

*Chapter 1*

**CRITICAL ELECTIONS, REALIGNMENTS,  
AND PARTY SYSTEMS**

It would be a serious exaggeration to suggest that what we will term the "realignment perspective" dominates the study of American political history. However, since the appearance of V. O. Key's seminal article in 1955, an extensive literature has appeared concerned in one way or another with critical elections, partisan realignments, party systems, and related political phenomena and processes.<sup>1</sup> The terminology of this perspective, at least, has penetrated the accounts of traditional historians, as well as the works of the more scientifically inclined of various disciplines, and it is also to be found in the writings of journalists and other political commentators. To a growing degree, moreover, political history is periodized, sometimes almost conventionally, in terms of party systems, or realignment eras. The realignment perspective, in short, has attained something of the

status of an organizing or synthesizing framework for the study and discussion of the American political past.

Our task in this chapter is to develop a comprehensive and extended statement of the realignment perspective as a starting point for empirical investigation. Our effort is to state the perspective in a form that encompasses partisan control of the agencies of government, the behavior of partisan elites, and the policy products of government as well as the behavior and attitudes of the electorate. To do so, however, it is first necessary to consider relevant work in some detail both to identify elements of the realignment perspective that are often either left implicit or neglected and to suggest areas of needed research.

### THE REALIGNMENT PERSPECTIVE

Discussions of the realignment phenomenon often and appropriately begin with V. O. Key's article, "A Theory of Critical Elections." Key identified one category of election which he described in an often quoted passage as "an election type in which the depth and intensity of electoral involvement are high, in which more or less profound readjustments occur in the relations of power within the community, and in which new and durable electoral groupings are formed."<sup>2</sup> Angus Campbell extended Key's conceptualization to include "maintaining" and "deviating" elections and later added "reinstating" elections to the scheme.<sup>3</sup> Gerald Pomper modified the classification to allow for realigning change that benefited the already dominant party, an election type he labeled "converting."<sup>4</sup>

Campbell's further contribution is less often noted. He explicitly linked this classification of elections to the social-psychological model of individual partisan attitudes and behavior developed in *The American Voter* and to the "normal vote" concept subsequently developed by Philip E. Converse.<sup>5</sup> In this way, he both extended the analytical utility of the classification and enriched its theoretical basis. It may be that a further and inadvertent consequence was to focus historical analyses even

more narrowly upon realigning elections and periods to the relative neglect of other elections. While realigning elections shifted both the balance of partisan identifications within the electorate and partisan control of the agencies of government, maintaining, deviating, and reinstating elections did not. Hence the latter categories of elections could be seen as intrinsically less interesting and indeed less important than realigning elections.

Whatever its specific source, interest in critical elections and partisan realignment has led investigators in several directions. One endeavor has involved establishing the timing of realignments—that is, deciding which elections are critical—and has produced substantial disagreement. Virtually all analysts agree that sometime between 1920 and 1940 a realigning election took place, but each presidential election from 1924 to 1936 has been designated as *the* realigning election.<sup>6</sup> Similar disagreements surround the elections of the Civil War era and of the 1890s.<sup>7</sup> Much of this discussion has occurred without clear conceptualizations of the realignment process, clear ideas of realigning electoral change, or an effective means to assess and measure such change. We address the latter two issues in the following two chapters, while the first is in certain respects a central topic of our entire study.

One critical conceptual and empirical difficulty in research into historical electoral behavior, a source of disagreement among investigators, is the task of inferring the underlying distribution of partisan loyalties—and shifts in that distribution—on the basis of the actual vote. Realignments are seen as producing new patterns of partisan loyalties and as ushering in periods of relative electoral stability based upon a new distribution or alignment of underlying loyalties. As the classification of elections suggests, however, complete consistency in the partisan distribution of the actual vote is not a characteristic of periods of stability, and shifts in the actual vote in particular elections are not necessarily indications of lasting change in partisan identifications within the electorate. Change in the distribution of the vote, in other words, occurs both during supposedly stable periods as well as during realignments, and a

critical task is to determine which of these changes in the actual vote are reflections of change in the underlying distribution of electoral loyalties.

To accomplish this task, a seemingly straightforward procedure has often been followed. Elections in which the distribution of the actual vote departs from the distribution of the vote in preceding elections but resembles the distribution in following elections are seen as realigning elections and as involving change in the basic partisan loyalties of the electorate. The implications of this operational definition of realigning electoral change introduce both theoretical and empirical tensions which are not as yet well reconciled. This definition implicitly identifies voting behavior with partisan attitudes and treats change in the former as a direct indication of change in the latter, despite recognition in other contexts that the partisan voting behavior of individuals often does not coincide with their partisan identifications. The implication of immediate conversion of electoral loyalties from identification with one party to identification with the other, which this procedure involves, is also at odds with other research suggesting the strength and enduring character of partisan identifications once formed.

In the hands of some investigators, this procedure has also involved an assumption of large-scale conversions of individual partisan loyalties during historical realignments. Increasingly, however, analysts have come to doubt on both theoretical and empirical grounds that realignments have involved such massive conversions of partisans from one party to the other. In the case of the New Deal, empirical evidence has been developed which suggests strongly that conversions of partisan identifications constituted a substantially smaller element in the realignment than is often suggested.<sup>8</sup> At a minimum, these conceptual difficulties, theoretical tensions, and conflicting views and findings seem to suggest that a more complex view of realignment is required.

Determination of the character and exact timing of historical realignments is complicated in other ways as well. The findings of various investigators indicate that realigning electoral change

has not occurred historically only in the abrupt fashion suggested by the critical election formulation. Lasting electoral change has apparently also occurred over extended "critical periods," rather than in a single election, or over even more extended periods through a process that Key labeled "secular realignment."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Key suggested that the gradual drift of particular population groups from one party to another could erode partisan alignments without ever causing a sharp break with past patterns.<sup>10</sup> And further complexities have also been encountered. The realignment perspective has been applied to regions, states, and occasionally communities as well as to the entire nation. One result has been the discovery that patterns of electoral stability and change are not identical at all levels, in all elections, or in all geographical areas. Thus here again, a different and more complex view of electoral change and of the realignment process seems clearly indicated.

