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CRITICAL ELECTIONS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

For a generation, the theory of critical elections has been a guiding research program for the study of American political history. As fashioned by such distinguished scholars as V. O. Key, Jr., Angus Campbell, Walter Dean Burnham, and Paul Allen Beck, critical election theory posits that American democracy follows an episodic pattern of change and stability. According to the prevailing wisdom, one or more critical elections periodically reorganize coalitions of voters, create new balances of party power, and introduce policy initiatives that respond to unmet needs. Realignment, in this view, are not historical accidents, but processes built into the dynamics of party identification and governmental structure in the United States.

Through a quantitative analysis of presidential election returns and party registration statistics (both measured for counties), this paper will challenge the application of critical election theory to the realignments of the 1890s and the 1930s. The results of analysis show that in neither case did shifts in the electorate follow the pattern predicted by realignment theory. It also reveals significant differences in each of the two periods that question the application of a single theory to historical distinct episodes of political change. The paper also presents a situational logic to account for the capacity of incumbent parties to sustain their power over extended periods of time.

CRITICAL ELECTIONS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Allan J. Lichtman

For the past generation, the theory of critical elections has dominated studies of change and stability in American politics. As fashioned by political scientists such as V. O. Key, Jr., Angus Campbell, and Walter Dean Burnham, critical election theory posits that periodic realignments of voter loyalties are built into the historical dynamics of political competition in the United States. In this view, long stretches of stability in party power, voter coalitions, and public policy are disrupted periodically by one or more "critical elections" that introduce new eras of stability marked by an altered balance of party strength, reorganized coalitions of voters, and policy initiatives that respond to unmet needs. Thus American history neatly resolves into stable systems of party rivalry punctuated by the upheavals -- the critical elections -- that produce the transitions from one system to another.¹

For most theorists, the party identification of voters is the key to explaining this pattern of regular, discontinuous change. Identification with a political party, the conventional wisdom relates, not only guides a voter's choice from among competing candidates but is so deeply integrated into the individual's psyche as to be highly resistant to change. For the electorate as a whole substantial shifts in the distribution of party allegiances occur only during the crises

that produce critical elections and introduce new eras of stable politics. With a kind of foolproof logic, party identification -- the "long-term" force behind voter decisions -- is posited as determining the outcome of elections except for such "deviating" cases as the Democratic victories of 1912 and 1916 and the Republican victories of 1952 and 1956. The results of deviating elections are attributed to the crosscutting influence of "short-term" forces unique to those contests and exogenous to the theory of critical elections itself.

To account for the seeming periodicity of critical elections (according to prevailing views they should occur about every thirty to forty years), Burnham argues that America's social and economic development has significantly outpaced the evolution of its political institutions, yielding an inherent lag in the meeting of political demands. In his view, unmet needs continue to build until a crisis occurs and those needs are met through the redistribution of political power that accompanies one or more critical elections. In Burnham's words, "The periodic rhythm of American electoral politics, the cycle of oscillation between the normal and the disruptive corresponds precisely to the existence of largely unfettered developmental change in the socioeconomic system and its absence in the country's political institutions. . . . Dysfunctions centrally related to this process become more and more visible. . . . Then the triggering event occurs, critical realignment follow, and the universe of policy and electoral coalitions is broadly redefined."²

Other political scientists such as Paul Allen Beck and

Kristi Andersen focus less on the importance of institutional arrangements and more on the dynamics of party identification itself.³ In this generational interpretation of realignment, voters coming of age after the critical period do not possess strong allegiances to either of the prevailing parties since they are remote from the events in which powerful party identifications were initially forged. Thus realignment primarily involves not the conversion of already committed party loyalists, but the recruitment of younger voters who had either not previously bothered to vote or first reached voting age during the realigning era. The period just prior to realignment, moreover, is viewed as one of "dealignment," in which party attachments are weak and voter participation is low. According to Beck, "the inexorable process of generational replacement produces variations in the composition of the electorate over time. When those who formed party loyalties in the crucible of realignment dominate the electorate . . . a period of stable alignment ensues. . . . Once [this] generation begins to be displaced, underlying stresses in the party coalitions surface. . . . The dealigning period ends when large numbers of young voters, unattached to the now-antiquated party system, are mobilized in a new realignment."⁴

The generational interpretation of party realignment, however, also depends on the inability of the American political system to meet ongoing voter demands. For realignments still arise only in the context of political crises; otherwise the period of dealignment would definitely continue.

