
REALIGNMENT

The Theory That Changed

the Way We Think

about American Politics

THEODORE ROSENOF

Realignment

This Page Intentionally Left Blank

Realignment

**The Theory That Changed the Way
We Think About American Politics**

Theodore Rosenof

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.
Lanham • Boulder • New York • Oxford

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.

A Member of the Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706
www.rowmanlittlefield.com

PO Box 317
Oxford
OX2 9RU, UK

Copyright © 2003 by Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rosenof, Theodore.

Realignment: the theory that changed the way we think about American politics / Theodore Rosenof.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7425-3104-X (hardcover: alk. paper) — ISBN 0-7425-3105-8

(pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Voting—United States. 2. Elections—United States. 3. Political science—United States. I. Title.

JK1967 .R66 2003

324.973'001—dc21

2002153094

Printed in the United States of America

∞™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

To Josephine Schmitt Rosenof
To the memory of Max Rosenof
To the memory of Hugh Francis Byrnes

This Page Intentionally Left Blank

Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	xi
1 The Study of Behavior	1
2 Discerning Patterns	7
3 Evaluators of Transition	15
4 The Breakthrough of Samuel Lubell	31
5 The Advent of V. O. Key	45
6 Origins of the Michigan School	63
7 The Crystallization of Theory	73
8 Assessing Coalitions	85
9 Weighing Upheaval	95
10 Prophets of Transformation	113
11 The Onset of Revision	125
12 Grappling with Incongruity	133
13 Divergent Scenarios	147
14 Realignment in Retrospect	155

Coda: The Future of Realignment Theory	163
Notes	169
Index	225
About the Author	231

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank the Mercy College Faculty Development Committee for funding major expenses, the Committee on Personnel, Promotion, and Tenure for its approval of a semester sabbatical leave, and my division chair, Ann Grow, for counsel and support. Interlibrary loan specialists Heather Blenkinsopp and Madge Muckenhaupt provided indispensable assistance in obtaining books and articles. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. graciously granted permission to research his father's papers at Harvard's Pusey Library. The Schlesinger, Arthur N. Holcombe, and the portion of the V. O. Key Papers in the Pusey Library are cited courtesy of the Harvard University Archives. The Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, and James Pollock Papers in the Bentley Historical Library are cited with the permission of the University of Michigan Library. I am grateful to the University of Chicago's Regenstein Library archival staff for allowing me to research the newly accessed Harold F. Gosnell Papers, to the archival staff at the University of Connecticut's Dodd Research Center for granting me access to the unprocessed Samuel Lubell Papers, and to the archival staff of Wesleyan University's Olin Library for making available the newly opened E. E. Schattschneider Papers. (I note that the Schattschneider Papers were reorganized following my research and hence my references are to an earlier format.) A grant from the John F. Kennedy Library Foundation facilitated research in the V. O. Key collection at the John F. Kennedy Library; Alan Lawson kindly wrote to the Foundation on my behalf. The archival staff of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, as always, aided me efficiently and courteously. I am grateful to history editor Mary Carpenter, editorial assistant Laura Roberts, production editor Lori Pierelli, and the editorial committee of Rowman & Littlefield for considering, accepting, and preparing

my manuscript for publication and to two anonymous readers for assessments and helpful suggestions. My wife Pat, son Chuck, and daughter Liza provided essential tolerance and support. Pat further assisted during research in the V. O. Key collection at the Pusey Library, and Liza came to my rescue in all matters relating to computer function and malfunction.

Introduction

When political science emerged as an academic discipline in the late nineteenth century, its emphasis was on the formal institutions, structures, and organizations of government and politics. Hence, early political scientists wrote about the nature and framework of the American constitutional system of government, dwelling on the factual makeup of the different branches of government and their constitutional relationships with one another. In American politics, the key institution was the political party, and stress was likewise placed on its organizational makeup and (a subject of much attention a century ago) the central role of “bosses” and the “spoils system” in the party structure. Beginning in the 1920s, this traditional institutional emphasis underwent modification. To be sure, the nature of institutions remained a basic and integral part of the study of American government and politics. But a clear shift in emphasis was underway, and what became known as the “behavioral” approach to government and politics emerged. In the realm of politics this new emphasis focused on electoral patterns and voting behavior. This approach evidenced a growing concern with process and movement, stressed dynamics over stasis, relied upon quantifiably verifiable generalizations, and in time culminated in realignment theory.

