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Electoral Realignments

A CRITIQUE OF AN AMERICAN GENRE

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are the other political scientists noted above who made influential analytic moves during the 1970s and 1980s. There is a point in operating in this fashion: what I am calling the fully fleshed-out version of the realignments perspective has proven, I believe, to be particularly engaging and influential.

As an analytic technique, I resolve the large realignments perspective into fifteen distinct empirical claims. In Chapters 3 through 6, drawing on relevant primary and secondary sources where appropriate, I evaluate these fifteen claims for their empirical validity and illuminative power.⁵ In Chapter 7, I close with some conclusions and a few points of more general interpretive criticism. In that chapter, as well as earlier, I point up what I am *not* doing in this work. I am not trying to argue that all American elections are equal. Unquestionably, some of them have been more engaging, momentous, or consequential in various ways than others. It is and should be a continuing scholarly task to illuminate such differences. Yet it is not helpful to get trapped forever in a failed model of illumination.

5. My approach in this work has some, albeit not all, of the characteristics of a meta-analysis.

The Realignments Perspective

2 WHAT IS THE ELECTORAL REALIGNMENTS perspective, and where did it come from? As Harvey L. Schantz has noted, the idea of realigning elections surfaced in political science before World War II.¹ Yet everyone agrees that it was V. O. Key who crystallized and popularized the concept in his 1955 article "A Theory of Critical Elections." Here we see the basic, trademark dichotomizing move of the realignments school—the idea of sorting American presidential elections into two categories: a few that are "critical elections," in Key's terminology, and a great

1. It appeared in the writings of Arthur N. Holcombe and Cortez A. M. Ewing. See Harvey L. Schantz, "Realignment Before V. Q. Key, Jr.," paper presented at the annual convention of the Southern Political Science Association, Atlanta, October 28–31, 1998.

residual many that are not. The former are defined as ones "in which voters are, at least from impressionistic evidence, unusually deeply concerned, in which the extent of electoral involvement is relatively quite high, and in which the decisive results of the voting reveal a sharp alteration of the pre-existing cleavage within the electorate." Additionally, as "perhaps . . . the truly differentiating characteristic of this sort of election, the realignment made manifest in the voting in such elections seems to persist for several succeeding elections."²

Using data from townships in select New England states, Key identified the elections of 1896 (the showdown between Democrat William Jennings Bryan and Republican William McKinley) and of 1928 (the contest between Democrat Al Smith and Republican Herbert Hoover) as "critical elections" that brought notably sharp and long-lasting changes in voting patterns. That is all. Nothing appears in Key's foundational article about any critical elections prior to 1896, any possible periodicity in the occurrence of such elections, or any distinctive kinds of issue innovations or government policy results that might be associated with such elections. Also, Key seemed to back off critical elections somewhat four years later by highlighting patterns of "secular realignment"—that is,

2. V. O. Key, Jr., "A Theory of Critical Elections," *Journal of Politics* 17 (1955), 3–18, at 4.

gradual change—in voter coalitions.³ Elsewhere in his writings, his comments on realignments are cautious and fleeting. Still, in 1955, thanks to Key, the idea of critical elections came to life.

E. E. Schattschneider weighed in with a quite different kind of contribution in 1956, which he reissued largely intact as the fifth chapter of his widely read *Semisovereign People* in 1960. Schattschneider's evocative framing of realignments was chatty rather than data-driven and was laden with far-reaching, if often elusive, empirical and theoretical claims rather than, as in Key's case, circumspect observations. Schattschneider zeroed in on the McKinley-Bryan election of 1896, "one of the decisive elections in American history," which, he asserted, brought on a party coalitional alignment "powerful enough to determine the nature of American politics for more than thirty years." The realignment of 1896 was "perhaps the best example in American history of the successful substitution of one conflict [that is, one cleavage between opposing clusters of interests] for another"—a signature Schattschneider

3. V. O. Key, Jr., "Secular Realignment and the Party System," *Journal of Politics* 21 (1959), 198–210. For a more recent statement on the idea of gradual as opposed to abrupt coalitional change, see Edward G. Carmines and James A. Stimson, "The Dynamics of Issue Evolution: The United States," ch. 5 in Russell J. Dalton, Scott C. Flanagan, and Paul Allen Beck (eds.), *Electoral Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies: Realignment or Dealignment?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 151–52.

concern. In turn, it took the later "revolution of 1932"—the election of Franklin Roosevelt—to "produce the greatest reversal of public policy in American history."⁴

Key and Schattschneider provided materials to build with. A half generation later, Sundquist presented a large, well-worked-out construction with his *Dynamics of the Party System*.⁵ Probably most undergraduate students have learned about electoral realignments by way of this zestful, accessible volume that organizes so much of American political history so interestingly. Sundquist addresses realigning periods or eras rather than just single elections; he notes that a realignment "reaches its climax in one or more critical elections."⁶ He dwells on three such eras that by around 1970 had become canonical: the 1850s, with its sectional crisis and Republican ascent to victory in 1860; the 1890s, with its Populist movement and McKinley-Bryan showdown; and the Depression-dogged 1930s. As with Schattschneider, the content of new voter cleavages—not just their statistical existence, as with

4. E. E. Schattschneider, "United States: The Functional Approach to Party Government," 194–215, in Sigmund Neumann (ed.), *Modern Political Parties: Approaches to Comparative Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956); E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1960), ch. 5, at 78, 81–82, 86.

5. James L. Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System: Alignment and Realignment of Political Parties in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1973; rev. ed., 1983).

6. *Ibid.* (1973), 294.