Exploration of the realignment phenomenon has not, of course, been confined to empirical mapping of patterns of electoral change. In fact, a significant proportion of the literature is concerned with the causes of realignments and with the sources of the new patterns of partisan loyalties seen as their products. Certainly much of Key's work is in this category, as is the work of Samuel Lubell on the New Deal realignment.<sup>11</sup> James L. Sundquist, in a study of noteworthy historical depth, examined the various fates which may befall the political party system in the process of realignment and searched for causal factors in the nature of issue concerns, the character of the existing party leadership, and the nature of the existing partisan alignment. He considered realignment of the existing parties around a new issue dimension, absorption of a third party by the existing parties, and replacement of one or both of the major parties, as well as resolution of the precipitating crisis without realignment.<sup>12</sup>

With rather substantial agreement, scholars have treated realignments as the product of crisis or widespread tensions within society and have seen them as involving significant change in government and politics. In doing so, they call attention to

shifts in issue orientations accompanying realignments and to their consequences for public policy and elite groups. Walter Dean Burnham provided one of the striking statements of these characteristics when he argued that realignments

are themselves constituent acts: they arise from emergent tensions in society which, not adequately controlled by the organization or outputs of party politics as usual, escalate to a flashpoint; they are issue-oriented phenomena—centrally associated with these tensions and more or less leading to resolution adjustments; they result in significant transformations in the general shape of policy and they have relatively profound after effects on the roles played by institutional elites. They are involved with redefinitions of the universe of voters, political parties, and the broad boundaries of the politically possible.<sup>13</sup>

But these formulations leave a number of questions unanswered. Crises and tensions have been more common in American political history than partisan realignments, however defined. Thus the question remains why such circumstances sometimes produce realignments but at other times do not, although Burnham, Paul Allen Beck, and others have suggested partial answers to this general question in terms of gradual erosion of partisan loyalties and generational change in the composition of the electorate. A second area of uncertainty has to do with the mechanisms relating these aspects of the realignment phenomenon to one another.

The rather substantial disruptions of the ranks of officeholders that have resulted from realigning shifts in electoral behavior obviously suggest one such mechanism, reconstitution of the governing political elite. Research has shown change in the composition of Congress and in the behavior of its members accompanying realignments.<sup>14</sup> It is possible that much of the literature on the presidency and the executive branch more generally could be reinterpreted in the light of the realignment perspective, but historically oriented work in this area has not developed in such a fashion. Some analysis of the presidency and the Supreme Court draws attention to the special problems

facing a president following realignments, but for the most part this literature is limited to Roosevelt and the New Deal.<sup>15</sup> In general, however, investigations of elite characteristics and behavior oriented by the realignment perspective are much less numerous than studies of electoral behavior.

Regardless of disagreement over the exact timing of realignments and some uncertainty as to their exact nature, causes, and consequences, numerous scholars have noted the regularity with which they have occurred. The regularity of their occurrence has been seen as rather neatly dividing the American political past into relatively discrete eras. Thus, Charles Sellers observed a repetitive "equilibrium cycle," and Burnham partitioned the course of American political history into a series of "party systems," each, except for the first, beginning with a partisan realignment and each, except for the latest, terminated by further realignment.<sup>16</sup> While Burnham noted continuities between party systems, he observed that "to a marked degree each is also a discrete entity, with characteristic patterns of voting behavior, of elite and institutional relationships, and of broad system-dominant decisions."<sup>17</sup>

Initially, emphasis was placed upon what were seen as the common and constant properties of these interrealignment eras. They were often treated as essentially "one-party" eras, marked by one party's relatively consistent dominance over the agencies of national government. Dominance over government by a single party, combined with relatively limited examination of electoral data, suggested that each of these eras was characterized by a standing, more or less stable balance of partisan strength in the electorate, which favored one of the parties. The politics of these eras, both at the electoral and the elite levels, were also seen as marked by a constant, dominant, and relatively well-defined pattern of issue concerns, although the empirical basis for this view is not well developed. In view of apparently common and constant properties, interrealignment eras could be taken as little more than periods of essential political stability.

But Sellers had described "cycles" in American two-party politics, roughly corresponding in time to Burnham's party systems, which were characterized by a period of ascendancy by one party followed by decline toward equilibrium between the parties.<sup>18</sup> More recently, examination in greater detail of the sequence of patterns during interrealignment periods, seen in the work of Burnham, Sundquist, and others, has provided a much more complex view of these eras.<sup>19</sup> Burnham has detected "mid-sequence realignments," which might better be termed adjustments, occurring roughly midway through each interrealignment era. In the case of the three most recent party systems, these midsequence adjustments were marked by strong but relatively transitory third-party movements—the Greenback Party in the latter 1870s, the Progressive and Socialist Parties in 1912 and 1914, and the Dixiecrats and Wallace Progressives in 1948.<sup>20</sup>

This more complex view has led to a tendency to divide interrealignment eras into relatively distinct subperiods. Each major historical realignment is seen as followed by a period of stability, a time of consolidation, with continuous dominance by the party advantaged by the realignment—the Democrats following the 1828 realignment, the Republicans during the Civil War and Reconstruction and again after the mid-1890s, then the Democrats following the New Deal realignment. During these phases, the majority party continued to control the presidency and to dominate Congress, although usually with levels of strength somewhat below those enjoyed during the realignment itself.