Further, insofar as elections were traditionally viewed as discrete events, outcomes were seen to pivot on matters of the moment: campaigns, issues, personalities, chance remarks. Thus, it was said that the infelicitous observation of a supporter cost Republican candidate James G. Blaine the presidency in the exceedingly close contest of 1884 and that a perceived snub did in Grand Old Party (GOP) nominee Charles Evans Hughes in his narrow loss of 1916. In more recent decades, note the brouhaha over Richard Nixon’s physical appearance in his first televised TV debate with John F. Kennedy in 1960 or Gerald Ford’s premature “liberation” of Poland from Soviet control in a

1976 debate with Jimmy Carter. And one need look only to 2000 for additional instances: Al Gore's audible sighs in the first debate with George W. Bush and the butterfly design of the ballot in a Florida county, which misled enough voters to tip the balance for the nation. In a narrowly decided contest virtually anything could be said to have made the difference. The point to make about realignment theory in this regard is not that it eschews such ephemeral matters, but that it relates them to a larger context.

What, for example, made the elections of 1960, 1976, or 2000 so close that pancake makeup, a slip of the tongue, or a rolling of the eyes could have been deemed decisive? Why were other elections runaways, so that nothing said or done over the course of a campaign would have made a significant difference? Realignment theory endeavors to provide a coherent answer by placing immediate events in long-term perspective. To be sure, historical connections were not ignored prior to the emergence of realignment theory in the mid-twentieth century. An awareness of such connections forms the background of its development. But the new theory provided a more systematic and usable historical perspective than the looser observations evinced earlier. It stressed the long-term electoral underpinnings of parties; it held that individual elections had to be understood, in part, as episodes along a historical continuum; and, very importantly, it posited that certain "critical" contests could usher in partisan dominance for decades to come. Henceforth, strategists and analysts would plot not only to win or understand the immediate election, but also to shape or project the course of power and influence well into the future.

The history of realignment theory simultaneously deals with the history of the analysis of electoral change. Indeed, the two subjects are wholly intertwined, with the behavioral tools of analysis dating to the 1920s providing the means through which realignment theory was fashioned in the wake of the election of 1948. Realignment theory then dominated the analysis of change into the 1970s and has been widely influential (as well as increasingly criticized) ever since. This said, my basic purpose is twofold. First, it is to explain the historical background, origins, and development of realignment theory as analysts responded to elections. Second, it is to show how a highly useful and insightful theory necessarily based (as originally conceived) on retrospective analysis was also misused to provide quick appraisals of the realignment potential of current elections. While analyses of elections over time led to the forging of realignment theory, and that theory, properly applied, illuminated the meaning of sequential elections, misapplication served to undermine the credibility of the theory itself.

Prior to the impact of the Great Depression and the New Deal, it was commonly assumed that the Republicans were the dominant political party. The Democrats were commonly deemed a permanent minority destined for power only in the event of a Republican split or exceptional circumstances. The up-

heaval of the 1930s brought this traditional assumption into question. Some analysts persisted in the belief that Democratic dominance under Franklin D. Roosevelt was but a temporary departure from the Republican norm. Others fashioned notions of cyclical partisan alternation in place of the concept of long-term or secular Republican hegemony. Still others—notably the political scientist Harold F. Gosnell—played with the striking thought that historic Republican control had given way to a new era of Democratic power.

But this notion of a new Democratic epoch remained highly tentative and normally subordinate to concepts of eventual Republican restoration or continuing cyclical alternation. Thoughts of a big Democratic secular breakthrough were strong following Roosevelt's landslide reelection of 1936. In the wake of Republican gains in 1938, however, there was a tendency to see a Republican resurgence underway or an inclination to view electoral trends in cyclical terms. Roosevelt's 1940 and 1944 reelections were explained in terms of foreign policy crisis and personal appeal. Once Roosevelt passed from the scene or World War II ended, the refrain ran, traditional patterns—or a full swing of the cycle—would be forthcoming. The sweeping Republican victory of 1946, which restored Congress to the party's control for the first time since the onset of the Depression, provided all the assurance most analysts needed that 1948 would bring a complete Republican restoration or cyclical swing with the party's retaking of the White House.

The 1948 election remains extraordinary in the annals of American electoral history. Harry Truman's upset victory over Thomas Dewey was anticipated by virtually no one. The shock of the election result was vital to the emergence of realignment theory. An outcome so far removed from common and expert expectations forced political analysts back to the drawing boards to develop an explanation that could account for this astounding victory. And an explanation for so striking an event appeared to require something more than reference to the vagaries of the 1948 campaign itself: Truman's strategy, Dewey's complacency. Surely a more in-depth analysis was essential, an analysis delving back into what had then come to be viewed as the enduring changes wrought by the 1930s. It is no overstatement to assert that a single election, 1948, set in motion the full development of a theory that shaped electoral analysis for years to come.

