
Development of the American Elections

Session 5

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17.263: American Elections

Roadmap

[Realignment Theory](#)

[Party Systems in American History](#)

[Limits and Alternatives to Realignment](#)

Realignment Theory

Giving Structure to History

- ▶ History can sometimes feel like it is just “one damned thing after another,” but many scholars have tried to discover (or impose) a structure underlying the progression of events.
- ▶ Varieties of temporal structure:
 - ▶ Secular trends (e.g., population growth)
 - ▶ Eras and breakpoints (e.g., “the Progressive Era”)
 - ▶ Recurrent cycles (e.g., presidential midterm loss)
- ▶ Why impose this structure?
 - ▶ **Description:** Organize historical facts and highlight the most significant ones.
 - ▶ **Explanation:** Emphasize the most important causes of historical outcomes and drivers of change.

Partisan Realignments

- ▶ One of the most influential ways of organizing American political history is through **partisan realignments**.
- ▶ A realignment can be defined as a **durable change** in the parties' electoral **coalitions** and in the issue **cleavages** over which parties fight.
- ▶ Since the idea was popularized in the 1960s, observers have asked "Is this a realignment?" almost every election.

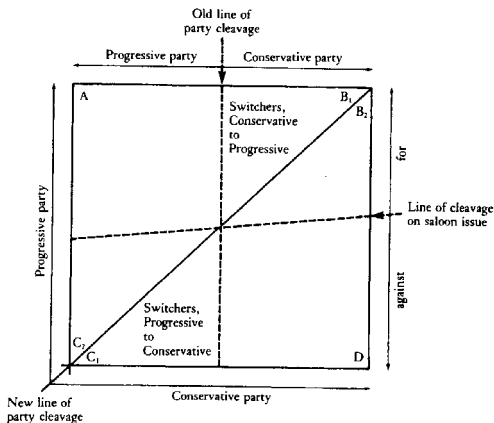


Packer, George. "[Is America Undergoing a Political Realignment?](#)" *The Atlantic*, April 18, 2019. © Emerson Collective. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

A Hypothetical Realignment (Sundquist 1983)

Imagine a newly settled democracy. . .

- ▶ Soon, an **issue** cleaves the community: whether to raise taxes to pay for dams and other public projects.
- ▶ Two **parties** form: Progressives (who favor such projects) and Conservatives (who do not).
- ▶ Later, a **new issue** arises: whether to allow the establishment of a saloon.
- ▶ The new **issue dimension** divides the existing parties.
- ▶ The parties **realign** along this new dimension, adopting positions A and D.



Sundquist, James L. *Dynamics of the Party System: Alignment and Realignment of Political Parties in the United States*. The Brookings Institution, 1983. © The Brookings Institution. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

Other Possible Outcomes

Other scenarios when a new issue arises and people mobilize around it:

1. Realignment of existing parties (see above)
 - ▶ e.g., racial realignment (1930s–60s)
2. Minor realignment (both parties adopt, few voters change)
 - ▶ e.g., discontent among hiterto Republican farmers in 1920s
3. Realignment thru absorption (major party absorbs 3rd party)
 - ▶ e.g., Populists in 1890s
4. Replacement of major party
 - ▶ e.g., Whigs with Republicans in 1850s
5. Two new parties

Note that established politicians tend to resist realignment.

Political Cleavages

What other potential cleavages can you think of, whether in the United States or other countries?

The Realignment Synthesis

Some, notably Walter Dean Burnham, have made party realignments a “master narrative” of American political development, claiming:

- ▶ Realigning elections occur once a generation (~30 years).
- ▶ Realignments delimit distinct **party systems** during which political coalitions and policymaking are fairly stable.
- ▶ Between realignments, voters are relatively quiescent, but political “stress” builds until it boils over in an exceptionally mobilized and ideological election.
- ▶ Realigning elections are the primary time that the American public influences the direction of policymaking.

Party Systems in American History

The 1st Party System (1796–1820)