As set forth in the form advanced either by Burnham or by

Beck, the theory of critical elections has profound implications for an understanding of American history. Scholars link electoral realignment to policy change, contending that major innovations in national policy occur only in the context of critical elections. According to Jerome Clubb, William H. Flanigan, and Nancy H. Zingale, "Most of us would agree, without demanding presentation of much in the way of detailed evidence, that these [realignment] periods were also times of major policy change . . . when the parties assumed well-defined and clearly opposing positions, when their positions constituted responses to recognized national issues and cleavages. . . . The political patterns of the years following partisan realignments also convey a sense of similarity . . . as marked by ineffective and divided government, by unsolved -- indeed, unaddressed -- national problems, by dissatisfaction with the mechanism of government, and by incremental rather than innovative policy-making."⁵

Critical elections are also viewed as the means by which new groups are integrated into the mainstream of pluralist competition in the United States. Indeed, for some theorists, critical elections have become the ultimate fail-safe mechanisms of pluralist democracy. If, over time, normal political competition does not produce mutually satisfactory resolutions of the conflicting demands and needs of different groups, realignment occurs and the polity responds to the will of the people. "Critical realignment occurs approximately once in a generation," notes Benjamin Ginsberg, "giving voters the opportunity to alter national policy significantly. Thus popular majorities appear, over time, to govern."⁶

In sum, if the critical election model were correct, one would expect to find, descriptively, periodic realignments in the electoral strength of parties accompanied by shifts in the social and economic composition of party coalitions. This process should result not from historical accident, but from a dynamic inherent to the nature of party identification, the process of generational change, and the accumulation of unmet demands. Policy change should follow the rhythm set by electoral realignment, with innovation taking place only in times of realignment and stable periods marked by policy inertia.

For the period since the Civil War, this paper will, in broad outline, challenge the above account of American history, suggesting that critical election theory may conceal more than it reveals about political experience. In particular, the inquiry will focus on realignment in the 1890s and the 1930s.

V. O. Key, Jr., in his 1955 article that introduced the notion of critical elections, identified two such presidential contests since the Civil War. First, McKinley's victory over Bryan in 1896 led to an era of Republican hegemony broken only by the "deviating" elections of 1912 and 1916. Second, in the presidential election of 1928, the defeated Democrat, Al Smith, is said to have forged the political alignments that introduced FDR's New Deal coalition.⁷

According to the prevailing wisdom, a national crisis, beginning with the advent of economic depression in 1893 and lasting through 1896, triggered a political realignment that reshuffled coalitions of voters and altered the balance of party power decisively in favor of the GOP. The dominant historical account of this

realignment arises from the work of "ethnocultural" historians such as Richard Jensen and Paul M. Kleppner, who contend that nineteenth-century voting reflects a clash of religious values between those dubbed "pietists" who sought to use the government as an instrument of moral reform, and those dubbed "liturgicals" who saw the fostering of morality as a matter between the communicant and his church, independent of state intervention. Politically, the Republicans were the party of morality and the bastion of the pietists, whereas the Democrats were the party of personal liberty and the stronghold of the liturgicals.⁸