The initial breakthrough for realignment theory came from Samuel Lubell, a political journalist rather than an academic analyst, in his 1952 *The Future of American Politics*. Partly this breakthrough was simply fortuitous, reflective of Lubell's gifts and insight. But partly it was no accident. After all, the interpretation of election outcomes was never the domain of academics alone; it was also very much within the realm of journalists. Lubell added knowledge of political scientists' contributions and the longer-run perspective of historians to

the journalist's flair. (It is no accident that historians played a role as well, given the retrospective nature of realignment theory.) In any event, Lubell in *The Future of American Politics* explicitly rejected as invalid the traditional notion of secular Republican dominance and the fashionable 1940s notion of cyclical alternation. What had actually occurred, he contended, was realignment from Republican to Democratic dominance—realignment confirmed by Truman's 1948 victory.

In the wake of 1948, the most influential academic student of American politics of his time, V. O. Key, also engaged in an intensive rethinking of earlier concepts. Key gradually emerged with what proved to be the most influential statement and development of realignment theory: his concept of critical elections. Key had been much influenced by cyclical notions of American politics, and the 1948 election result jolted him no less than it did others. His initial effort at a secular formulation paralleled that of Lubell, but less comprehensively, as Key acknowledged. Now, however, Key set forth his idea that electoral contests in times of great stress—the Civil War, the crisis of the 1890s, and the Great Depression—cut so deeply that people continued to vote the way they had been driven to do in a time of great emotion. Here was a notion to explain not only 1948 in the wake of the 1930s, but also the lasting electoral impacts of the 1860s and of the 1890s. The passage of time, Key concluded, demonstrated whether dramatic electoral departures endured—the test of realignment.

If Key, following Lubell, provided a “macro” version of realignment theory, Angus Campbell provided the “micro” underpinnings of the theory. Campbell was a social psychologist, rather than a political scientist, but one whose work came to focus on the motivations of the individual voter. Campbell originated the concept of “party identification,” the notion that individual voters developed and normally maintained a strong sense of allegiance to one party. They might deviate from that loyalty in any given election due to temporary exigencies, but only major upheaval would lead them to break permanently with their partisan allegiance. Such upheavals inaugurated eras of electoral realignment. Key and Campbell influenced one another's work, and Campbell went on to meld Key's macro and his own micro contributions into an overall framework of election classification. Campbell's work was based on surveys of voters. In Campbell's formulation, such surveys demonstrated whether departures at the polls reflected temporary phenomena or changes in more deeply rooted party identifications.

With Lubell's breakthrough, Key's refinement, and Campbell's contribution, realignment theory was in place. But it was no sooner formed than added ingredients complicated its course. Realignment theory was built upon the rejection of earlier cyclical theories; founding statements of the theory posited

historical realignment instances as discrete, sharing the common characteristics that made them realigning, but not appearing as manifestations of a cyclically recurring pattern. Realignment was seen as secular and discontinuous, not cyclical and emergent at regular intervals. Indeed, Lubell, Key, and Campbell all explicitly rejected prerealignment cyclical concepts. But notions of cycles made their way into realignment theory through the back door. As scholars applied realignment theory to past elections, a cyclical pattern was discerned. Critical elections appeared forthcoming every twenty-eight to thirty-six years: 1800, 1828, 1860, 1896, and 1932.

As the impact of realignment theory developed in full force, especially via the tumultuous elections of 1964 and 1968, the cyclical expectation came to the fore. A new critical election was now deemed “due.” Electoral analysts followed the election returns, eagerly looking for a “critical” break in patterns, while making judgments about current elections too quickly in terms of a valid retrospective application of realignment theory (a tendency facilitated by the instant “elections” made possible by voter surveys). Hence, in the wake of Lyndon Johnson’s 1964 landslide over Barry Goldwater came proclamations of existent or impending “realignment” further strengthening the reigning Democratic majority. Then, in 1968 with Richard Nixon’s narrow victory over Hubert Humphrey, in a race featuring a strong showing by independent George Wallace running to the right of Nixon, came proclamations, in the words of the one of the era’s most influential analysts, Kevin Phillips, of an “emerging Republican majority.” The expectation that the Wallace turnout of 1968 would provide a way station to Republican voting appeared to be confirmed by Nixon’s massive landslide over the Democrats’ hapless George McGovern in 1972.