Sovereignty, centralization, and foreign policy

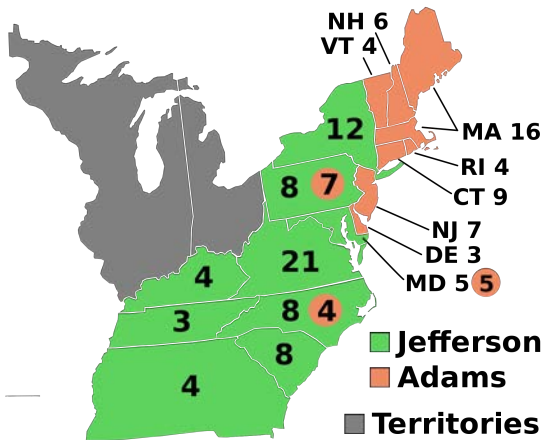
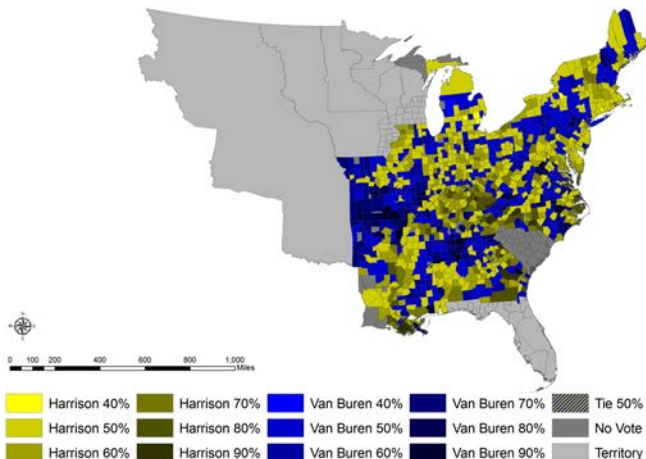


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Figure: 1800: Jefferson vs. J. Adams

The 2nd Party System (1828–1854)

Role of government in promoting economic and moral “improvement” (NOT slavery)

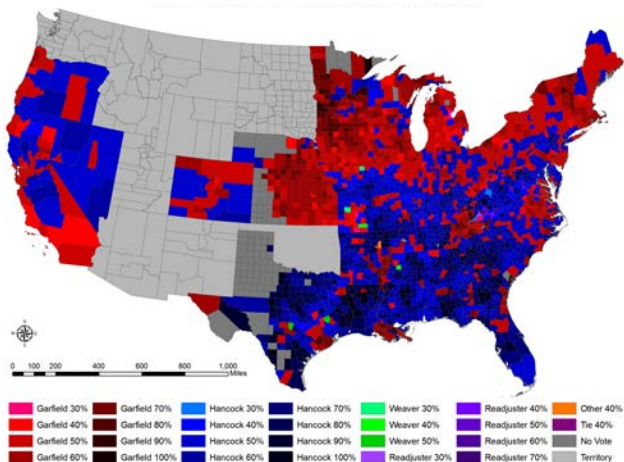


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Figure: 1840: W. Harrison vs. Van Buren

The 3rd Party System (1860–1894)

Sectional conflict over slavery and Civil War layered over preexisting economic/moral cleavages

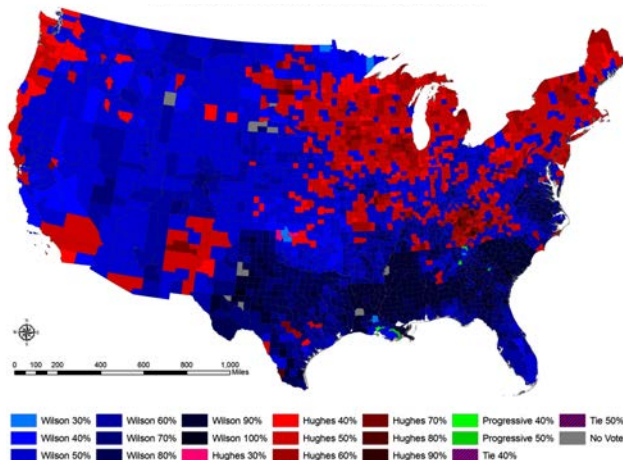


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Figure: 1880: Garfield vs. Hancock (vs. Weaver)

The 4th Party System (1894–1932)

Agrarian–business conflict over industrialization layered over North–South sectionalism

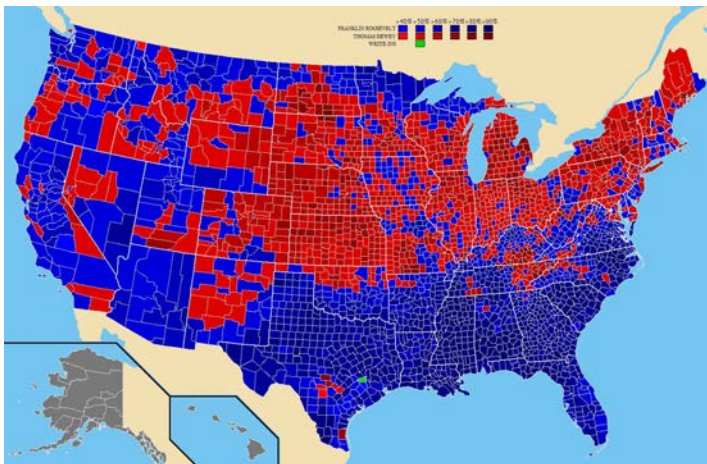


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Figure: 1916: Wilson vs. Hughes