Perhaps alerted by the deterioration of the New Deal electoral coalition in the 1960s and 1970s, as documented by sample survey research, investigators have also tended to assign particular properties to the periods following midsequence adjustments. In general, the increasing tendency is to see these subperiods, which we label the "decay phases" of interrealignment periods, as times of growing political instability and of deterioration of the prevailing electoral alignments. Causal mechanisms underlying these patterns have been suggested in

terms of the gradual disengagement of the partisan coalition created by the realignment, either as a consequence of the waning salience of the issues of realignment or the continuing reconstitution of the electorate by new voters who did not directly experience the earlier realignment.<sup>21</sup> Burnham also suggested that the emergence of third parties during these periods signaled decline toward another full-scale realignment.<sup>22</sup> These considerations are seen as providing at least partial explanations for both growing partisan instability during decay periods and for the periodicity of realignments.

These findings suggest a substantially more complex periodization of American political history. Interrealignment periods, in these terms, are no longer seen only as times of political stability. Thus the rather narrow preoccupation with the phenomenon of partisan realignment characteristic of the earlier literature has been somewhat alleviated. On the other hand, there is a continuing tendency to treat the decay phases of interrealignment periods as of little significance other than as preludes to the next partisan realignment.

The periodization of the political past provided by the realignment perspective is summarized chronologically in Table 1.1, which employs temporal boundaries approximating those which appear more or less conventionally in the literature. So depicted, the temporal boundaries of the several periods and subperiods may seem unduly precise. Indeed, it is almost certain that other investigators would contest some or all of the partitioning dates given here and would perhaps prefer to treat partisan realignments as occurring across relatively extended periods rather than in a single election. Without pausing to debate these issues, we can see that even in these schematic terms, the realignment perspective provides a superficially plausible chronological framework for describing the course of American political history.

As it has emerged in the recent literature, then, the realignment perspective has come to constitute a reasonably systematic and comprehensive view of the American political past. The perspective provides a typology of elections, and it parti-

TABLE 1.1 Electoral Sequences and Classification of Elections, 1828 to the Present

<i>Party System</i>	<i>Partisan Realignment</i>	<i>Stable Phase</i>	<i>Midsequence Adjustment</i>	<i>Decay Phase</i>
II	1828	1830-1840	1842	1844-1858
III	1860	1862-1874	1876	1878-1894
IV	1896	1898-1910	1912	1914-1930
V	1932	1934-1946	1948	1950-

tions the political past into a relatively clearly demarcated pattern of repetitive periods and subperiods with particular characteristics. As the preceding discussion suggests, however, systematic empirical research oriented by this perspective has tended to focus most intensely upon the voting behavior of the mass electorate. While the perspective points directly to shifts in partisan control of government, to change in public policy, and to shifts in the issue content and orientation of politics which are seen as occurring in relation to electoral realignments, these characteristics are often left implicit and have been subjected less to systematic conceptualization and empirical investigation. In examining mass voting behavior, moreover, disproportionate attention has been focused upon the few historical realigning, or critical, elections. One consequence is that the empirical research has tended to involve intensive examination of limited series of elections, while comparison of extended series of elections has been less common. A second consequence also follows. The periods between realignments have received less attention than the realignments themselves with the result that much of American electoral history has suffered neglect.

Statements and conceptualizations of the general perspective have tended to share these characteristics. In such statements, the relation between electoral realignment, on the one hand, and partisan control of government and public policy, on the other, are recognized. On the whole, however, the more careful conceptualizations, like the more precise quantitative analyses, have tended to focus upon electoral behavior and the process of electoral realignment.

## AN EXTENDED PERSPECTIVE

Our purpose in this section is to provide an extended and more consistent and comprehensive statement of the realignment perspective as a point of departure for the empirical investigation to follow in subsequent chapters. Our goal in doing so is to interrelate explicitly processes of electoral change and stability, the performance and policy products of government, and the behavior and performance of political leadership. As we move toward specifying the processes and mechanisms linking together these elements of the political and governmental system, our formulations, like the equivalent formulations of other investigators, become substantially less susceptible to direct support or falsification in terms of empirical historical evidence. Our purpose here, however, is to develop a reasonably coherent and intuitively plausible conceptualization of the realignment perspective, which is at least in some of its aspects subject to empirical assessment.<sup>2 3</sup>

Each of the major periods, or party systems, began with a partisan realignment which involved a shift in the distribution of the popular vote and gave to one of the parties dominance over the agencies of the national government and over an increased proportion of state governments. Shifts in the distribution of the vote came in response to national crises and major, widespread tension within society. As a consequence, the realignments also introduced a new set of issue concerns both at the governmental and the public levels, which were related to the crises and tensions producing the realignment. Control of the agencies of government allowed policy action within these areas to be seen as successfully coping with crises and reducing societal tension. The stable periods following realignments were marked by continued dominance by the party advantaged by realignment, both in terms of electoral strength and in terms of governmental control, although perhaps with the strength declining in both areas. During these periods, the issue concerns produced by crisis and realignment remained preeminent, and policy action in these issue areas continued.

The decay phases following and perhaps merging with these stable periods involved erosion of the electoral alignments produced by the realignments. The beginning of each of these periods was marked by a midsequence adjustment; and they involved at least temporary loss of governmental control by the dominant party and were marked by limited change in the distribution of partisan strength in the nation. The following periods were characterized by indications of greater volatility of the popular vote, by loss of consistent and effective control of government by the dominant party, by deviating elections, and by the appearance of third-party movements. During these periods, the centrality of the issues produced by crisis and realignment tended to decline, and the processes of policy-making worked less effectively, with an increasing propensity to avoid issues and to enter deadlock. These developments can be seen as reflecting increasing deterioration of the elite and popular coalitions produced by the earlier realignment.