Key—is the signal feature associated with Sundquist's voter realignments. Yet in an updating touch appropriate to a new era of public opinion research, it is opposing issue positions, rather than, as in Schattschneider's case, opposing interests off which issue propensities could in principle unproblematically be read, that are said to index the cleavages. Sundquist is cautious. He is quick with a proposition or a generalization about behavior by voters or parties, but I could not pinpoint any claims in his work about, for example, the governmental policy consequences of realignments.

Of Burnham's many works on electoral realignments, three issued between 1965 and 1970 are perhaps the best guides to his thinking. In his seminal article "The Changing Shape of the American Political Universe," he associated the country's twentieth-century decline in voter turnout with the alleged electoral realignment of the mid-1890s.⁷ In his chapter in the classic volume *The American Party Systems*, he organized American history into successive "party systems" bracketed by electoral realignments.⁸ And in his *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings*

7. Walter D. Burnham, "The Changing Shape of the American Political Universe," *American Political Science Review* 59 (1965), 7–28.

8. Walter Dean Burnham, "Party Systems and the Political Process," ch. 10 in William N. Chambers and Burnham (eds.), *The American Party Systems: Stages of Political Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

of *American Politics*, he provided his fullest statement.⁹ Ample attention will be given to Burnham's specific claims below. In general, while embracing ideas set forth by Key and Schattschneider, Burnham went on to point the realignments scholarship toward additional instances of realigning elections, periodicity throughout American history, and policy effects said to be systematically associated with realignments. With these extensions, the realignments genre at the level of journal articles and graduate instruction became largely Burnham's.

Now for the shift of gears. A fully fleshed-out, maximally claim-laden version of the realignments perspective, I posit, can be sorted into a series of distinct claims about reality. Drawing on the relevant literature, I present fifteen such claims in this chapter. There is nothing magic about these particular fifteen; anyone else who happened to scrutinize the same literature would probably code it differently, though not radically so.¹⁰ This empirical chunking may seem an odd way to proceed, but there is a reason for it. Any analyst approaching the realignments literature can get tied in knots over whether

9. Walter Dean Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York: Norton, 1970).

10. In an early, briefer version of this work, I listed only eleven such claims. See David R. Mayhew, "Electoral Realignments," *Annual Review of Political Science* 3 (2000), 449–74. I expanded the list to fifteen after re-reading certain realignments works and reading ones that had escaped me before.

the features allegedly associated with realignments are causes, defining properties, concomitants, or consequences of them. I do not believe that those knots can be untied, and that to attempt a critique that is directly geared to the realignments canon's own conceptual structure would therefore be confusing and unproductive. Yet the canon's statements, regardless of what their place might be in any conceptual structure, can at least be probed for their truth value. That is my task here.

The fifteen claims are all in principle empirically testable, or at least they have a testable empirical side. All but the last are universalistic in form—at least across the domain of American national history. The last is historical. Taken together, claims 1 through 4 add up to the kind of content found in a cyclical theory of history—such as business-cycles theory. They feature a phenomenon that recurs, a specified periodicity of the recurrence, and two alternative causes of the alleged periodicity. (In this work, I tackle these causes by seeing if they leave the identifying tracks of evidence they are supposed to.) Claims 5 through 7 take up process events that are thought to map onto electoral realignments in various ways, claims 8 through 10 take up issue events, and claims 11 through 13 take up government policy events. Claims 14 and 15 are not easily classifiable.

Here are the fifteen claims:

1) *Through the examination of patterns of voter support for parties over time, American national elections can be sorted into two kinds—a few specified realigning ones and a great many nonrealigning ones.* This is the genre's foundational empirical claim. The terminology can be blurry: The terms *critical* and *realigning* have not been synonymous for all authors. There is the messy matter of eras as opposed to single elections: The election of 1860, which triggered the Civil War, often sprawls back to encompass most of the 1850s; the election of 1896 is often joined to the sweeping Republican midterm victory of 1894; the 1928 and 1932 elections are variously treated as distinct and unrelated events, related events, or part of the same continuing event. For the most part, the literature addresses only presidential elections, but some authors take up congressional ones. Still, Key's claim of 1955 has remained central: "Both sharp and durable" are the voter alignment changes brought by some elections, but not by others.¹¹ For Burnham, critical elections have differed from all others "not in degree but in kind."¹² Sundquist is less committed to a binary distinction in principle,¹³ but he dwells on the canonical realignments in practice. Consensus has reigned in the genre on the requirement of

11. Key, "A Theory of Critical Elections," 11.

12. Burnham, "Party Systems and the Political Process," 287.

13. Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System* (1983), 8.

durability.¹⁴ As for the elections in question: "There has long been agreement among historians that the elections of . . . 1800 [which brought Jefferson to power], 1828 [Jackson], 1860 [Lincoln], 1896 [McKinley], and 1932 [Franklin Roosevelt], for example, were fundamental turning points in the course of American electoral politics"¹⁵—a Burnham judgment in 1970 that has not drawn much dissent among political scientists.¹⁶

Strictly speaking, the reader may notice, this first claim can be sorted into two distinct subclaims: that the universe of American elections can be dichotomized *and* that the results of that dichotomization can be mapped onto specified time junctures. I am blending those two strands here, as the realignments literature usually does. In general, the same body of evidence is relevant to assessing both strands. Where appropriate, I will decouple the strands.

2) *Electoral realignments have appeared in a pattern of*

14. Ibid., 4, 159; Burnham, "Party Systems and the Political Process," 288–89; Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings*, 4–5.

15. Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings*, 1.