The 5th Party System (1932–1968)

Class cleavages over economic regulation and social welfare layered over North–South sectionalism

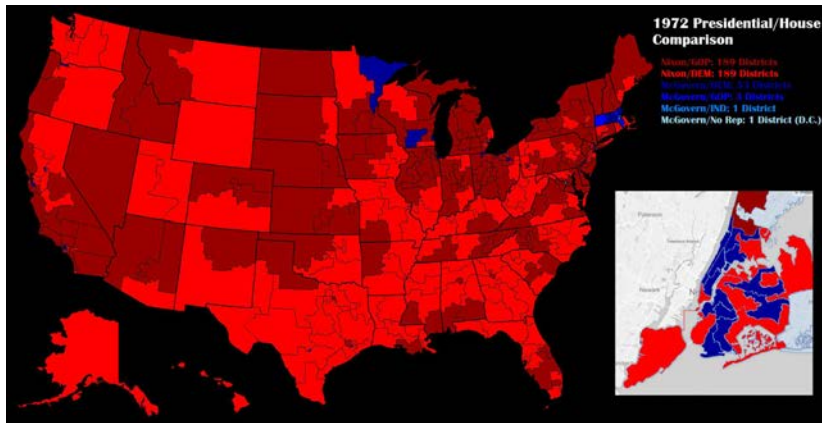


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Figure: 1944: F. Roosevelt vs. Dewey

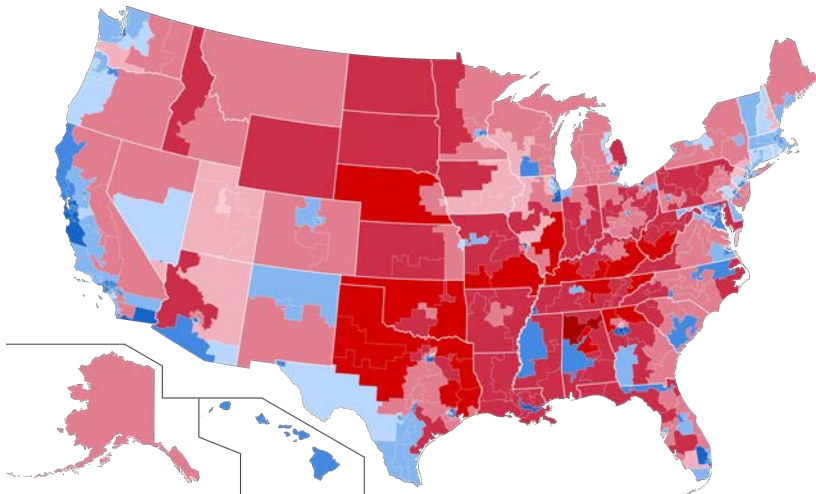
Dealignment (1970s–80s)

Decoupling of Presidential and Congressional Elections



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The 6th Party System (1990s–Present)



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Figure: 2016: Trump vs. Clinton

Limits and Alternatives to Realignment

The Limits of Realignment Theory

- ▶ As Dealignment slide suggests, realignment as a predictive theory began to break down shortly after it was articulated.
 - ▶ 1970s–80s: Waiting for the realigning election that never came.
- ▶ One problem is the theory's sharp distinction between realigning elections and "normal" ones.
 - ▶ Party coalitions eventually realigned, but slowly ("secular" rather than "critical" realignment)
- ▶ Another problem is its ambition to be a "theory of everything."
 - ▶ Might be more plausible in some domains (U.S. House elections?) than others.


Alternative Ways of Organizing the Past

- ▶ An alternative to a single “master” theory is periodizing by domain:
 - ▶ Party ideology
 - ▶ Party organization
 - ▶ Campaign tactics (textbook)
 - ▶ Suffrage regimes
 - ▶ Immigration policy
 - ▶ Taxation policy
 - ▶ Welfare policy

Alternative Ways of Organizing the Past

- ▶ An alternative to a single “master” theory is periodizing by domain:
- ▶ Another is alternative temporal patterns (e.g., midterm loss).
- ▶ But regardless of the kind of structure, we must be cautious about expecting history to follow regular patterns, and we must also be aware that, like maps, temporal structures can **conceal** as well as reveal.



Donald J. Trump 

@realDonaldTrump



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