These characteristics lead quite straightforwardly to expectations as to patterns of change and stability in indicators of historical political behavior. More precise expectations can be gained by specifying the mechanisms and processes underlying these characteristics. In doing so, however, we must also postulate aspects of past politics which are not subject to direct examination in terms of empirical historical data.

In this context, it is necessary to emphasize a more complex view of the process of partisan realignment than is often suggested by the literature. In this view, historical realignments are seen as involving several interrelated elements. Partisan realignments were initiated by shifts in the distribution of the popular vote in response to crisis conditions and widespread societal tension and dissatisfaction. It is likely that these initiating shifts in the popular vote involved little more than rejection of the party in power and of incumbent office-holders. The consequence, however, was to give the opposing party effective control of government and an opportunity to take policy action perceived as an effective response to crisis.<sup>24</sup>

The formation of a new distribution of electoral partisan loyalties, in this view, involved two steps. First, in response to crisis and as a reflection of widespread dissatisfaction, one party was rejected by the electorate. The second step involved endorsement and affirmation of the advantaged party in subsequent elections, apparently by somewhat different electoral majorities, as a response to governmental action perceived as alleviating crisis.<sup>25</sup> Governmental action perceived as alleviating crisis worked to reinforce new patterns of individual partisan voting behavior and produced a new distribution of attitudinal identifications with the parties. In this view, then, partisan realignment is seen as a process involving conceptually discrete but interrelated elements: electoral rejection of the party in power; capture of effective control of the elective agencies of government by the advantaged party; policy action by that party which could be seen as a response to crisis; and formation of a new distribution of partisan loyalties in the electorate.

Several implications follow from this general view of the realignment process. Electoral change, including lasting change in partisan voting behavior, is not the only component of partisan realignment, nor is it sufficient to account for realignment. Lasting electoral change may occur frequently and is not confined to periods designated as partisan realignments. Indeed, our research suggests that both long-term and short-term electoral change is a more constant property of American politics than much of the relevant literature would indicate. Only rarely, however, have patterns of electoral change combined to produce the major and unidirectional changes in partisan control over the agencies of government critical to historical realignments.

The surges in electoral strength going from one party to the other, which initiated realignments, appear from this perspective as deviating ones, perhaps involving little more than "throwing the rascals out." The central consideration is that these surges of strength could appear as mandates for governmental action; they produced the extraordinary margins of

control of government that allowed the decisive and innovative policy actions often seen as characteristic of historical realignments. Policy action which appeared responsive to national problems and which could be perceived as alleviating crisis worked to convert temporary electoral strength into lasting partisan support and loyalty. Whether policy action was in fact responsible for the alleviation of crisis is another matter.

Obviously, we are not implying massive and "instantaneous" conversions of partisan loyalties from one party to the other. Change in voting behavior is conceptually distinguished from change in partisan attitudes. The formation of a new distribution of mass partisan attitudes is seen to be a more gradual process, coming in response to governmental performance and perhaps primarily involving mobilization and demobilization of segments of the potential electorate. This view treats control of government and governmental performance as central elements in the realignment process, and it places particular stress upon political and governmental leadership. Hence, it suggests that historical opportunities for full-scale partisan realignment have been more common than the actual occurrence. As we will argue, the fact that these opportunities did not consistently lead to realignment can be seen as the consequence of failure in the policy-making arena and of the intrusion of unforeseen and perhaps uncontrollable events.

This perspective also suggests processes underlying the characteristics of the periods following historical realignments. The combination of crisis, voting shifts, policy action, and popular response to policy action leads to the formation of new electoral alignments and new coalitions of voting groups. These new alignments and coalitions do not involve a complete break with past patterns of partisan loyalties. Indeed, there is reason to expect substantial continuity in individual partisan identifications from one realignment era to the next. Relatively small shifts, however, in the standing distribution of partisan strength within the electorate tend to work to the lasting advantage of one of the parties.

Realignment also leads to the formation of a dominant issue dimension or a limited set of tightly constrained issue dimen-

sions, along which parties, individuals, and social and economic groups align themselves and toward which they direct their primary political attention. Thus one of the consequences of crisis and realignment is to suppress issue concerns that are not perceived as related to the crisis. Moreover, the same combination of crisis, voting shifts, policy action, and response to policy action creates a symbol (or set of symbols) which refers to crisis and which also alludes to perceived explanations for the crisis and to policies perceived as remedies. For example, the Great Depression, Herbert Hoover, Franklin Roosevelt, the New Deal, and social security are all elements of the symbol pattern produced during the realignment of the 1930s. Similarly, the symbols of the 1860s realignment include those of national union, secession, civil war, Lincoln, slavery, and the yeoman farmer, while those of the 1890s include symbols of business and industrial growth, national modernization, the infant industries, and the tariff.

Here again, realignments do not necessarily involve a sharp or complete break with the past. Rather, realignments apparently can work to reestablish, reinforce, and augment earlier symbol patterns. The realignment of the 1890s, with the restoration of Republican dominance in that decade, is a case in point. The realignment maintained much of the basic symbolic and issue content of the earlier Civil War realignment, while adding new elements related to the crisis, tensions, and policies of the 1890s. On the other hand, realignments shift the focus and add to the issue and symbolic content of politics. Moreover, the narrowing of the attention of the electorate to a limited range of issues, combined with shifts in electoral behavior, appears as a mandate for policy action and provides the conditions of united control over government, and the majorities, which permit the advantaged party to take action addressed to crisis and constituting a departure from previous policy patterns.

The symbol and issue patterns produced by partisan realignments work to sustain partisan loyalties during the years that follow. Their strength and endurance is related to the gravity of the realignment crisis and the perceived efficacy of remedial



policies. The stronger the realignment symbols, the greater the probability of loyal party voting and the longer such loyalties last following the realignment. But whatever the specific case, the salience of realignment symbols and issues declines with the passage of time, as do the stability and strength of the voter alignments and coalitions produced by the realignment. It is this process which underlies what we have called the decay phases of interrealignment periods.

