

Party Realignments in America since World War II

An Outline

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A. New Deal alignment after WWII

1. Democrats

a. Social composition

- 1) Urban
- 2) Working-class & Unions
- 3) Ethnic/immigrant (pre-1920 groups)
- 4) Catholic
- 5) Jewish
- 6) Some attraction of Blacks

b. Southern conservative, segregationist (unchanged since Reconstruction)

- 1) However much the party might have wanted to promote black rights, the Southern component of the party made this difficult or impossible

c. Cold War Internationalist

- 1) Non-isolationist, esp in contrast to trad GOP isolationism
- 2) Anti-communist, esp in response to strong GOP anti-communism

d. New Deal (& after) Welfare State provisions, esp

- 1) Social Security, Unemployment Insurance, & various other benefits/entitlements to the middle- & working class & poor
- 2) Mild Govt intervention in the economy

2. Republicans

a. Social composition

- 1) Small-town & (sometimes) rural

- 2) White Anglo-Saxon Protestant
 - 3) Middle class
 - 4) "Main Street" & "Wall Street"
- b. Non-Southern
 - c. Anti-Communist
 - 1) Remaining struggle over Isolationism vs. Internationalism
 - d. Mainly free-market, though some acceptance of post-New Deal Welfare State
3. This alignment produced
- a. Strong Democratic Congressional majorities, with a few exceptions
 - b. Strong Democratic party ID majorities
 - c. An underlying Democratic Presidential majority, which the Republicans were effectively able to challenge when:
 - 1) Truman was weak at the wrong time of an election cycle
 - 2) They nominated a non-partisan war hero, Eisenhower

B. The 1960s

- 1. By the early 60s, the New Deal alignment had begun to weaken in some respects
 - a. Republicans (esp. Eisenhower, Nixon, Rockefeller) had accepted, or at least ceased contesting, many of the entitlement programs - esp. for the middle class, but also for the poor
 - b. After Brown vs. the Board of Education, Eisenhower began tentatively to support black civil rights, while the Democrats still hung back because of their Southern wing
 - c. Democrats became increasingly cold-war anti-communist, in part as a response to the Republicans
- 2. During the 1960-64 Presidential term, the Democrats moved to strong support of the Civil Rights movement
 - a. This was still somewhat tentative under Kennedy, but after his assassination, Johnson was key in pushing the civil rights legislation through Congress

- b. This won them full support from African Americans, who moved from plurality support for the Dems to almost unanimous support
 - c. It began to undermine white Southern support, beginning with Presidential elections, and eventually continuing through Congressional, Gubernatorial, state and local politics
 - 1) The early stages of this realignment can perhaps be attributed to racial politics, but the later stages perhaps not
3. Also, under Kennedy-Johnson, the U.S. became much more heavily involved in the Vietnam War, and this began to produce tensions within the Democratic Party on foreign policy, and led to the emergence of an anti-war New Left
- a. The anti-Cold War old left was now reinforced by new generations of anti-War New Left, who also had a personal stake because of the draft
 - b. The New Left was also inspired by the Civil Rights movement
4. In the course of the 60s, the New Left also became a Counter-Culture: generally anti-authoritarian, anti-Establishment, and anti-traditional morality.
- a. It was predicated on affluence, and centered on the young, white, non-Southern well-educated middle class
 - b. It stressed individual self-fulfillment, sexual freedom, greater gender equality, freedom of expression, drug experimentation, non-traditional spiritualism, non-traditional family and community arrangements.
 - c. It rejected traditional religious, family, and community authority.
 - d. It was comparatively indifferent to the Old Left's focus on working-class and labor issues.
5. The impact of these developments was not yet strongly felt in the 1964 elections, but '64 saw the beginnings of certain political patterns that eventually became extremely important.
- a. After the Civil Rights legislation, Johnson's landslide was possible only because he was a Southerner himself.
 - 1) The Civil Rights legislation initiated the breakup of the Southern Democratic alignment, and no non-Southern Democratic presidential

candidate since Kennedy has done well in the South - and therefore in the electoral college.