Ethnocultural historians interpret the critical election of 1896 not only as a reaction against the party in power during the depression, but also as a result of the Republican party's ability to modify their hard-line pietist image and offer voters a beneficent pluralism that could attract Democratic pietists. According to Jensen, "McKinley's new spirit of pluralism . . . born of professional reaction to the defeats wrought by pietistic moralism inside the GOP . . . quickly set the tone of national and midwestern politics."⁹ The Republican embrace of pluralism, the ethnoculturalists argue, came precisely at the time that the Democrats nominated William Jennings Bryan -- a candidate whose own pietistic religious background and crusading campaign style would be more appealing to the Republicans' predominant pietist constituency than to the Democratic Party's own liturgicals. Thus the election of 1896, Kleppner maintains, produced a "two-way voter movement [marked by] the propensity of steadfastly anti-Democratic pietists to embrace Bryan's democracy and that of resolutely Democratic ritualists to reject it."¹⁰

A major exception to the ethnocultural interpretation of the 1896 election is Burnham's claim that McKinley's victory represented the triumph of a new industrial and financial elite seeking to control the "large and possibly dangerous mass electorate" of late nineteenth-century America.¹¹ According to Burnham, the decline of two-party competition and the falling turnout that followed 1896 resulted in "the insulation of elites from attacks by the victims of an industrializing process, and corresponding reinforcement of political conditions favoring an exclusively private exploitation of the industrial economy."¹² Unlike the ethnoculturalists, however, Burnham has not attempted a detailed study of the politics of the 1880s and 1890s.

A predominantly ethnocultural orientation also guides accounts of the realigning sequence of elections alleged to begin in 1928 and end in 1936. Contradicting the view that ethnocultural conflict was dissolved in a new turn-of-the-century pluralism, scholars such as Samuel Lubell, John Allswang, and Kristi Andersen suggest that ethnocultural combat continued through the twentieth century, culminating in the 1928 contest between Hoover and Smith. Postponing the triumph of pluralism more than thirty years after 1896, historians argue that it was the political victory attained by the new immigrant America between 1928 and 1936 that blocked efforts to impose on the nation the moralism of small-town Protestant pietism. Henceforth, political leaders would concentrate on pragmatic solutions to immediate economic problems and give all groups access to the powers of government.¹³

In line with this account of the New Deal realignment, the source of political change is sought not only in the statistics of a

sagging economy, but primarily in tallies of the birthrates of the new immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe. The sons and daughters of the immigrants, drawn to the Democratic Party by Al Smith, became the backbone of the New Deal coalition as Roosevelt satisfied their yearning for political recognition and fashioned policies that seemed tailored to their needs. It was "a little matter of birth rates," wrote Samuel Lubell. "Through the entire Roosevelt era the Republicans labored on the wrong side of the birth rate. Nor was there anything they could do about it, since the birth rates frustrating them were those of 1910 to 1920."¹⁴

Andersen offers recent confirmation of Lubell's analysis in a study of surveys taken between 1952 and 1972 that asked people to recall their history of party identification and voter behavior. Linking Lubell's version of the New Deal realignment with a generational interpretation of critical elections, Andersen contends that the Democrats gained few converts from among the Republican faithful, but were able to recruit vast numbers of new loyalists from among previously apathetic and newly eligible voters, primarily foreign-stock Americans. "If in fact the great political upheaval around the time of the New Deal (seen in terms of partisanship, that is) occurred mainly through mobilization of the non-immunized and replacement of the electorate rather than through conversion, the status of party identification as a 'secular religion' is greatly enhanced. In this view, even during the traumas of the Depression and the emergence of new bases of cleavage between the parties, individuals' partisan attachments remained relatively stable."¹⁵

This study indicates that on several important accounts prevailing interpretations of both realignments are incorrect. First, there was no realignment of 1896 in the sense of reshuffled coalitions of voters. Despite the upheavals of the 1890s, the social bases of the two parties display considerable continuity from the 1880s through the 1920s. This means, of course, that the election of 1896 was not characterized by a major two-way movement of liturgicals and pietists across the nation's dominant parties. Second, the election of 1896 resulted in neither the triumph of pluralism nor in newly-established control of the policy agenda by an economic elite. Third, New Deal politics did not begin in 1928 with an "Al Smith revolution" that mobilized the masses of urban, working-class, immigrant Americans. Fourth, the New Deal realignment involved the substantial conversion of Republican loyalists as well as the recruitment of nonvoters and newly-eligible voters. This reanalysis of political realignment both revises our understanding of post-Civil War politics and challenges the precepts of critical election theory.

