In the face of the persisting volatility of voters' partisan cleavages, a dealignment perspective has superseded the realignment theory as a more viable model to account for recent developments in US politics (Ladd, "The Brittle Mandate;" Carmines, McIver, and Stimson; Lawrence). The realignment model emphasizes the links that associate party choices in different elections. In this view, not even critical elections are an exception. Although they disrupt previous voting patterns by definition, they also establish new and enduring trends in party preferences at the polls because the realignment is supposed to affect the outcome of a number of succeeding elections. Conversely, the flux of votes between the two major parties is the main feature of dealignment and the evaluation of officeholders' performances replaces party allegiances as the key criterion by which voters cast their ballots (Fiorina;Monardi; Svoboda).

In the era of candidate-centered campaigns, presidential contests have become a sort of referendum on the public record of the incumbent federal administration. This phenomenon determines the highly transitory polarization of the party cleavage that has characterized the years after the demise of the New Deal party system because each election is insulated from any previous and following vote (Ladd, "The Brittle Mandate" 24-25; Wattenberg 130-155). Thus, even the landslide reelection of an incumbent or the overthrow of the dominant party in a presidential contest reflected short-term evaluations of performances instead of a mandate for either continuity or change based on long-term ideological commitments and policy preferences (Ladd, "On Mandates;" Dahl 363-365; Wattenberg 92-129). Economic conditions have become so central to voters' choices that nowadays the state of the economy is the main indicator of election outcomes (Erickson).

The idea of retrospective voting was hardly new to Key himself. Actually, he resorted to it to disprove possible deterministic interpretations of voting behavior resulting from the socio-psycological analyses of the Michigan School. According to this latter approach, individuals develop their partisan identifications early in

life, interacting with family members and their social environment. Voters subsequently strengthen such party loyalties over the years and end up casting their ballots with scant regard to issues (Campbell et al.). Conversely, Key argued that voters base their choices on the rational appraisal of public policy, governmental performance, and executive personality. Specifically, he maintained that the average voter "judges retrospectively; it commands prospectively only insofar as it expresses either approval or disapproval of that which has happened before" (*The Responsible Electorate* 7, 61).

While confuting the automaton vision of the voter of the Michigan School, Key also corrected similar implications of his own realignment theory. The concept of critical elections suggests a discontinuous and intermittent operating of people's sovereignty. Eligible voters can always exercise a potential influence upon policy-making at the polls. Yet they exert their power to the hilt solely when they first enter the active electorate and at times of economic, social or political crisis, when they support a party they did not identify with in earlier elections. After casting their first ballot or shifting their previous partisan allegiance, most voters are supposed to retain their new affiliation somewhat passively until another major crisis arises. As a result, the stability in loyalty to either party regardless of ever-changing political circumstances, which underlies the idea of a long-term persistence of voters' new polarization after a critical election, limits the role of the electorate between periods of realignment.

Aware of these problems, Key acknowledged that, whenever the same party retained power, changeful coalitions, rather than stable majorities, were likely to keep its candidates in office. In this view, voters do not necessarily cast their ballots repetitively to let the same party win one election after the other. Conversely, the enduring majority party gains new supporters among its former opponents and turns old adherents into foes because of voters' ever-changing responses to the record of the incumbent administration over the years (*The Responsible Electorate* 16-18, 30, 52).

Although Key introduced the concept of retrospective voting to argue for the rationality of the electorate, the effectiveness of this latter determinant of the vote seems in jeopardy against the backdrop of the volatility of the political controversies that characterize the current dealignment. Short-term emotional reactions, rather than the cognition of policies, have increasingly influenced the electorate in presidential contests (Goren). While knowledgeable voters are more likely to cast their ballots on the basis of issues, this cohort of the participating electorate has also been shrinking in the face of the spreading political apathy of the American people (Moon).

However, as Key showed, retrospective voting and the realignment synthesis are not in conflict. Jerome M. Clubb, William H. Flanigan, and Nancy H. Zingale have interrelated both interpretations. In their opinion, two stages are essential for a

realignment to occur. After a critical election, the winning party needs to consolidate the new partisan lineup. The incoming administration, therefore, has to enact measures capable of changing the protest votes against the former majority party into a stable following for the new governing party by effectively tackling the crisis that brought about the electoral upheaval. David W. Brady has similarly argued that Congress operates to reinforce the new distribution of the popular vote after a critical election. Thus, the task of legislators is to pass acts that strengthen the polarization of the electorate after voters cause the congressional turnover that is necessary to generate the policy changes associated with realignments. According to Patricia A. Hurley, too, it is voters' satisfaction with the policies of the new government which turns short-lived deviations in electoral trends into realignments. Indeed, the favorable response of the emerging majority party to constituents' signals for change characterized the New Deal realignment (Sinclair).

Besides providing the institutional dimension that lacked in Key's early formulation, these interpretations offer additional insights into the failure of the emergence of a contemporary realignment. A legislative gridlock has prevailed in the years of divided government since the final demise of the New Deal party system in the late 1960s. As James L. Sundquist has remarked, "in the American form of coalition government, if the president sends a proposal to Capitol Hill or takes a foreign policy stand, the opposition controlled house or houses of Congress—unless they are overwhelmed by the president's popularity and standing in the country—simply *must* reject it" ("Needed" 630). Consequently, both Republican presidents in the 1970s and 1980s and Clinton in the 1990s were unable to consolidate their own electoral following through major legislative achievements. Congress voted 82 percent of the time in accordance with Reagan while the GOP controlled the Senate in 1981. But Reagan's success rate fell below 50 percent after the Democrats recaptured the Senate. Clinton's legislative success even plunged to 36 percent following the 1994 Democratic debacle (Keefe 249251). Pivotal measures such as the 1996 welfare reform were enacted only by bipartisanship, which blurred the merits and the demerits of each party in the eyes of voters (Mink 2-5). For instance, supporters of the two-term limit on welfare almost split between Clinton and Dole in 1996. The former received 48.6 percent of their votes, the latter 44.1 percent (Weisberg and Mockabee 59).

Conclusion

The awareness that the realignment theory is no longer a viable formulation to explain present-day American politics does not necessarily mean that such a concept will also be useless for understanding future developments of the US party system. Still prospective voting dynamics, too, corroborate the intellectual shift from the realignment to the dealignment in the analysis of US elections. Indeed, it is unlikely that a realignment will occur soon as Clinton's presidency has failed to restore an era of unified government (Shafer). Actually, while a pivotal cohort of

voters usually split their tickets out of the persuasion that partisan balance in power contributes to good government (Tarrance and De Vires), early polls for the 2000 elections have predicted the persistence of divided government, this time under a Republican president and a Democratic Congress as another example of the short-term volatility of party cleavages at the polls (Clymer and Elder). However, regardless of the actual outcome of the 2000 contests, the lack of a consistent voting trend in recent years points to the continuation of a dealigning process.

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