- 2) Johnson was also probably the last Democratic Presidential candidate who could draw fully on the old New Deal non-Southern urban working-class support. After '64, this constituency began to fragment.
- b. Johnson also did well because Goldwater rejected the moderate Republican accommodation of the New Deal welfare state and of the Democrats' lukewarm support for Cold War anti-communism. Goldwater lost because he was seen as too extreme. However, he planted two seeds that came to fruition under Reagan:
- 1) A stress on libertarian free-market economics and principled opposition to welfare state measures
 - 2) A reinvigorated Cold-War anti-communism that was not a return to older Republican isolationism
 - 3) He did not take a strong anti-Civil Rights stand, nor did he stress social and cultural conservatism. His legacy on these issues was less pronounced.
6. The 1968 and 1972 elections saw the full impact of the issues of Race, the Vietnam War, and counterculture. A major anti-liberal reaction began to set in, first picked up by George Wallace, and then absorbed by Nixon.
- a. The segregationist South reacted against civil rights legislation, and first supported a segregationist Democrat like Wallace. But Wallace broadened his appeal by also stressing -
- 1) Opposition to Federal programs and government bureaucracy
 - 2) Patriotic support for the American war effort in Vietnam
 - 3) Opposition to countercultural values and New Left elitism
- b. Wallace's package began to draw broader support than just Southern segregationists:
- 1) The non-Southern working class, especially in the industrial Midwest and North Atlantic states
 - 2) Traditional moralists, now not just conservative Protestants, but increasingly, conservative Catholics, too.

3) Cold-War anti-communist patriotic non-isolationists.

- c. Wallace helped split the Democratic vote in 1968, but Nixon adopted much of his position, though with reduced intensity. All these factors, including Nixon's "Southern Strategy," helped put an end to the long New Deal Democratic dominance of the Presidency.
- d. Out of office after 1968, the New Left's influence grew in the Democratic Party, and it captured the nomination in 1972. Nixon was able to reinforce the support of the South and anti-New Left constituencies, retain traditional conservative support, and simultaneously move to the center - and won in a landslide.
- e. The scandals of Watergate interrupted this Republican dominance of Presidential elections, but that proved temporary.

C. Political disaffection, beginning in the 1960s.

- 1. In the mid-1960s, political disaffection and alienation began to set in, accompanied by declining electoral turnout. This trend has fluctuated a few times, but has never since been decisively reversed.
- 2. Disaffection was first expressed by the 60s protest movements, especially the Civil Rights and New Left movement. However, even as they expressed disaffection, they also captured the Democratic Party.
- 3. Disaffection was then expressed by the reaction against these movements under Wallace and Nixon.
- 4. Spurred on by the tenor of these protest movements, disaffection was increasingly directed against all established social and political institutions, and parties. And this cynicism was tremendously reinforced by the scandals of Watergate.
- 5. More generally, analysts speak of a period of political de-alignment, rather than realignment during this time.
 - a. The improbable but successful New Deal coalition of Northern liberals and minorities with Southern conservatives began to break apart.
 - b. But more than this, voters stopped taking cues from their own political leadership to the extent that they used to.

- 1) Traditional church, union, ethnic and communal leaders began to lose influence over their members. More voters began to make their choices as individuals, without leadership cues.
 - a) African Americans are a partial exception to this rule. Black leaders retain more influence than in most other social groups, but even they have trouble leading the poorest and most alienated blacks.
- c. Voting became increasingly influenced, not by traditional leaders and alignments, but by new single-issue social movements, by candidates' personalities, and by scandals and corruption.
 - 1) Even the influence of social movements began to wane, as they moved to direct mail and television rather than social mobilization to attract support. The result was even less influence of organization and even more social and political privatization.
6. As the parties lost their ability to integrate constituencies in broad, stable coalitions, all groups began to feel more neglected and disadvantaged. Political disaffection with parties and government grew.
7. Again, this disaffection was not simply due to unpopular policies. A great number of individual policies were actually very popular. Nor was it simply due to the unpopularity of individual politicians - on the contrary, surveys often show strong respondent support for their own representatives. Rather, disaffection was due to the decreased integrative capacity of parties and leaders, and government and social institutions.
8. Some politicians, notably Reagan and Clinton, have been able to reduce this disaffection temporarily, but not reverse the major trend.