16. An unchanged Burnham judgment in 1991: "In the United States all elections are equal, but some are decidedly more equal than others. It has been clear to modern American historians for fifty years or more that likely candidates for the latter category of elections are found in the years 1800, 1828, 1860, 1896, and 1932." Walter Dean Burnham, "Critical Realignment: Dead or Alive?" ch. 5 in Byron E. Shafer (ed.), *The End of Realignment? Interpreting American Electoral Eras* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 101.

regularity—that is, periodicity. This claim is absent in Key, as noted earlier, but it is prominent in Burnham and available in qualified form in Sundquist.¹⁷ For Burnham, who once wrote a chapter entitled “The Periodicity of American Critical Realignments,”¹⁸ a realignment cycle emerges “approximately once every thirty years,”¹⁹ or in another formulation “approximately once a generation, or every thirty to thirty-eight years.” Also from Burnham: “Historically speaking, at least, national critical realignments have not occurred at random. Instead, there has been a remarkably uniform periodicity in their appearance.” “This periodicity has had an objective existence.” There has been a “periodic rhythm,” a “cycle of oscillation.”²⁰ From Paul Allen Beck: “Realignments have occurred at roughly three-decade intervals, and each realignment has been followed by a long period of stable normal politics.”²¹

What has motored the American system through these cycles of such notable regularity? Two distinct theories address this question, one emerging around 1970 and the other a few years later. Since the theories are not contra-

17. See claim 4, below, for a discussion of Sundquist's view on this point.

18. Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings*, ch. 2.

19. Burnham, “Party Systems and the Political Process,” 288.

20. Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings*, 26, 8, 181.

21. Paul Allen Beck, “A Socialization Theory of Partisan Realignment,” ch. 10 in Richard G. Niemi and associates, *The Politics of Future Citizens* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1974), 207.

dictory, either or both might be taken to help the overall story along.

3) *First motor: A dynamic of tension buildup has caused the oscillation in and out of the thirty-year-or-so realignment cycles.* This is Burnham's thinking, with an assist from Sundquist. On this topic, the realignments genre has traveled on suggestions and metaphors rather than on sustained argument, but it has probably been no less influential for that, and the theory is worth teasing out. In brief, what happens in Burnham's account is that political “stress” or “tensions” build up following the last electoral realignment until they “escalate to a flash point” or a “boiling point,” at which time a “triggering event” brings on a new realignment.²² Notice the terms “flash point” and “boiling point” with their connotation, as in the Marxist dialectic, of a change in quantity being overtaken by a change in quality.

To put it more elaborately, there exists a “dynamic, even dialectic polarization between long-term inertia and concentrated bursts of change.” Ordinarily, American institutions tend toward “underproduction of other than currently ‘normal’ policy outputs. They may tend persistently to ignore, and hence not to aggregate, emergent political demand of a mass character until a boiling point of

22. Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings*, 4, 10, 27, 135, 136, 181.

some kind is reached." In another of Burnham's passages, "The socioeconomic system develops but the institutions of electoral politics and policy formation remain essentially unchanged." Consequently stacked up are "dislocations," "dysfunctions," and "increasingly visible social maladjustments," which are not sufficiently attended to until the political system catches up with a lurch as "incremental bargaining politics" gives way to "nonincremental change."²³ Sundquist, reflecting a view once popularized by reformers and Progressive historians, gives a corresponding cast to the politics of the latter part of the nineteenth century leading up to the mid-1890s. "Patronage, rather than program, became the object of politics." For twenty years, the party system was based on "dead issues of the past," offering voters "no means of expressing a choice on the crucial issues of domestic economic policy around which the country had been polarizing." Then, with the Democrats' nomination of Bryan in 1896, "the party system took on meaning once again. The day of political unresponsiveness, of evasion and straddling on fundamental, burning questions, was over."²⁴

4) *Second motor: A strengthening and weakening of party identification has caused the oscillation in and out of the thirty-year-or-so realignment cycles.* Sundquist offered

23. Ibid., 27, 135, 137, 181.

24. Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System* (1973), 92-94, 144, at 93, 144.

this idea in 1973,²⁵ Beck crystallized and elaborated it in 1974,²⁶ and Burnham has since embraced it.²⁷ The passions and crisis atmosphere of a realignment juncture, the argument goes, bring on party identifications that are exceptionally strong. "For many people the emotional attachment to one party and the hostility toward the other formed at a time of crisis remain an essential part of their personal identities for the rest of their lives."²⁸ Strong identities of this kind freeze electoral behavior for quite a while. Yet as time goes on, more and more younger voters untransfixed by such realignment-induced identification come along. The socializing of children into parental party identities sags with each generation, eventually supplying voters who enjoy "little insulation from the short-term political forces they encounter as young adults." Accordingly, some twenty-five years after the last realignment, in Beck's view, the electorate is "ripe for realignment" once again. Put simply, "the prior disengagement of young voters from the established party system is a necessary precondition for realignment."²⁹

But this disengagement is not a sufficient condition. In

25. Ibid., 33-36, 281-83. A slightly amended version appears in Sundquist (1983), 45-47, 304-6.

26. Beck, "A Socialization Theory of Party Realignment."

27. Burnham, "Critical Realignment: Dead or Alive?" 111.

28. Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System* (1973), 281.