If 1896 were a critical election that recast voter groupings, we would expect to find a distinctive pattern of stability and instability in party coalitions measured across pairs of elections. Pairs of elections selected from either before 1896, on the one hand, or from 1896 until the next critical election, on the other hand, should display little movement of voters across party coalitions. In contrast, pairs of elections selected by choosing one election from each period, should display considerable voter movement since a reshuffling of electoral groupings has allegedly occurred.

Typically, investigators have used correlation coefficients -- measures of how well the vote in one year for a set of units such as counties or states can predict the vote in a later year for the same units. The values of correlation coefficients, however, are extremely sensitive to changes in factors such as the level of aggregation that have nothing to do with changes in the actual voter coalitions. In addition to reporting correlation coefficients, I have used a technique based on regression analysis to estimate defections from one party grouping to another.¹⁶ After dividing voters into two groups -- those who voted for a particular party and those who did not -- this measure gives the mean rate of defection across the two groups. Depending on the purpose of analysis, such groupings may or may not include those eligible to vote who did not do so. If, for example, the two voter groups were Democratic and non-Democratic voters, the defection measure would be the proportion of Democratic voters in Election 1 who became non-Democratic voters in Election 2, plus the proportion of non-Democratic voters in Election 1 who became Democratic voters in Election 2, divided by two, to get the mean defection rate.

$$\text{Mean Defection Rate} = \frac{D1\bar{D}2 + \bar{D}1D2}{2}$$

where $D1\bar{D}2$ is the proportion of Democratic voters in Election 1 voting non-Democratic in Election 2, and $\bar{D}1D2$ is the proportion of non-Democratic voters in Election 1 who voted Democratic in Election 2.

Tables 1, 2, and 3 report mean defection rates as well as traditional correlation measures for selected elections from 1888 to 1928. The statistics are computed from election returns for all

TABLE 1
MEAN DEFECTION RATIOS AND CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS: DEMOCRATIC PERCENTAGE OF VOTE CAST

	% Democratic Defection Rate	1888 r ²	% Democratic Defection Rate	1896 r ²	% Democratic Defection Rate	1900 r ²
% Dem 1896	19	.23				
% Dem 1900	17	.38	13	.49		
% Dem 1904	6	.64	29	.23	12	.53
% Dem 1908	13	.50	19	.56	12	.62
% Dem 1912	12	.52	19	.41	15	.52
% Dem 1916	21	.36	22	.55	18	.56
% Dem 1920	12	.40	20	.37	14	.40
% Dem 1924	10	.37	19	.27	13	.34
% Dem 1928	16	.36	35	.11	23	.26

TABLE 2

MEAN DEFECTION RATIOS AND CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS: DEMOCRATIC PERCENTAGE OF ADULT POPULATION

	<u>% Democratic Defection Rate</u>	<u>1888 r²</u>	<u>% Democratic Defection Rate</u>	<u>1896 r²</u>	<u>% Democratic Defection Rate</u>	<u>1900 r²</u>
% Dem 1896	17	.23				
% Dem 1900	20	.28	16	.65		
% Dem 1904	14	.50	27	.37	18	.49
% Dem 1908	14	.38	19	.52	6	.66
% Dem 1912	18	.36	23	.41	13	.56
% Dem 1916	19	.25	33	.22	17	.34
% Dem 1920	29	.21	29	.35	12	.48
% Dem 1924	25	.30	33	.25	29	.28
% Dem 1928	37	.10	44	.04	39	.12

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TABLE 3

MEAN DEFECTION RATIOS AND CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS: REPUBLICAN PERCENTAGE OF ADULT POPULATION