But a complication in terms of realignment theory became evident. Realignment theory suggested an overall shift in partisan dominance. Republicans, for example, had dominated both branches of Congress, as well as the presidency most of the time between 1896 and 1932. The same was true of the Democrats between 1932 and 1968. But the Democrats retained control of Congress in 1970 and did so even in the midst of Nixon’s presidential landslide in 1972. Jimmy Carter’s Democratic victory in 1976 seemed to many to call into question whether 1968–1972 involved realignment at all or only a deviation due to temporary factors, making the Nixon era comparable to Dwight D. Eisenhower’s 1952 and 1956 Republican presidential victories. The explosive election of 1980, however, revived realignment theory: It brought not only the Republican Ronald Reagan’s decisive presidential victory, but also the Republican takeover of the Senate. But, despite Reagan’s massive landslide reelection of 1984, the Democrats continued to hold the House of Representatives throughout and retook the Senate in 1986. The election of Reagan’s vice president,

George Bush, to the White House in 1988 reinforced the idea of Republican presidential dominance, but continuing Democratic control of Congress called into question the overall applicability of realignment theory.

Indeed, dating back to the 1970s, criticisms of realignment theory emerged and blossomed even as efforts were made to revise the theory in order to adapt it to new contingencies. Increasingly, critics focused on short-term factors as determinants of voting behavior. Stress on realignment gave way to stress on what was dubbed “dealignment”—the notion that party loyalty had frayed in the wake of the 1960s as increasingly independent voters picked and chose from election to election, free of significant attachments to party. Phillips moved to this position, and the most influential academic student of realignment at the time, Walter Dean Burnham, appeared to sway between the idea that dealignment had brought an end to realignments and the idea that dealignment constituted the latest version of realignment. The vagaries of the 1990s—Bill Clinton’s election in 1992, the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994, Clinton’s reelection in 1996, the Republicans’ tenuous hold on Congress in 1998—at times provided renewed attention to realignment theory (as in 1994). But often the apparent confusion of the decade—topped off by the disputed election of 2000—lent itself to a focus on short-term voting determinants and discussion of the electoral underpinnings of “divided government.”

Nonetheless, assertions of the continued validity of realignment theory were also heard. Notably, it was widely held in the 1990s that realignment had occurred in the 1960s, even if not in the form anticipated. In my view, realignment theory remains useful, but has too often been misapplied. A theory born in revolt against cyclical notions was subsequently encumbered with cycles. A theory maintaining that realignment could be ascertained only in the fullness of time became a tool for instant analysis. Here the theory carried over into a speculative venture for which it was unintended and ill suited. Realignment theory was properly geared to retrospective judgment rather than to quick prognostication. It was designed to provide the in-depth analysis made possible by a long-term perspective. Election-year excitement over what appeared to be incipient realignment too often had the opposite of the theory’s intended effect: Realignment theory was subordinated to and distorted by the short-run perspective of the latest election returns (or subsequent survey results). In terms of its original intent, however, realignment theory yet retains a capacity to illuminate.

Chapter One

The Study of Behavior

The study of American electoral behavior in a time-related focus had origins, appropriately enough, in the work of leading historians, as well as political scientists. Frederick Jackson Turner, whose work on the role of the frontier in American history dated from the 1890s, was also the developer of the concept of sectionalism as an important influence in American history. In his own work, in the work of his students, and in work inspired by his, such as that of the political scientist Arthur N. Holcombe, formulations were set forth stressing the underlying sectional patterns of American electoral behavior across time. Analyses were made in terms of political maps based on aggregate voting statistics. Correlations were provided between voting and demographic data. Highly influential in its time and with reverberations throughout twentieth-century electoral analysis, the Turner method also had its limits. It tended to be static, reflecting historical traditions—important as baselines for change, but lacking explanations of dramatic upheaval.¹

A second source of early electoral—particularly political party—analysis, often intertwined with Turnerian influences, was that emanating from Charles A. Beard, a historian, as well as a political scientist. Well known for his stress on economic factors in history and politics, Beard posited a view of American political history based on the notion of essential continuity. In his concept, while party names changed from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries, essential patterns remained intact and endured indeed into his own time, the early to mid-twentieth century. One pattern, dating to the Federalists and continuing via the Republican Party, largely reflected urban business interests. The other, going back to Thomas Jefferson and continuing with the modern Democratic Party, reflected the concerns of farmers and workers. Beard's concept, however, like Turner's, downplayed instances of and lacked the power to explain major political upheavals.²