29. Beck, "A Socialization Theory of Party Realignment," 207, 211, 212, 216.

Beck's terminology, an exogenously caused, possibly randomly occurring "societal trauma" like the sectional conflict of the 1860s or the devastating depressions of the 1890s and 1930s is a necessary condition.³⁰ Thus the "ripeness" of the electorate may or may not usher in an electoral realignment. Sundquist makes a similar contingent argument.³¹ In effect, an interaction variable is in play here; "ripeness" and "societal trauma" need to occur jointly to cause the predicted effect. The traumas of the 1860s, 1890s, and 1930s could trigger realignments, yet in Beck's account: "Other traumas of at least equal magnitude—the economic depressions of 1873 and 1907, two world wars, and the anticommunist hysteria of the early cold war period, for example—had no more than short-lived impacts on partisan behavior."³²

Again, these first four claims offer a dichotomizing concept, periodicity, and two alternative versions of a dynamic—the needed components of a cyclical theory. Taken up in the next three claims are process events that have figured in various theoretical roles as causes, properties, indicators, concomitants, or precursors of realignments.

5) *Voter concern and turnout are unusually high in realigning elections.* This idea goes back to Key, as noted

30. Ibid., 207, 212, 217, at 212.

31. Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System* (1973), 36.

32. Beck, "A Socialization Theory of Party Realignment," 212.

earlier,³³ and it is embraced by at least Burnham: "The rise in intensity is also normally to be found in abnormally heavy voter participation for the time."³⁴

6) *Realignments are marked by turmoil in presidential nominating conventions.* The intensity surrounding critical elections, in Burnham's account, "typically spills over into the party nominating and platform-writing machinery during the upheaval and results in major shifts in convention behavior. . . . Ordinarily accepted 'rules of the game' are flouted; the party's processes, instead of performing their usual integrative functions, themselves contribute to polarization."³⁵

7) *For one reason or another, good showings by third parties tend to stimulate, or at least to take place shortly before, realignments.* Emphasized in the genre are the Liberty party of 1844 and Free Soil party of 1848 that preceded the Civil War realignment; the Greenback party of the late 1870s and People's (Populist) party of 1892 that preceded the 1896 realignment; and the Progressive party candidacy of Robert La Follette of 1924 that preceded the New Deal realignment. No writer has posited a deterministic, one-to-one connection between third parties and realignments, but various logics conjure up a pattern of the former leading to the latter. For Sundquist, a third party

33. Key, "A Theory of Critical Elections," 4.

34. Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings*, 7–8.

35. Ibid., 6–7.

may seize on a new explosive issue arising in society, attract a following, and go on to trigger an electoral realignment either by rising to major-party status itself or by enticing one of the major parties to adopt its cause.³⁶ As regards the 1890s and 1920s, an argument of this sort is cursorily presented by Key.³⁷ For Burnham, third-party movements of a "protest" variety, sometimes occurring as early as the midpoint of a "party system" as with the Greenbackers, figure as "protorealignment phenomena" in his model of tension buildup.³⁸ For Beck, a generation "ripe" for realignment by virtue of flagging party identification is especially likely to cast ballots for third parties.³⁹

Next are the three claims about issues.

8) *In an electoral realignment, a new dominant voter cleavage over interests, ideological tendencies, or issues replaces an old one.* As noted earlier, this important claim is central to Schattschneider's and Sundquist's work, though not to Key's. I do not see it as a clear, upfront assertion in Burnham's. For Schattschneider, the 1896 realignment brought on a durable new "cleavage" or "conflict" as such groups as "southern conservative Democrats," "northern

36. Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System*, (1983), 28–32, 312–13.

37. V. O. Key, Jr., *Politics, Parties, and Pressure Groups* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 5th ed., 1964), 257–58, 261–62, 280.

38. Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings*, 27–29, at 27–28.

39. Beck, "A Socialization Theory of Party Realignment," 212; Paul Allen Beck, "The Electoral Cycle and Patterns of American Politics," *British Journal of Political Science* 9 (1979), 129–56, at 132–40.

conservatives," the "northern business-Republican minority," and "southern and western agrarian radicals" rearranged their alliances.⁴⁰ In a somewhat different argument, the 1932 realignment was "closely related to a profound change in the agenda of American politics" as a "sectional" cleavage gave way to a "national" one.⁴¹ (Schattschneider does not point to any "agenda" change in his treatment of 1896, and he does not discuss any reworking of alliances among interests or ideological groupings in his treatment of 1932.) For Sundquist, a new "issue" or "cluster of related issues" can provoke and highlight a realignment, as did slavery in the 1850s and the questions of "what should the government do about the hardships of the farmers and about inequality in the distribution of wealth and income among regions and classes?" in the 1890s, and "what should the government do about the Great Depression?" in the 1930s.⁴²

9) *Elections at realignment junctures are marked by insurgent-led ideological polarization.* This is a Burnham claim. It combines the idea of ideological style with the idea of polarization. "The rise in intensity [during realignments] is associated with a considerable increase in ideological polarizations, at first within one or more of the major parties and then between them. Issue distances

40. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People*, 78–82.

41. *Ibid.*, 86–90.

42. Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System* (1983), 35, 298–99.

between the parties are markedly increased, and elections tend to involve highly salient issue-clusters, often with strongly emotional and symbolic overtones, far more than is customary in American electoral politics."⁴³ Also: "In the campaign or campaigns [during a realignment], the insurgents' political style is exceptionally ideological by American standards; this in turn produces a sense of grave threat among defenders of the established order, who in turn develop opposing ideological positions."⁴⁴

10) *At least as regards the U.S. House, realigning elections hinge on national issues, nonrealigning elections on local ones.* This is a recent contribution by David W. Brady that I have not come across in any other scholarship. "Certain elections," he claims, "are dominated by national rather than local issues." Brady undertakes to demonstrate that "during realignments" the House is elected "on national, not local issues, thus giving a sense of mandate to the new majority party."⁴⁵

Particularly important are the next three claims about government policy. Claim 12 overlaps claim 11, but their logics and factual structures differ.

43. Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings*, 7.

44. Burnham, "Party Systems and the Political Process," 288.

45. David W. Brady, *Critical Elections and Congressional Policy Making* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 14, 18.

11) *Electoral realignments are associated with major changes in government policy.* Recessive at best in Sundquist, this claim infuses both Schattschneider and Burnham, albeit complicatedly. For Schattschneider, the 1932 realignment obviously ushered in important changes in policy, and the voter alignment caused by the 1896 election no less obviously underpinned major policy results for a generation,⁴⁶ but did the 1896 election bring about *changes* in policy? That he stops short of asserting, not least, evidently, owing to his judgment that "aside from the protective tariff and the gold standard" the newly dominant Republicans of the McKinley era "*had no important positive program of legislation.*" Catering to business interests trying to keep the government off their backs, the party gauged its policy success "in terms of *what was prevented*"—not in terms of what was initiated or enacted.⁴⁷ Burnham, in his more recent writings, has acknowledged this lack of post-1896 innovation: "Unlike the turnovers of 1828, 1860, or 1932, the realignment of 1894–1896 *did not* result in a major reversal of dominant public policy."⁴⁸

Burnham, however, in the realignment genre's classic

46. Schattschneider, "United States: The Functional Approach to Party Government," 208, 205.

47. *Ibid.*, 197–98; italics in the original in both cases.

48. Walter Dean Burnham, "Periodization Schemes and 'Party Systems': The 'System of 1896' as a Case in Point," *Social Science History* 10 (1986), 263–313, at 269; italics in original. See also Burnham, "The System of 1896: An Analysis," ch. 5 in Paul Kleppner et al., *The Evolution of American Electoral Systems* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1981), 175.

days, did not shrink from rendering bold, general, un-asterisked assertions. A critical realignment constitutes "a turning point in the mainstream of national policy formation."⁴⁹ Critical realignments "are intimately associated with and followed by transformations in large clusters of policy."⁵⁰ They "have been followed by significant alterations in national public policies."⁵¹ They "result in significant transformations in the general shape of policy."⁵² A comment by Key approached these claims: critical electoral junctures like those of 1896 or 1928–36, he remarked in the 1964 edition of his widely used text on parties, "clear the way for a broad new direction in the course of public policy."⁵³ Assertions like these have had a life. Brady, in a recent work, takes it as given that the aftermaths of alleged realignments are times to canvass for successful major policy innovations, examines the three chief canonical aftermaths (although no other times), and claims to detect such major innovations during those aftermaths. Through overcoming "policy incrementalism," his reasoning goes, "realigning or critical elections create conditions under which majorities are capable of

49. Burnham, "Party Systems and the Political Process," 289.

50. Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings*, 9.

51. Walter Dean Burnham, "American Politics in the 1970's: Beyond Party?" ch. 11 in William N. Chambers and Walter Dean Burnham (eds.), *The American Party Systems: Stages of Political Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2d ed., 1975), 310.

52. Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings*, 10.

53. Key, *Politics, Parties, and Pressure Groups* (1964), 535.

legislating clusters of policy changes." "The Congresses of the Civil War, 1890's, and New Deal eras were responsible, in part, for outpourings of new comprehensive public policies."⁵⁴

12) *Electoral realignments bring on long spans of unified party control of the government—that is, of the House, Senate, and presidency; such spans are a precondition of major policy innovation.* In the words of Clubb, Flanigan, and Zingale in 1980: "Consistent unified control of some duration by a single party is a significant condition for achieving major policy innovation."⁵⁵ Indeed, "the only rival circumstance seems to be an external military threat." Of such spans of party control, the uniquely long and important ones have been the fourteen-year stretches of Republican rule after 1860, Republican rule after 1896, and Democratic rule after 1932—all brought on by electoral realignments. Such longevity is crucial for policy making: it allows "time for program formation and development, for new policies to be assimilated by the populace

54. Brady, *Critical Elections and Congressional Policy Making*, vii, 4. See also 18.

55. Jerome M. Clubb, William H. Flanigan, and Nancy H. Zingale, *Partisan Realignment: Voters, Parties, and Government in American History* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1980), ch. 5, at 162. See also Walter D. Burnham, Jerome M. Clubb, and William H. Flanigan, "Partisan Realignment: A Systemic Perspective," ch. 1 in Joel H. Silbey, Allan G. Bogue, and William H. Flanigan (eds.), *The History of American Electoral Behavior* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 64–70.

at large, to gain support, and to become embedded in the governmental and legal structures. Hence, the likelihood of reversal and dismantlement of policies and programs diminishes with the duration of control by the initiating party." On the record, as in claim 11 above, there has been policy payoff: "Impressionistic evidence clearly suggests that the partisan realignments of the Civil War years, the 1890s, and the 1930s were associated with major policy innovations."⁵⁶

13) *Electoral realignments are distinctively associated with "redistributive" policies.* This is a relatively recent Burnham idea, building on Theodore J. Lowi's well-known three-category typology.⁵⁷ There is no reason to expect "distributive" or "regulatory" policy making to map onto realignment cycles in any predictable way, Burnham states or implies, but "matters become quite different when we turn to *redistributive* policies"—that is, initiatives of classwide impact such as Social Security. "Such policies are the heart of critical-realignment periods and are among the most important of their 'symptoms.'"⁵⁸

Next to last is an exceptionally large claim that capstones and, to some degree, duplicates or incorporates

56. Clubb, Flanigan, and Zingale, *Partisan Realignment*, 157, 162–64, 185n3.

57. Theodore J. Lowi, "American Business, Public Policy, Case-Studies, and Political Theory," *World Politics* 16 (1964), 677–715.