	<u>% Republican Defection Rate</u>	<u>1888 r²</u>	<u>% Republican Defection Rate</u>	<u>1896 r²</u>	<u>% Republican Defection Rate</u>	<u>1900 r²</u>
% Rep 1896	10	.31				
% Rep 1900	15	.43	20	.50		
% Rep 1904	12	.43	23	.37	11	.59
% Rep 1908	8	.44	22	.34	6	.57
% Rep 1912*	8	.37	22	.28	8	.42
% Rep 1916	26	.13	22	.27	16	.26
% Rep 1920	23	.32	35	.18	24	.30
% Rep 1924	24	.28	36	.14	25	.28
% Rep 1928	21	.32	36	.14	21	.32

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counties outside the states of the Confederacy. I will analyze only the defection rates, although the correlation coefficients tell essentially the same story.

If 1896 were a critical election that recast voter alignments, we would expect to find high defection rates for the voter coalitions of 1888 and those of 1896 and all subsequent elections. For 1896 marks the dividing line between what historians have termed America's third and fourth party systems. Likewise we should find substantially lower rates of defection for all elections beginning in 1896 and continuing throughout the fourth party system.

The actual results confound these expectations, suggesting instead that the party system of the 1880s continues through the early twentieth century. Table 1, which lists defection rates for the Democratic percentage of the vote cast, reveals that after the upheavals associated with Bryan's candidacies in 1896 and 1900 (especially 1896) voter alignments returned to a pattern closely resembling that of 1888. Despite the elapse of sixteen years and the expected attenuation of aggregate-level relationships, defection rates disclose the election of 1888 to be a better precursor of political groupings in 1904 than is the election of 1896, or even the contiguous election of 1900. If the county-to-county alignments of voters in 1888 are used to anticipate the alignments of 1904, then 6 percent of the 1888 Democratic and non-Democratic voters are estimated to have shifted between these two groups. For 1896 and 1904 the mean defection rate is 29 percent, and for 1900 and 1904 it is 12 percent. Remarkably, as compared to 1896, Table 1 reveals that 1888 more closely resembles every succeeding

election of the fourth party system. As compared to 1900, 1888 more closely resembles every succeeding election, with the exception of 1908, when Bryan was nominated for a third and final time, and Woodrow Wilson's successful campaign for reelection in 1916.

Table 1, however, is based only on measures of the vote actually cast, and given the substantial decline in voter turnout after 1896, we might expect different patterns to emerge when party coalitions are portrayed as percentages of the potential voting population rather than of those who turned out to vote. Tables 2 and 3 report defection measures for, respectively, the Democratic and Republican percentages of the eligible adult population. Although, as would be expected, the tables reveal less overall stability than does Table 1, the temporal pattern of relationships is quite similar. For Democratic voting, the presidential election of 1888 is again a better precursor of results for 1904 than is either 1896 or 1900. For 1896, this domination continues through all subsequent elections. For 1900, the election of 1888 is a more accurate harbinger of voting patterns in 1924 and 1928, but not in the elections from 1908 to 1920. For Republican voting, as disclosed in Table 3, 1888 is a better forerunner of 1904 than is 1896 and a slightly less accurate precursor than is 1900. The election of 1888 is a better forerunner of all subsequent elections than is 1896, and, with the exception of 1916, yields results almost identical to those obtained for 1900.

Thus the examination of pairwise relationships among elections fail to reveal 1896 as a critical contest that recast the sources of support for the nation's two major parties. Rather, following 1896,

party alignments were reminiscent of those which had prevailed during an earlier period. In the terminology of critical election theory, like a critical election with respect to the composition of voter coalitions and more like a "deviating" election that temporarily disrupted the prevailing alignments of voters. Not surprisingly, the ethnocultural historians who had proclaimed 1896 as a year of durable realignment had simply failed to look beyond the turn of the century: their analyses end abruptly in 1900.