D. The 1970s - 1980s.

1. After Watergate, the Democrats made large gains in the 1974 congressional elections, and revived the New Deal coalition sufficiently to elect Jimmy Carter, a Southerner, in 1976. But in terms of Presidential politics, this was a temporary aberration.
2. Several important socioeconomic developments began to change the terms of politics.

- a. The long post WWII economic expansion slowed tremendously with the oil shocks, recessions, inflation, and deficits of the 70s and 80s. People spoke of fiscal crises and crises of governability.
- b. At the same time, de-industrialization gained speed. Manufacturing moved increasingly offshore, and despite a weaker economy, a post-industrial economy and society grew.
- c. The economic squeeze and movement to service economy was accompanied by a greater feminization of the workforce. And as women moved increasingly into the labor force, the women's movement gained force.
 - 1) Although women's pay has trended toward equality, it was substantially less than men's, especially early in this period.
 - 2) The women's movement also put questions of divorce, abortion, and single-parenthood more squarely into the public debate.
- d. Social conservatives began to counter-mobilize on the social questions raised by the women's movement, and Christian fundamentalism became a major political force.
- e. Again, movement organization on both the left and the right was more privatized and less socially mobilized, using direct mail and media, than the civil rights and anti-war movements had been.
- f. Overt racism became less politically relevant.
 - 1) On one hand, racial attitudes in the South began converging with the rest of the nation. On the other hand, issues moved from denial of civil rights and segregation to questions of busing and affirmative action - in all parts of the country.
 - 2) African Americans remained firmly in the Democratic column.
 - 3) Social conservatives reduced their emphasis on racial questions and turned instead to questions of traditional values, family, sexuality, and religion. The distance from the social conservatism of George Wallace to that of Ronald Reagan highlights this change.
- g. The Cold War reached a turning point with American withdrawal from Vietnam; and it ended with the collapse of the Soviet empire, having been given a big push by Reagan's defense spending.

3. The political consequences of these socioeconomic changes were these:
 - a. The South continued to move more firmly into the Republican camp, no longer so much because of racism, but because of Christian conservatism, conservative social values, and Cold War patriotism.
 - b. The organized working class continued to lose power and influence. Unionization declined in the weak economy and with de-industrialization. More families moved into white-collar occupations and thus, further from old New Deal partisan loyalties. Reagan in particular made great inroads into the working-class electorate, especially when they were socially conservative. Bush had less success, but aimed at a similar goal.
 - 1) The unions have subsequently regained some of their political influence - but more as a pressure group than as a mass-based organization.
 - c. A gender gap began to open up, not just in America, but in most western democracies, based partly on economic inequality, partly on social issues, and partly over defense issues. More on this later.
 - d. These changes tended to work to the Republicans' advantage, not only in Presidential politics, but increasingly, in the Senate, and eventually in the House, too. However, there were certain consequences and limits of Reagan's and Bush's policies.
 - 1) Reagan and Bush both gave strong symbolic lip-service to the social issues, but refrained from pushing much policy - except, to some extent, in court appointments.
 - 2) They greatly increased defense spending, but without reducing social spending much. They also oversaw important tax reductions. The result was victory in the Cold War, and a huge increase in government deficits.
 - 3) The Republicans - and Thatcher in Britain - also put tremendous emphasis on marketization. Government services were privatized, markets were encouraged, and unions discouraged. This trend later gained force with the collapse of Communism.
 - e. Republican policy had several important consequences
 - 1) It ended the Cold War. Republican credit for this was short-lived because it also removed one of their most effective issues: anti-communism.