58. Burnham, "Periodization Schemes and 'Party Systems,'" 270; italics in original.

most of the rest, but it is worth stating independently. It is at least an empirical claim, although other readings are possible.

14) *The American voting public expresses itself effectively and consequentially during electoral realignments, but not otherwise.* This is the heart of the realignments case. Note carefully the language used in assertions like this one from Burnham: "The voting public has made vitally important contributions to American political development approximately once in a generation."⁵⁹ That is, the public has done that at those junctures but not otherwise. From Key: "Elections that partake of this critical nature [that is, ones like 1896 and 1928–36] are the most striking instances of electoral interposition in the governing process."⁶⁰ For Sundquist, the public had "no means of expressing a choice on the crucial issues of domestic economic policy" for twenty years—a long time—but then in 1896 "the party system took on meaning once again."⁶¹ For Schattschneider, the voter alignment brought on by the 1896 election "determined"—an unusually strong verb—"the nature of American politics from 1896 to 1932."⁶²

59. Burnham, "Party Systems and the Political Process," 287.

60. Key, *Politics, Parties, and Pressure Groups* (1964), 535.

61. Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System* (1973), 144.

62. Schattschneider, "United States: The Functional Approach to Party Government," 201. In Schattschneider's formulation in *The Semisovereign People*, that realignment "was powerful enough to determine the nature of American politics for more than thirty years" (78).

That is, voters could not or did not do anything effective or consequential after that time for a third of a century.

Finally, the historical claim:

15) *There existed a "System of 1896."* This claim figures so prominently in the work of both Schattschneider and Burnham—it is something like a large container packed with its own content yet snugly insertable into the larger realignments vehicle—that it merits special mention. The "function" of the voter alignment struck by the McKinley-Bryan election of 1896, Schattschneider wrote, using an explanatory terminology in vogue in the 1950s, was to award political and economic supremacy to the American business class—a result that stuck for a "determined" thirty-six years. The Republican party, "the political instrument of business," ordinarily ruled during that time. The sectional shape of the post-1896 alignment—that is, the newly accentuated one-party rule by Democrats in the South and by Republicans in much of the North—was a key aspect of that hegemony: "Both sections became extremely conservative because one-party politics tends strongly to vest political power in the hands of people who already have economic power." In addition, "the sectional party alignment was unfavorable to the development and exploitation of new alternatives in public affairs."⁶³

63. Schattschneider, "United States: The Functional Approach to Party Government," 197, 202, 205.

In the following statements Burnham has highlighted the American business sector's "insulation" from "mass pressures" after 1896. The 1896 alignment, in his view, "almost certainly" depressed voter turnout for a generation or more, notably through depositing noncompetitive one-partyism across both the North and the South. Accordingly, "the functional result of the 'system of 1896' was the conversion of a fairly democratic regime into a rather broadly based oligarchy." In 1965 he wrote that in general terms, "this [1896] realignment brought victory beyond expectation to those who had sought to find some way of insulating American elites from mass pressures."⁶⁴ In 1967: The "chief function" of the post-1896 party system was "the substantially complete insulation of elites from attacks by the victims of the industrializing process."⁶⁵ And in 1986: "I have no doubts that *in general* the system established in the 1890s was in fact a political matrix which insulated industrial and finance capital from adverse mass pressures for a generation afterward."⁶⁶

Let no one underestimate the intellectual aspiration of these Schattschneider and Burnham claims about the

64. Burnham, "The Changing Shape of the American Political Universe," 23, 25.

65. Burnham, "Party Systems and the Political Process," 301.

66. Burnham, "Periodization Schemes and Party Systems," 269; italics in original. See also Burnham, "The System of 1896: An Analysis" (1981), 181.

System of 1896. There is an echo of Barrington Moore, Jr.:⁶⁷ "The take-off phase of industrialization has been a brutal and exploitative process everywhere, whether managed by capitalists or commissars. A vital functional political need during this phase [that is, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the American case] is to provide adequate insulation of the industrializing elites from mass pressures."⁶⁸ There is an answer to the question: Why no socialism in the United States? "One is indeed inclined to suspect that the large hole in voter participation which developed after 1900 roughly corresponds to the area in the electorate where a viable socialist movement 'ought' to have developed."⁶⁹ And there is an answer to the question: Why no European-style welfare state in the United States? "The accomplishments of the [post-1896] Republican party might be measured more accurately, therefore, by the gap produced between the social legislation of western European countries and that of the United States before 1932."⁷⁰

67. That is, of the dark interpretation of economic progress set forth in Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).

68. Burnham, "The Changing Shape of the American Political Universe," 24.

69. Burnham, "Party Systems and the Political Process," 301. See also Burnham, "The System of 1896: An Analysis," 195.

70. Schattschneider, "United States: The Functional Approach to Party Government," 198.

Those are the fifteen claims. They add up to a grand, even magnificent interpretive structure—a view of how American political history has taken place. I hope that I have stayed true to the texts and that I have expressed fairly the ideas of the various authors.

Framing the Critique

3 HOW WELL DOES THE CLASSICAL RE-alignments genre stand up at the start of the twenty-first century, well past its base in historical evidence and a generation or two beyond the main assertions by its chief exponents?