Even if we confine our attention to 1896 itself, the two-way movement of pietists and liturgicals, described by the ethnoculturalists, simply fails to emerge. Rather the distinctive coalitions of 1896 arose, in large part, from a fusion of Cleveland's 1892 supporters with those of People's Party candidate James B. Weaver. The People's or Populist Party nominated Bryan in 1896 rather than running an independent candidate of their own, and most Populist voters fell into line. Table 4 reports the results of a regression analysis that estimates how both voters and nonvoters changed their behavior between 1892 and 1896. The table shows the estimated proportion of Cleveland, Harrison, Weaver, and minor party and nonvoters who voted for Bryan, voted for McKinley, and either did not vote or voted for a minor party candidate. The results disclose that along with 90 percent of Cleveland's loyalists, 85 percent of those who opted for Populist candidate Weaver voted for Bryan in 1896. None of the former Weaver voters are estimated to have chosen McKinley in 1896.

Table 4 also indicates the importance of new voters in creating the McKinley majority of 1896. McKinley was more than twice

TABLE 4
CHANGING ELECTORAL BEHAVIOR 1892-1896

	<u>Voting for Bryan (Democrat/Peoples)</u>	<u>Voting for McKinley (Republican)</u>	<u>Nonvoting/ Other</u>
Voting for Cleveland (Democrat)	91%	6%	3%
Voting for Harrison (Republican)	0%	97%	3%
Voting for Weaver (People's)	85%	0%	15%
Nonvoting/Other	9%	20%	70%

as successful as his Democratic rival in recruiting previous nonvoters and minor party supporters. Again, contrary to the ethnocultural interpretation, Table 4 shows little switching of voters from one major party to the other. Only 6 percent of the 1892 Democratic voters are estimated to have voted for McKinley and no Harrison voters are estimated to have voted for Bryan.

Not only was the election of 1896 not marked by a reshuffling of voters with different religious values, but the contest failed to introduce a new pluralism in which moralistic concerns would be replaced by a kind of politics in which parties sought to recruit diverse coalitions of voters through the merchandising of policy proposals tailored to their pragmatic interests. The era of an alleged fourth party system that followed 1896 witnesses an intensification of the prohibition campaign, the struggle over "100% Americanism," the adoption of the Eighteenth Amendment and the Volstead Act, the formation of the Second Klan, the Scopes Trial, and the religiously divisive election of 1928.

According to Burnham, Republican victory in 1896 meant the domination of American politics and society by a business elite combined with new constraints on the policy options presented to voters. Yet he fails to show that the policy debates of the 1880s and early 1890s, centered on the tariff and free silver, were more threatening to captains of industry and finance than the policy concerns of the Progressive Era, including the graduated income tax, the regulation of private enterprise, restraints on labor injunctions, the eight-hour day, and social welfare legislation. Burnham is neither

able to cite examples of victories for the masses prior to 1896 nor to show how that contest connects with a reform movement that came five to twenty years later and often involved new groups of participants. Historians have demonstrated that large enterprise was often able to shape the policymaking process to serve its special needs during the early twentieth century, but no scholar has shown that business either began the drive for economic and social reform or had better than mixed success in manipulating policy change.

Finally, confounding generational theories of realignment, the election of 1896 did not follow a period of "dealignment" in which voter attachments to parties and the political system were weak and unstable. The virtually equal balance of party power that prevailed prior to 1896 might seem to lend support to the dealignment thesis, but the thin margin of difference between the two parties reflected the strength, not the weakness, of party allegiances. For equi-ness in party competition arose from the reliable cadre of committed loyalists at the call of each major party. During the waning years of the third party system, moreover, voter turnout attained the highest levels ever achieved in federal elections.