- a) Center-right parties all over the world actually lost influence because of this victory, and some parties like the Italian Christian Democrats actually went out of existence, when voters were no longer willing to overlook corruption for the sake of anti-communism.
 - b) Center-left parties all over the world had to scramble in the 90s to develop “third ways.” In the U.S., this would open opportunities for “New Democrats” like Clinton. By the mid-90s, “third way” center-left parties governed most western democracies.
- 2) It greatly increased government deficits, and opened a new axis of economic debate.
- a) Reagan’s Republicans had hoped to use tax cuts to force reductions in government spending. Yet while voters were opposed to “big government” in the abstract, they strongly supported almost every government program. On concrete issue after concrete issue, Republicans found very little support for spending reductions, and the deficit resulted.
 - b) Republicans were now divided on policy. On one side were economic populists, who wanted tax reduction, fewer government services, and more marketization. And on the other side were fiscal conservatives, who wanted to balance the budget.
 - c) This policy split reflected strains within the Republican coalition. Reagan’s Republican party had put together a “big tent,” which as Bill Schneider put it, was composed of three parts: Wall Street, Main Street, and Easy Street. Wall Street and Main Street were the traditional Republican constituents, and they leaned toward fiscal conservatism. Easy Streeters were the Reagan Democrats, and they were the economic populists.
 - d) The Democrats were initially left out of this debate. Republican tax reductions had stolen one of their traditionally popular New Deal strategies - pump-priming - and along with it, part of their appeal to white working-class voters.
 - e) Deficits did, however, open the way for Ross Perot’s third-party insurgency, focused on fiscal responsibility. Perot mainly harmed the Republicans, because he drew more from fiscal conservatives than Reagan Democrats.

- 3) Finally, social conservatism began to reach its political limits.
 - a) Neither Reagan nor Bush ever delivered as much policy as lip service to the social conservatives. Reagan was personally so popular among social conservatives that they tended to forgive him for it, but Bush was always suspected of not being “one of us.”
 - b) As they failed to get much substance for their support, Christian conservatives, especially, began to re-think their commitment to political activity. (Some observers note that Evangelicals have historically tended to avoid party politics, and that the 1970s and 1980s were an aberration in this respect.) Also, after fielding two secular Northerners in the 80s (Mondale and Dukakis), the Democrats returned to Southern candidates in the 90s (Clinton, Gore), who could cut into Christian conservative support. As a result, Christian conservatives became less of an active force in favor of the Republicans.

E. Institutional factors that promoted polarization from the 1960s to the 1980s.

1. Some observers have speculated that the American public became more polarized from the 1960s to the 1980s, and that this accounted for polarization of the parties.
2. However, studies of public opinion, like Paul Dimaggio’s AJS article, have indicated that there was not substantial polarization of public opinion, though political partisans polarized to some extent.
3. One reason for partisan polarization was the party primaries. Candidates had to appeal especially to activists, who voted more heavily in low-turnout primaries. This benefitted more extremist challengers through this period.
4. Another reason was the redistricting of Congressional seats in the wake of Civil Rights legislation.
 - a. As congressional districts were made more uniform in terms of race and class, the elected Representatives could take more extreme positions because they did not have to form coalitions of diverse constituencies.
 - b. Thus, House Representatives became more polarized than Senators or Governors, who had to be elected from more diverse state-wide

constituencies, or than Presidential candidates, who had to put together national coalitions.