All the claims I have presented here can, in principle, be assessed for their empirical validity; that is the principal task I undertake in the remainder of this work. How can this be done? In some instances, reasonably hard empirical information is available in published works and can be assembled. Yet in many instances that course is not possible, and one must resort to conventional wisdom that has been piled up by many generations of historians writing standard works about American political history—or at least that conventional wisdom as I apprehend it. For

recent times, there is also my own experience of living under and witnessing the American regime. These are fallible reliances, yet what are the alternatives? It is not responsible, as the realignment writers would likely agree, simply to throw up one's hands when confronted by provocative assertions on large, important, not easily tractable matters.

A second concern, beyond validity, is the illuminative power of the realignments genre. What has been its value added? What would we be thinking about American electoral history otherwise? What did we think before the realignments genre came along? In this regard, it has always been obvious that certain American elections have surpassed others in engaging voters, generating a sense of high stakes among voters, shaking up received voter alignments, or spurring notable changes in government policy. Elections are not all equal. That is baseline knowledge. Certainly the election of 2000, to name one, was unusual. In addition, virtually everyone would agree that the Civil War and New Deal eras have stood out in American history for both their electoral turbulence and their policy innovations. That is baseline knowledge also. A plausible question is: What has the realignments genre added beyond these baselines?

Probably the chief contemporary charge against the realignments genre is that it has ceased to be relevant: No certifiable electoral realignment has occurred since 1932.

A sixty-eight-year gap obviously seems overly long for a theory of thirty-year-or-so electoral cycles, and at least three explanations have been offered for this embarrassment. Perhaps the decomposition of American parties in the 1960s and 1970s—the rise of ticket splitting and independent voter identities possibly brought on by new media technologies—sent the old realignments dynamic to the attic.¹ Perhaps the two major parties, hungry for victory as always yet better informed in an age when scientific surveys can pinpoint the median voter, have learned to steer clear of polarizing.² Finally, for Beck and Sundquist, an electoral realignment failed to occur on schedule in the 1960s and 1970s because, as their theories allow, that era lacked a strong enough triggering event—or at least one that impinged on the parties appropriately.³

Burnham, however, in a surprising move, argues that “there in fact *was* a critical realignment in the 1968–72 period. One of its essential features lay in the very dissolu-

1. See, e.g., Walter Dean Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Main Springs of American Politics* (New York: Norton, 1970), ch. 5 (“The Contemporary Scene I: The Onward March of Party Decomposition”), 91–92; Martin P. Wattenberg, *The Decline of American Political Parties, 1952–1994* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), chs. 1–3.

2. John G. Geer, “Critical Realignments and the Public Opinion Poll,” *Journal of Politics* 53 (1991), 434–53.

3. Paul Allen Beck, “A Socialization Theory of Partisan Realignment,” ch. 10 in Richard G. Niemi and associates (eds.), *The Politics of Future Citizens* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1974), 216; James L. Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System: Alignment and Realignment of Political Parties in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1983), ch. 17.

tion of the traditional partisan channels that had been implicitly incorporated as a nonproblematic part of the classic realignment model. People therefore looked for it with the wrong tools and in the wrong places.”⁴ Translation: for evidence of realignments, don’t bother to rely on patterns of election returns any more. In the newer Burnham view, we need to look beyond “Type A” critical realignments, the trademark shakeups in voter alignments that inspired and defined the classical realignments genre and engrossed Key, Schattschneider, Sundquist, Burnham himself, and the rest to consider “Type B” critical realignments, which feature abrupt political changes of other kinds.⁵ For support on this point, Burnham draws on two sources. One is “the very perceptive political commentator Sidney Blumenthal,” with his idea of the “permanent campaign”—the decisive and lasting intrusion of campaign consultants into both elections and governing around 1968; Blumenthal “was perhaps the first to get the basic story right.”⁶

4. Walter Dean Burnham, “Critical Realignment: Dead or Alive?” ch. 5 in Byron E. Shafer (ed.), *The End of Realignment? Interpreting American Electoral Eras* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 107; italics in original.

5. Ibid., 116. At issue here is a distinction between two varieties of abrupt political change. This has nothing to do with the more familiar distinction between abrupt political change, as seen in classically defined electoral realignments, and gradual or secular electoral change.

6. Ibid., 107. The reference is to Sidney Blumenthal, *The Permanent Campaign* (New York: Simon and Schuster, rev. ed., 1982), 303–12.

The other source for Burnham is a study of the unquestionably turbulent 1960s and early 1970s by John H. Aldrich and Richard G. Niemi in which those years are declared to be a "critical era" exhibiting "a wide variety of changes" that inaugurated the country's "sixth party system."⁷ The old realignments calendar is accordingly borne out. For this study, twenty-seven political indicators, none of which probes for an electoral realignment in any conventional sense, were organized into time series extending across four decades. In general, sharp changes do indeed materialize in the indicators between 1964 and 1972. During that time, for example, confidence in government plummeted; positive attitudes toward the parties eroded; incumbency advantage in House elections surged; African-American identification with the Democratic party solidified (in the mid-1960s); and the public's designation of the country's "most important problem" shifted from foreign to domestic concerns as the Vietnam War wound down in the early 1970s. Also, on the structural side, the parties decisively switched away from conventions toward primaries as a means of nominating their

7. Burnham, "Critical Realignment: Dead or Alive?" 107; Walter Dean Burnham, "Constitutional Moments and Punctuated Equilibria: A Political Scientist Confronts Bruce Ackerman's *We the People*," *Yale Law Journal* 108 (1999), 2237-77, at 2258. The source is John H. Aldrich and Richard G. Niemi, "The Sixth American Party System: Electoral Change, 1952-1992," ch. 5 in Stephen C. Craig (ed.), *Broken Contract? Changing Relationships Between Americans and Their Government* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1996), 87.

presidential candidates.⁸ That was the 1960s and early 1970s. Recently, Aldrich has speculated about the existence of a new "critical era" inaugurating a "seventh party system" thirty or so years later in the 1990s.⁹

In this work, I largely steer clear of questions about realignments happening or not happening since 1932. On the not-happening side, party decomposition and other accounts are at least plausible, and I leave it there. We should not ask too much of the realignments genre. A perspective that managed to illuminate the first century and a half of American political history, even if it has ceased to work in recent times for whatever reasons, would be an impressive achievement.