Modern electoral analysis in a truly substantive and systematic fashion dates from the 1920s in terms of the emergence of an approach within political science. However, there were social-science precursors, as well as influences traceable to historians. A major source of this approach derived from Franklin H. Giddings, a Columbia University sociologist, who influenced the work of such students of quantitative electoral analysis as William F. Ogburn and Stuart A. Rice.³ Rice, in particular, emerged as an important figure in the 1920s. He was remarkable not only for his pioneering use of quantitative data in electoral analysis, but also for his conceptual anticipations of what became major approaches to electoral change only a quarter-century and more later. Working under Giddings, Rice earned his doctorate in sociology from Columbia. He received accolades both at the time and subsequently for his quantitative investigations into electoral behavior.⁴ It was “amazing,” wrote Seymour Martin Lipset in 1959, “how many of the main lines” of inquiry in the field “were laid out, defended in sophisticated theoretical and methodological terms, and actually given flesh by concrete research examples by Rice.”⁵

Rice, in outlining his approach, called it “behavioralistic.” Too often, he maintained, political science had been concerned with particulars. But through the analysis of aggregate voting data across time, sequences and patterns could be discerned; secular trends and cycles would be revealed. Quantitative data allowed for a precision not available in traditional scholarly approaches. The subject, he declared, was “virgin.”⁶ Moving from techniques to concepts, Rice, in his 1924 book, *Farmers and Workers in American Politics*, included a chapter on “Realignment of Forces in American Politics.” Here, in embryonic form, he touched on notions later developed by V. O. Key and others. A new political alignment, Rice wrote, may result from “an unforeseen and harrowing experience,” or “a new issue,” cutting across established “lines of party division,” may trigger realignment as old issues lose “their vitality.” Anticipating the later approach of Angus Campbell and the Michigan School, Rice in a 1924 article linked party loyalty to realignment—precisely what Campbell and Key did in a more developed and systematic fashion over three decades later. So powerful was “party loyalty itself as an . . . influence,” wrote Rice, that it would endure “until . . . broken by some new and disturbing question . . . resulting in a new party cleavage.”⁷

Charles Merriam was another very important figure of the 1920s, although Merriam’s great influence was less intellectual and substantive than institutional and personal. Merriam had a strong interest in the use of quantitative data in political science and in applying insights from other social-science disciplines, notably psychology, to political analysis. Although he was a prolific writer, Merriam’s work in that regard, as in others, was most important for the inspiration it provided to his students and other scholars. As head of the University of Chicago’s Department of Political Science, Merriam was

able to gain the influence and funds needed to advance his vision. Out of his entrepreneurial efforts came the Chicago School of political and electoral analysis, a precursor, if not actually the parent, of the post-World War II “behaviorial school” in which major patterns of mid-century electoral analysis evolved. In the long run, the most important product of the Chicago School in terms of electoral analysis was V. O. Key; in the shorter run, the figure of great importance was another Merriam student and subsequently a faculty colleague and coauthor, Harold F. Gosnell.⁸

Gosnell developed very much within the fertile context nurtured by Merriam, but there were other Chicago influences as well. James Field, of the economics department, aided Gosnell in the area of statistical techniques. William F. Ogburn, who moved from Columbia to Chicago in 1927, was also of assistance. Gosnell had met Ogburn in Europe in 1925, occupied an adjoining office in Chicago, and acknowledged Ogburn’s example in the application of statistics to political research.⁹ Like Merriam, Gosnell was interested in the application of psychological as well as statistical tools to political analysis; he also believed that political scientists could learn from economists. In understanding cycles and trends, Gosnell wrote, economists had advanced well beyond political scientists, who now had to catch up. Quantitative data, as compared with historical narrative, allowed for greater precision and less subjectivity. The past was vital to understanding the present, but statistical data analyzed over time could provide surer insights than traditional historical and political methodology; a “statistical politics” could be based on the wealth of electoral data available in almanacs and yearbooks. The end result, Gosnell anticipated, would be a science of electoral politics based not on “mechanical relationships,” but rather on an understanding geared to “tendencies” and “trends.”¹⁰

In 1924 Merriam and Gosnell coauthored *Non-Voting*, widely considered a pioneering work not only for its use of quantitative data per se, but also for its employment of survey data in particular. In this work, largely written by Gosnell, Chicago nonvoters were surveyed and compared with voters, thus presaging the widespread use of survey data after World War II by the Michigan School. Indeed, leaders of the Michigan School such as Angus Campbell and Philip Converse explicitly acknowledged the pioneering status of *Non-Voting* in terms of its use of survey techniques and the way those techniques allowed access to the individual not available through aggregate data. *Non-Voting* thus presented a premier example of how a general approach tendered by Merriam was systemically developed and followed through upon by his student Gosnell.¹¹ Their goal, Merriam and Gosnell wrote, was not again simply to decry low voter turnout, but to ascertain reasons for it through a compilation of material throwing light on the nature of the electoral process and thus providing a more in-depth understanding of “one of the least explored of