5. One consequence of partisan polarization was that now, not only “movement” voters, but even centrist voters began to feel disaffected.
 - a. In social terms, the parties were becoming defined by their more socially extreme constituencies. For the Democrats, these were activist blacks, feminists, environmentalists, gays and lesbians, and protectionists within the labor movement. For Republicans, these were Christian conservatives, anti-abortionists, and anti-government, anti-tax populists.
 - b. Thus, socially-centrist voters became as alienated as social movement voters had earlier felt. This eventually aided the Perot candidacy; and it helped Clinton, and later, George W. Bush move their parties back toward the center. The parties began increasingly to battle for the “Angry White Men,” “Soccer Moms,” and similar constituencies, who had once formed the center of American politics.
 - c. Of course, with a nation as diverse as the United States, and with an electoral system not based on proportional representation, it is always difficult to hold together coalitions within just two parties. Some groups will almost inevitably feel excluded. What is unusual is that by the end of the 1980s, it was the centrist constituencies who felt excluded.
6. Ultimately, party polarization changed the whole dynamic of party primaries and third party insurgencies. Earlier in this period, challengers to the party establishment generally came from the extremes. Examples include Goldwater, George Wallace, Bobby Kennedy, McCarthy, McGovern, and Reagan. By the end of this period - and extending up to the present - insurgents came from the angry center. Perot is the biggest example, but others include John Anderson, Clinton, McCain, and Bradley. In fact, in this year’s primaries, the party-establishment candidates had to move to the outside to beat centrist insurgents.

F. The 1990s.

1. In the 90s, the Democrats under Clinton clawed their way back toward the center, and the Republicans initially continued their movement to the populist, socially conservative right, but then found themselves overextended and forced to rethink their position.
2. In 1992, George Bush was punished by economic populists for going back on his “no new taxes” pledge; and he wasn’t able to hold the fiscal conservatives in

line against the Perot insurgency. He got very little help from the Western victory in the Cold War. The Gulf War boost was very short-lived.

3. At the same time, Bill Clinton signaled that he intended to pursue a fiscally conservative policy, and reign in the influence of new left “movement” politics, especially those who were farthest out in the black, counter-cultural, and women’s movements. He no longer had a Cold War flank to protect.
 - a. After a political false start on a National Health Insurance policy, Clinton in office drew back from ambitious new social policies, and eventually even scaled back welfare benefits.
 - b. He gave Robert Rubin and Alan Greenspan the lead on fiscal responsibility. This resulted in an enormous economic expansion, which helped paper over any tensions that might have emerged within the Democratic coalition from a weak economy.
 - c. As a result of the expansion, fueled by the “New Economy,” Clinton was also able to push through more market policies and promote international open markets against economic populists in his own party like Gephardt, and outside the party, like Buchanan.
 - d. Deficits disappeared, and the issue was removed from the political agenda - at least for the time being.
 - e. Clinton and the Democrats could now focus on maintaining and protecting social programs like social security, and pursue an incremental approach on health care, education, and anti-poverty programs.
4. After benefitting from Clinton’s initial political missteps on a national health insurance and possibly gays in the military, the Republicans took control of the House for the first time in decades with their Contract With America in 1994.
 - a. However, they may have benefitted as much from low Democratic turnout as from real voter change.
 - b. The Republicans overestimated the popularity of their programs and underestimated Clinton’s political skills. They overextended themselves, lost showdowns, and were punished at the polls in 1996 and even 1998.
 - c. Their impeachment campaign against Clinton struck very little popular resonance, and may even have produced a backlash against Republican moralistic “extremism.” The public didn’t approve of Clinton’s private actions,

but felt it wasn't an abuse of office. He was also shielded by a strong economy and high job-approval ratings - and, like Reagan, by his charm.

5. Coming into the 2000 election, George W. Bush signaled his intention - parallel to Clinton's in 1992 - to move his party back toward the center, with his "compassionate conservatism."
 - a. He hopes to downplay extreme social conservatism, without losing social conservative voters. Thus, he says as little as possible about issues like abortion or prayer in schools.
 - b. He hopes to steal, or at least cut into, some of the Democrats issues - as Clinton earlier stole the traditionally Republican issue of fiscal conservatism. Thus, Bush speaks of educational reform, and providing aid to the poor through "faith-based institutions."
 - c. He makes gestures toward minority voters.
 - 1) In the case of Hispanics, he actually hopes that this group may come into play. He has had success in wooing Hispanics in Texas, as has his brother Jeb in Florida. He appeals to middle-class Hispanics on economic policy, of course, but he also appeals on the basis of family and religious values, and cultural respect.
 - 2) He would also like to make inroads with Asians, along similar lines.
 - 3) He doesn't have much immediate hope of winning over many African Americans, though he hopes the Republicans can eventually attract some support in the future - again, along the same lines.
 - 4) One of the biggest reasons for his outreach to minorities is to signal that he is socially tolerant, especially to middle class women - Soccer Moms. This is a low-cost way of showing social moderation, without driving off social conservatives by making concessions on anti-abortionism or religious fundamentalism.
 - d. Bush had to divert his centrist drive to defeat McCain, the centrist challenger in the primaries, but he seems back on track, without having tarred himself too badly as an extremist Republican.