We can describe this process in different, more conventional terms. The outcome of an election is the product of short-term forces—that is, issues and conditions of all sorts, candidates' personalities, campaign activities—and “long-term” forces, such as party loyalty and other long-standing symbols and issues which endure beyond a particular election. During a realignment, the dominant short-term forces are the realignment symbols and issues; through the process of realignment, they become dominant long-term forces. Over the years, however, the realignment symbols decline in candidate and issue specificity. Realignment issues become less salient and less controversial, and the positions of the parties with respect to them are likely to become increasingly similar. As a consequence, the capacity of realignment issues and symbols to dominate other issues or candidate appeals also declines. With the passage of time, new and current conditions lead to short-term forces becoming increasingly potent in relation to the old issue and symbol patterns. Since these new issues do not fit the issue dimensions of the previous realignments, they often lead to internal divisions within parties or provide the basis for third-party activities.

This pattern of change is accompanied by the deterioration of the partisan alignments and coalitions produced by the realignment. The partisan orientations of individuals and groups and the configuration of coalitions of voting groups are heavily based upon and sustained by the symbols and issues associated with the preceding partisan realignment. New issues and resurgent older issues cut across this pattern of realignment symbols and issues; they frequently have the effect of politically acti-

vating, or reactivating, conflicting group affiliations and interests. For example, the nomination of a Catholic for president in 1960 had the effect of assigning (or reassigning) political relevance to the group differences between Catholics and Protestants and worked to disrupt the partisan loyalties and partisan coalitions that had resulted from the preceding realignment. In other words, during the decay phase, short-term forces can activate conflicting group affiliations and disrupt existing individual and group loyalties. As a consequence, individuals are frequently confronted with politically conflicting group pressures; in the aggregate, these cross pressures lead to increased variability in both partisan voting and turnout.

Just as the realignment symbol declines in strength as an activator of partisan loyalties under the influence of short-term forces, it becomes increasingly irrelevant to incoming members of the electorate. In increasing numbers following realignment, new voters enter the electorate who have not directly experienced the crisis and other circumstances of the realignment. As a consequence of the natural attrition of the years, older voters who were directly involved and who directly experienced the events and circumstances of the realignment disappear from the electorate. In other words, the electorate is increasingly composed of voters whose ties to the realignment are indirect and relatively weak. Thus, during the decay phase, the tendency of young voters to identify strongly with the parties gradually diminishes, and the likelihood they will identify as independents increases. Like the increased proportion of individuals under cross pressures, the greater proportion of independents and weak partisans in the electorate leads in the aggregate to greater variability in party support and levels of turnout, to increase in split-ticket voting, and to greater susceptibility to short-term forces.

The increasing importance of short-term forces and the increasing electoral volatility characteristic of these periods do not necessarily work to the advantage or disadvantage of either of the parties. That is, they can work disproportionately to the benefit of the minority or the majority party, or they can work

to the advantage of first one party and then the other. The point is that voting behavior becomes less consistent and partisan alignments less stable. Nor is electoral change limited to the effects of short-term forces or decline in the incidence and strength of partisan identifications. New voting groups appear with new partisan attachments, and secular realignment of particular groups occurs. But these patterns of change do not lead to dominance by either party; rather, they contribute to further derangement of the old alignment.

\* Electoral change is accompanied by parallel and related change in elite behavior and in the performance of government. The process of realignment creates new partisan elite coalitions with reasonably coherent issue orientations and policy goals. These coalitions work to provide at least a partial bridge between agencies of government, both at particular levels of government and from one level of government to the other. Thus they provide a basis for relatively integrated, coherent, and effective governmental action. During decay phases, elite coalitions are increasingly disrupted, and their issue and policy coherence diminished as new issues appear, as older issues temporarily suppressed by the circumstances of realignment regain salience, and as new leaders emerge.

As deterioration of electoral alignments continues, legislators and other elected officials are confronted with new, diverse, changing, and often conflicting constituency demands and interests. The process of realignment involves narrowing of electoral interests to a limited range of issues and results in relatively focused demand for governmental action addressed to those issues. As time passes following realignments, constituencies change in composition and issue orientations. As a consequence of the growing susceptibility of the electorate to new issues and short-term forces and as a consequence of the diminishing strength and incidence of partisan identifications during decay phases, officials are elected for increasingly diverse reasons, bases of electoral support become less dependable, and political parties as symbols have less and less common meaning both among voters and among leaders. But despite deterioration of

the old alignment, political leaders are not fully free to abandon older issues and bases of support in order to embrace new issues in an effort to build new coalitions. The issues, symbols, and voter coalitions produced by the preceding realignment retain salience and importance for the electorate. To ignore them is to risk defeat at the polls.

These processes can lead to increasing incidence of deviating elections, to periodic loss of dominance over the agencies of government by the party advantaged by the preceding realignment, to divided partisan control of government, or, as in the latter nineteenth century, to the absence of a clear majority party. These conditions obviously diminished the capacity of either party to take consistent and effective policy action. But even when one party retains majority status and continues to hold consistent and united control of government, as in the 1920s, loss of internal coherence and unity diminishes its effectiveness as a mechanism of integrated policy formation and implementation.

These processes and patterns of change help to explain the characteristics of policy-making during the decay phases of interrealignment eras. In contrast to realignment periods, policy-making tends to be incremental rather than innovative, and the tendency to avoid issues increases. As the parties lose capacity to function as bridges between agencies of government and from one level of government to the other, the likelihood of coherent and consistent public policy diminishes, and discordant policy action increases. At the risk of overstating the case, the process of alignment decay can be seen as involving feedback and multiplier effects. The progressive decay of partisan alignments is accompanied by declining effectiveness of government, by increasing propensity for policy deadlock, and by failure to cope with new problems, tensions, and discontents within the polity. As a result, the propensity of the system to produce short-term forces and unresolved problems increases, and popular confidence in government and the parties declines, with temporal distance from the preceding realignment. It may follow as well that the likelihood of crisis of a magnitude

sufficient to produce partisan realignment also increases with temporal distance from the preceding realignment.