On the happening side, I am uneasy about Type B realignments. To give up on critical elections as a defining property is to sacrifice not only content—the flightless bird comes to mind—but also definitional constraint. In probing for Type B realignments, what are the rules for deciding what qualifies as a relevant indicator? Whatever the answer, the genre risks embarrassment with this move. It is vanishingly unlikely that the familiar periodization of the realignments genre—that is, 1800, 1828, 1860, 1896, and 1932—would survive a serious canvass of American

8. Aldrich and Niemi discuss this move in "The Sixth American Party System," 101-2, although it could not, or at least does not, figure among their twenty-seven indicators.

9. John H. Aldrich, "Political Parties in a Critical Era," *American Politics Quarterly* 27 (1999), 9-32, 10-11.

history for junctures of "party-system" change independent of critical elections. For one thing, unwelcome junctures would turn up. Consider the developments during the Progressive era around 1912: a growing cohort of Socialist mayors; a switch to initiative, referendum, and recall procedures in the states; direct primaries in the states; direct election of U.S. senators; a lurch, courtesy of Woodrow Wilson, toward what James W. Ceaser has called "individual candidate supremacy" in the selection of presidents;¹⁰ a historic disempowering of party leadership in the U.S. House (in 1910); and the appearance of a forceful Progressive faction among congressional Republicans that lasted a quarter of a century into the New Deal years. A party system marked by the impulses of the Progressive era was emerging. Public opinion data, if the technology could be transported backward to that time of ferment, would probably add dozens more items.

Closer to the present, a decent case arises for 1948 through 1956 as a juncture rivaling 1964 through 1972. That postwar decade saw the breakup of the "Solid South" in presidential voting; civil rights and the Cold War as new agenda items; a Red scare that crushed the once influential Communist or at least pro-Popular Front left in the Democratic party, third parties, and labor unions; and actual patterns of durable voter realignment as impressive

10. James W. Ceaser, *Presidential Selection: Theory and Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 39.

as those for 1964–72 (more on this in Chapter 4).¹¹ Also, as presidential candidates awoke to television as an invaluable direct link to the public, the 1950s brought pioneering media techniques in Eisenhower's campaigns; the country's last multiballot nominating convention in 1952 (candidates could henceforth build nationwide coalitions on their own in advance of a convention); a surge in split party outcomes in congressional districts (one way for president, the other way for House) in 1956;¹² and an introduction to a new kind of normality as one party managed to win the presidency but not the House in 1956.¹³ That was an arresting result for a presidential year as opposed to a midterm; it had been seen previously only in 1792, 1848, and 1876. Yet the pattern was to appear in seven of twelve presidential election years starting in 1956.¹⁴ Divided party control of the government thus

11. In the present work, see table 4.1 and fig. 4.1. See also Jerome M. Clubb, William H. Flanigan, and Nancy H. Zingale, *Partisan Realignment: Voters, Parties, and Government in American History* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1980), 92–97, 105; Larry M. Bartels, "Electoral Continuity and Change, 1868–1996," *Electoral Studies* 17 (1998), 301–26, at 315. On the importance of the 1948 election, see J. Clark Archer and Peter J. Taylor, *Section and Party: A Political Geography of American Presidential Elections, from Andrew Jackson to Ronald Reagan* (New York: Wiley, 1981), 119, 135–36, 209.

12. Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings*, 109.

13. For a similar discussion of the 1956 election as a break point, see Morris Fiorina, *Divided Government* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2d ed., 1996), 12–13.

14. And very nearly in 1960, 1976, and 2000, albeit very nearly *not* in 1968.

came of age. In terms of party systems, construed broadly, much of the future seems to have been forged during 1948 through 1956.¹⁵

But that is enough. In the case of alleged Type B realignments, the rules are unclear and the past is uncharted. The subject of this book is electoral realignments, not nonelectoral realignments. My task is to appraise the familiar electoral realignments perspective—although without making too much of the absence of certifiable realignments after 1932, since that absence is perhaps excusable. Required is an examination of American electoral experience in general. The fifteen claims presented in Chapter 2 will be examined one by one and assessed for their empirical validity and, occasionally, their illuminative power.

15. Many of the developments I cite here for 1948–56 do not have much in common, yet that is no less true of those cited by Aldrich and Niemi for 1964–72.

The Cyclical Dynamic

4 DOES AMERICAN ELECTORAL HISTORY sort into specified crests and troughs? Do the highs and lows appear in regular cycles? What explains the regularity of the alleged cycles? Claims 1 through 4 of the realignments genre address these basic concerns.

1) *The existence of specified realigning and nonrealigning elections.* Of efforts to discover realigning as opposed to nonrealigning elections during American history, I am aware of two sophisticated works using quantitative data that were undertaken blind to the conventional wisdom of the realignments genre about what results to expect.¹ It

1. Peter F. Nardulli's recent work, which has interesting time series on subregions, does not seem to be "blind" in this sense. See Nardulli, "The Concept of a Critical Realignment, Electoral Behavior, and Political