G. Beyond 2000.

1. Thus, both parties moved to certain extremes in the 1960s - 1980s period, as the New Deal alignments faded, in order to capture new constituencies.
2. As these realignments reached certain limits, and in a post-Cold War period of prosperity - with the really hard issues off the agenda for the moment - the parties are moving back toward the center to try to consolidate their re-constituted coalitions. Competition has returned to the sociological center, as well, as the parties attempt to capture/recapture cross-pressured middle-class white men and women voters, without alienating their more extreme true believers.
3. These centrist battlegrounds have opened at least by the 1990s -
 - a. Gender. Historically, the gender gap that opened in the 1970s can be caricaturized as cowboys versus moms.
 - 1) White middle-class men (the cowboys) were attracted to individualist and macho themes like a strong defense, gun rights, law and order, lower taxes, and smaller government.
 - 2) White middle-class women (the moms) were attracted to “nurturance” issues like education and health care (because they were more often care-givers for young or old family members), maintaining government programs (because they were less economically secure), and perhaps also abortion rights and gun control - though the latter two divide the genders less than is sometimes thought.
 - 3) Lake and Goeas have noted that a “marriage gap” has begun to open up in the same realm as the gender gap.
 - b. Minorities and new immigrants.
 - 1) Most Hispanics favor the Democrats, while Asians are more evenly divided, but both groups’ loyalties are increasingly in play, and the Republicans are increasingly interested in them.
 - a) Republicans can appeal to them on economics as they enter the middle class, and on traditional family and religious values.
 - b) Of course Hispanics and Asians are also divided into many nationality groups, whose party preferences vary widely.

- 2) Republicans also keep a watchful eye on African Americans, who are still almost monolithically Democratic, but who may eventually begin to divide their vote for the same reasons as the other minorities do now.
 - 3) Republicans can also signal their tolerance to white middle-class women by appealing to minorities.
- c. The South. The Democrats have begun to win back some of their losses in the South. The situation has changed as racism moderates - or at least becomes less regionalized - as the parties move back toward the center, as the Southern economy booms and non-Southerners move in, and with the end of the Cold War. Pragmatic Democrats have made serious inroads on Republican ideologues, especially when they run on modernization, education, and health care. The South is becoming stably competitive for perhaps the first time since Reconstruction.
- d. Social Class. Class voting has declined in all western democracies since WWII, and most of all in the U.S. It may rise again with future economic downturns, but it is unlikely to regain its old strength or its old form, as industrialism declines as a proportion of the American economy.
- e. Social Conservatives, especially Christian conservatives. Since Nixon, social conservatives have generally supported Republicans, but this support has been tenuous for several reasons.
- 1) Republicans can easily give lip-service to traditional values, but it is dangerous for them to enact extreme policies like abortion restrictions or prayer in school, because they may lose centrist support. Thus, social conservatives have become more cynical about the Republicans and have lost some of their political fervor. And if Republicans like Reagan can offer them lip service, Southern Democrats, especially, can also sometimes talk their talk.
 - 2) Social conservatives are often lower middle class or below, and are thus open to appeals by Democrats on economic issues. Pragmatic Democrats can often successfully appeal to them by offering to protect or reinforce popular government programs like social security, education, or health care.