This is not to say that deterioration of electoral alignments necessarily leads to a new realignment or that the issues gaining salience during decay phases necessarily anticipate the issues of a coming realignment. As electoral alignments deteriorate, the electorate becomes increasingly susceptible to realignment should a crisis of sufficient magnitude occur. This susceptibility has been indicated historically by increased incidence of third parties, by increasing variability in turnout and in the partisan distribution of the vote, by frequent deviating elections and conditions of divided partisan control over the presidency and Congress, and by increased incidence of split-ticket voting. These characteristics of decay phases reflect, in turn, growth of a pool of active or inactive voters whose attachments to the parties are weak or nonexistent and who are susceptible to realignment as a consequence of crisis, widespread tension, and dissatisfaction.

Historical interrealignment periods, except for the most recent, have terminated in crisis and a new realignment about 36 years after the preceding realignment, although we can neither specify the types of crisis that produce realignments nor argue that interrealignment periods are necessarily of any particular temporal length. With the passage of time, the electorate becomes sufficiently disengaged from the partisan divisions, issues, and symbols of the past to be susceptible to a realignment in partisan loyalties should crisis conditions, tensions, and dissatisfactions of sufficient magnitude develop. Various types of crisis, tension, and dissatisfaction can lead to realignment, and because of declining capacity of government during decay phases to address and resolve societal problems, the likelihood of such conditions may increase during these periods.

The probability that these conditions will produce realignment in any particular case is related both to the magnitude of crisis (in terms of the proportion of the population directly affected) and the temporal distance from the preceding realignment. Thus, the longer the erosion of the previous alignment

has progressed, the less severe the crisis and tension needed to initiate a new realignment. Neither deterioration of electoral alignments nor crisis alone is sufficient to produce realignment, nor is the combination of the two. As we have argued above, policy action by government that can be popularly perceived as a meaningful and effective response to societal problems is a further and necessary component of the realignment process.

In terms of public policy and popular control of policy directions, the realignment perspective is a rather simple one. Much of the time, policy initiatives are at best incremental, often conflicting and ineffective, and electoral pressures are diffuse, erratic, and inconsistent. The realignment perspective suggests that "politics as usual," and the lack of policy direction and electoral intensity the phrase implies, are typical of the American political system. On the occasion of infrequent partisan realignments, public pressure on elected officials becomes much less ambiguous; during these periods, political parties reveal unaccustomed unity of purpose which bridges the diverse agencies and levels of government. These are periods when the public expresses strong preferences, and these views are translated more or less directly into governmental action by a newly dominant party. Historically, partisan realignments have occurred under conditions of national crisis—although not all crises have been accompanied by realignments—and have produced a level of political integration and articulation sufficient to allow effective and coordinated governmental response, albeit usually within a relatively limited and well-defined issue area. Partisan realignments can thus be seen as both the products of accumulated tensions and dysfunctions and as the means through which responses to these problems have occurred. But partisan realignments are rare. For the most part, the political and governmental system meanders along almost casually, and only intermittently is the direction of the system controlled firmly by a combination of electoral and leadership forces.

Although the formulation of the realignment perspective developed here is not ruthlessly parsimonious, the generalized manner in which it is presented may well provoke reservations.

It is stated as if it applied with complete consistency to a century and a half of American political history. This despite the massive social, economic, political, and institutional changes which have overtaken the nation during these years. Moreover, we encounter at a number of points significant empirical evidence that does not fully conform to even the extended realignment perspective sketched here.

In some degree, these deviations of empirical evidence from the realignment perspective appear explicable when historical patterns of change are taken into account. That is to say, when we specify even crudely what elements of change in the social, economic, and institutional environment of politics have occurred over the past 150 years, some of these deviations of empirical evidence from the realignment perspective appear plausibly reconciled. In other cases, however, this or other reconciliations are substantially less plausible. Hence doubts and questions arise at a number of points as to the adequacy of this general conceptual perspective. Whether these doubts and questions should be seen as products of measurement limitations imposed by the characteristics of historical data, as indications of the inadequacy of the realignment perspective either in general or as formulated here, or more simply as reflections of the inadequacies of the present research are matters to be left for subsequent investigation and evaluation. Readers may well wish for more definitive conclusions about the adequacy of this perspective and the complex patterns of relationships it involves, but the complexity and importance of the subject matter impose cautions which we are not inclined to resist.

Two further matters touched on above require additional stress. Political parties and partisan processes are central to the perspective developed and employed here, and the adequacy of the perspective and the following analysis is dependent upon the acceptability of the view of parties as basic elements of electoral behavior and policy-making. It is assumed that political parties are meaningful objects of identification for the bulk of the electorate, and that many voters are capable of using party labels to reward leaders with their votes when satisfied or

to rebuke them by denying votes when dissatisfied. But the political party is also crucial for leaders as a basis for coordinating their policy-making activities within and between institutions at a given level of government, as well as a mechanism for coordinating, at least loosely, between levels of government.

Political parties are obviously not the only factor in the decision-making of either voters or political leaders, but parties are uniquely important to both. Political parties constitute an institutional device for organizing political and governmental action and for marshaling popular support behind policies and methods of implementation. Nothing about the realignment perspective argues that political parties will necessarily accomplish great feats, only that they have the capacity for coordinating policy-making and the ability to link mass preferences to policy-making. Of course, these capabilities may go unrealized.

The realignment perspective as developed here also places major stress upon the performance of government and upon political and governmental leadership. Students of politics almost invariably view political leaders as inadequate to the demands of the times, and while the judgment may be unduly harsh, it correctly focuses attention on leaders. The realignment perspective as presented above clearly views the political leadership as the active element in policy-making and the electorate as passive and reactive. The study of the mass public alone may yield accurate reflections of the behavior of leaders, but to a greater degree than heretofore, analytic attention must be focused on the leaders themselves. This volume cannot claim to be a major step in that respect; we hope it is a move in the right direction.

## NOTES

1. The major landmark in this literature, of course, is V. O. Key, Jr., "A Theory of Critical Elections," *Journal of Politics* 17 (February 1955), pp. 3-18. Major works since 1955 are Walter Dean Burnham, "Party Systems and the Political Process," in

William Nisbet Chambers and Walter Dean Burnham (eds.), *The American Party Systems: Stages of Political Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975) and *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York: Norton, 1970); James L. Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1973); Gerald Pomper, *Elections in America* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1968). For a collection of major articles on the subject, see Jerome M. Clubb and Howard W. Allen (eds.), *Electoral Change and Stability in American Political History* (New York: Macmillan, 1971).

2. V. O. Key, Jr., "A Theory of Critical Elections," p. 4. A contemporary but relatively neglected work by Schattschneider outlined the major party systems and treated both 1896 and 1932 conceptually as critical elections. See E. E. Schattschneider, "United States: The Functional Approach to Party Government," in Sigmund Neumann (ed.), *Modern Political Parties* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), pp. 194-215. A later version of many of the same points is more widely cited. E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semi-Sovereign People* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960).

3. Angus Campbell, "A Classification of Presidential Elections," in Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes, *Elections and the Political Order* (New York: John Wiley, 1966), pp. 63-77. For an earlier statement, see Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes, *The American Voter* (New York: John Wiley, 1960), pp. 531-538.

4. Gerald Pomper, "Classification of Presidential Elections," *Journal of Politics* 29 (August 1967), pp. 535-566.

5. Campbell et al., *The American Voter*, pp. 523-538; Campbell, "A Classification of Presidential Elections," and Converse, "The Concept of a Normal Vote," both in Campbell et al., *Elections and the Political Order*, pp. 63-77 and 9-39 respectively.

6. For several possibilities, see Jerome M. Clubb and Howard W. Allen, "The Cities and the Election of 1928: Partisan Realignment?" *American Historical Review* 74 (April 1969), pp. 1205-1220. The election of 1924 is preferred by Allen J. Lichtman, "Critical Election Theory and the Reality of American Presidential Politics, 1916-1940," *American Historical Review* 81 (April 1976), pp. 317-348.

7. Most analysts mark the Civil War realignment at 1860, but Gerald Pomper uses 1864. See Pomper, "Classification of Presidential Elections." Walter Dean Burnham has used 1854; see Burnham, *Critical Elections*. There is more agreement on the date of 1896, although analysts who examine off-year elections mark the realignment at 1894. Again, see Burnham, *Critical Elections*.

8. See Philip E. Converse, "Public Opinion and Voting Behavior," in Fred I. Greenstein and Nelson W. Polsby (eds.), *Handbook of Political Science* Vol. 4, (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1975), pp. 135-144; Kristi Andersen, "Generation, Partisan Shift and Realignment: A Look Back at the New Deal," in Norman H. Nie, Sidney Verba, and John R. Petrocik, *The Changing American Voter* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 74-95; Paul Allen Beck, "A Socialization Theory of Partisan Realignment," in Richard G. Niemi and Associates *The Politics of Future Citizens* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1974), pp. 199-119; and William Claggett, "The Development of Partisan Attachments in the American Electorate," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1978.

9. See V. O. Key, Jr., "Secular Realignment and the Party System," *Journal of Politics* 21 (May 1959), pp. 198-210. The concept of a "critical period" is elaborated

in Duncan MacRae, Jr., and James A. Meldrum, "Critical Elections in Illinois: 1888-1958," *American Political Science Review* 54 (September 1960), pp. 669-683.

10. Such a formulation obviously can be amended to describe the gradual mobilization of formerly inactive political groups, which would then rearrange existing electoral coalitions and alignments. See V. O. Key, Jr., "Secular Realignment." During the last decade or so, considerable scholarly attention has been given to the assessment of gradual party realignment in the South, which apparently includes mobilization, immigration and outmigration, as well as individual changes in identification. See, for example, Philip E. Converse, "On the Possibility of a Major Political Realignment in the South," in Campbell et al., *Elections and the Political Order*, pp. 212-242; Philip E. Converse, "Change in the American Electorate," in Angus Campbell and Philip E. Converse (eds.), *The Human Meaning of Social Change* (New York: Russell Sage, 1972), pp. 307-317; William C. Havard (ed.), *The Changing Politics of the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972); Bruce A. Campbell, "Patterns of Change in Partisan Loyalties of Native Southerners: 1952-1972," *Journal of Politics* 39 (August 1977), pp. 730-761; Paul Allen Beck, "Partisan Realignment in the Postwar South," *American Political Science Review* 71 (June 1977), pp. 477-496; Raymond E. Wolfinger and Robert S. Arseneau, "Partisan Change in the South," presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, 1974.

11. In many ways, Lubell's contributions to the early development of these analytic traditions were as important as Key's. See Samuel Lubell, *The Future of American Politics* (New York: Harper and Row, 1952).

12. Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System*, especially Ch. 2.

13. Burnham, *Critical Elections*, p. 10.

14. In addition to the work of Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System*, already cited, see David Brady, *Congressional Voting in a Partisan Era* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1973); David Brady, "Critical Elections, Congressional Parties and Clusters of Policy Changes: A Comparison of 1896 and 1932 Realignment Eras," presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, 1975; David W. Brady and Naomi B. Lynn, "Switched Seat Congressional Districts: Their Effect on Party Voting and Public Policy," *American Journal of Political Science* 17 (1973), pp. 523-543; Michael R. King and Lester G. Seligman, "Critical Elections, Congressional Recruitment and Public Policy," in Heinz Eulau and Morris Cuzdnowski (eds.), *Elite Recruitment in Democratic Politics* (New York: Halsted Press, 1976), pp. 263-299; H. Douglas Price, "The Congressional Career—Then and Now," in Nelson W. Polsby (ed.), *Congressional Behavior* (New York: Random House, 1971); Barbara Deckard Sinclair, "Party Realignment and the Transformation of the Political Agenda: The House of Representatives, 1925-1938," *American Political Science Review* 71 (1977), pp. 940-953; Barbara Sinclair, "From Party Voting to Regional Fragmentation: The House of Representatives, 1933-1956," *American Politics Quarterly* 6 (April 1978), pp. 125-146; Jerome M. Clubb and Santa A. Traugott, "Partisan Cleavage and Cohesion in the House of Representatives, 1861-1974," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (1977), pp. 375-401.

15. For an exception focusing on Jackson and Lincoln as well as Roosevelt, see Robert Scigliano, *The Supreme Court and the Presidency* (New York: Macmillan, 1971).

16. Charles Sellers, "The Equilibrium Cycle of Two-Party Politics," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 29 (Spring 1965), pp. 16-38; Burnham, "Party Systems and the Political Process."
17. Burnham, "Party Systems and the Political Process," p. 289.
18. Sellers, "The Equilibrium Cycle of Two-Party Politics."
19. See especially Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System*, and Burnham, *Critical Elections*.
20. Burnham, *Critical Elections*, p. 27 and passim.
21. Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System*; Beck, "A Socialization Theory of Partisan Realignment."
22. Burnham, *Critical Elections*, p. 27.
23. In formulating this perspective, we have particularly benefited from Burnham, *Critical Elections* and "Party Systems and the Political Process"; Gerald M. Pomper, *Elections in America: Control and Influence in Democratic Politics* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1970); and Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System*. It would be impossible to cite all the literature on political parties, elections, and government that might have influenced the content of this section. Many of the works already cited provide an overview of the realignment perspective, and we have attempted to utilize them. Some relevant works not previously cited are: V. O. Key, Jr., and Frank Munger, "Social Determinism and Electoral Decision: The Case of Indiana," in Eugene Burdick and Arthur J. Brodbeck (eds.), *American Voting Behavior* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), pp. 281-299; Paul Kleppner, *The Cross of Culture—A Social Analysis of Midwestern Politics, 1850-1900* (New York: Macmillan, 1970); Richard J. Jensen, *The Winning of the Midwest: Social and Political Conflict, 1888-1896* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971); Melvyn Hammarberg, *The Indiana Voter: The Historical Dynamics of Party Allegiance During the 1870's* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977); Ronald P. Formisano, *The Birth of Mass Political Parties: Michigan, 1827-1861* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971); Samuel T. McSeveney, *The Politics of Depression: Political Behavior in the Northeast, 1893-1896* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); Richard J. Trilling, "Party Image, Party Identification and Partisan Realignment," unpublished; William L. Shade, *Social Change and the Electoral Process* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1973); Michael P. Rogin and John L. Shover, *Political Change in California: Critical Elections and Social Movements, 1890-1966* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, 1970); Lee Benson, Joel H. Silbey, and Phyllis Field, "Toward a Theory of Stability and Change in American Voting Patterns: New York State, 1792-1970," in Joel H. Silbey, Allan G. Bogue, and William H. Flanigan (eds.), *The History of American Electoral Behavior* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978); John L. Hammond, "Minor Parties and Electoral Realignments," *American Party Strength in the United States* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1972); Ray M. Shortridge, "The Voter Realignment in the Midwest During the 1850s," *American Politics Quarterly* 4 (April 1976), pp. 193-222; Benjamin Ginsberg, "Critical Elections and the Substance of Party Conflict," *Midwest Journal of Political Science* 16 (November 1972), pp. 603-625; Dale Baum, "Know-Nothingism and the Republican Majority in Massachusetts: The Political Realignment of the 1850s," *Journal of American History* 64 (March 1978), pp. 959-986. For an earlier effort to state the perspective developed in this section, see Walter Dean Burnham, Jerome M. Clubb, and William H. Flanigan, "Partisan Realignment: A Systemic Perspective," prepared

for presentation at the Mathematical Social Science Board Conference on Historical Voting Behavior, Cornell University, 1973, and published in Silbey et al., *The History of American Electoral Behavior*. A perspective similar in some respects to the one developed in this book is provided by Paul Allen Beck, "The Electoral Cycle and Patterns of American Politics," *British Journal of Political Science* 9 (April 1979), pp. 129-156.

24. It would be a mistake to exaggerate the departure here from earlier work. Most analysts implicitly link electoral patterns with policy-making, but explicitly they conceptualize election returns as the realignment. In the closely related literature on competition, attention has been focused on control of government. See, for example, Joseph A. Schlesinger, "The Structure of Competition for Office in the American States," *Behavioral Science* 5 (1960), pp. 197-210, and "A Two-dimensional Scheme for Classifying the States According to Degree of Inter-party Competition," *American Political Science Review* 49 (1955), pp. 1120-1128; or, more recently, C. Anthony Broh and Mark S. Levine, "Patterns of Party Competition," *American Political Quarterly* 6 (July 1978), pp. 357-384.

25. It is hard to imagine any substantial investigation of this process of attitude formation without individual level data, and it would be odd to find circumstances in which aggregate data could effectively address these points. Some empirical evidence for these steps is in W. Phillips Shively, "A Reinterpretation of the New Deal Realignment—Based of All Things, on the *Literary Digest* Poll," *Public Opinion Quarterly* (1971-1972), pp. 621-624.