For the era of the New Deal realignment we fortunately have data on party registration, the best aggregate-level indicator of partisan attachments. For the five states that kept county-level registration statistics -- New York, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Oregon, and California -- Table 5 reports defection rates and correlation coefficients for the percentage of the potential electorate registering with the Democratic Party from 1926 to 1940. If 1928 were a critical

TABLE 5

MEAN DEFECTION RATES AND CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS:
 DEMOCRATIC REGISTRATION AS PERCENTAGE OF ADULT POPULATION: 1926-1940*

	% Dem 1926		% Dem 1928		% Dem 1930		% Dem 1932		% Dem 1934		% Dem 1936		% Dem 1938		% Dem 1940	
	DF	r ²														
% Dem 1926	0%	1	3%	.86	1%	.94	4%	.63	13%	.38	17%	.29	24%	.12	23%	.13
% Dem 1928					5%	.92	2%	.83	8%	.59	12%	.53	16%	.32	15%	.35
% Dem 1930					0%	1	4%	.83	9%	.65	15%	.53	15%	.38	16%	.37
% Dem 1932							0%	1	7%	.78	12%	.66	13%	.47	10%	.56
% Dem 1934									0%	1	7%	.83	4%	.78	4%	.81
% Dem 1936											0%	1	1%	.81	1%	.87
% Dem 1938													0%	1	2%	.91
% Dem 1940															0%	1

* Five States: New York, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, California, Oregon

election or the beginning of a realigning era, there should be a sharp break in the stability of the Democratic coalition in 1928, or more likely in 1930, the first registration period after the critical contest. No such pattern, however, emerges from the data. Instead, defection rates reveal extraordinary stability in the Democratic coalition from 1926 through 1932. For this period, defection rates for pairs of coalitions range from 1 percent to a high of but 5 percent (upper left-hand box). A departure from earlier alignments takes place only after 1932, during Franklin D. Roosevelt's first term in office. For pairs of party coalitions formed by selecting one year from 1926-1932 and one from 1934-1940 (upper right-hand box), defection rates range from 7 percent to 24 percent, with 13 of 16 above 10 percent. For pairs of coalitions selected only from the period after 1932 (lower right-hand box), defection rates range from 1 percent to 7 percent, with all but one below 5 percent.

For the percentage of potential voters registered as Republicans from 1926 to 1940, the discontinuity in party coalitions occurs two years after that for the Democratic groupings. Table 6 reveals that for pairs of party coalitions from 1926 to 1934 (upper left-hand box), defection rates range from 1 percent to 6 percent; for pairs of coalitions formed by selecting one from 1926-1934 and one from 1936-1940 (upper right-hand box), defection rates range from 6 percent to 23 percent, with 11 of 15 over 10 percent; and for pairs of coalitions from 1936-1940, defection rates range from 2 percent to 9 percent.¹⁷

Contrary to a generational interpretation of the New Deal

realignment, these shifts in the composition of party coalitions resulted not primarily from the recruitment of new voters, but from the conversion of previous Republican loyalists. Table 7 discloses that a two-tiered realignment of party coalitions took place after the advent of economic depression. First, between 1930 and 1932 the Democrats were more successful than their Republican rivals both in recruiting new registrants and in retaining their previous loyalists. This development -- which may be termed the "depression effect" -- hiked the Democratic proportion of the two-party registration from 31 percent to 40 percent, but did not substantially reorganize the social and economic composition of the Democratic coalition. Second, between 1932 and 1934, the Democrats converted a substantial portion of previous Republican loyalists (12 percent) while retaining most of their own registrants (93 percent). This development -- which may be termed the "Roosevelt effect" -- both increased the Democratic proportion of the two-party registration from 40 percent to 48 percent and reshuffled the composition of the Democratic coalition.

As in the 1890s, political change in the 1930s began only after the advent of depression and was not rooted in the politics of an earlier period. The election of 1928 was notable primarily for sparking religious strife between Catholics and Protestants and did not contribute to the later formation of the Roosevelt coalition.¹⁸ America's Great Depression was a major discontinuity in the nation's electoral history. Realignment of the American electorate occurred neither in response to generational change nor in reaction to the unmet needs of those sharing least in the prosperity of the 1920s. Changes

TABLE 7

CHANGES IN VOTER REGISTRATION: 1926-1934*

	<u>Democratic 1928</u>	<u>Republican 1928</u>	<u>Not Registering 1928</u>
Democratic 1926	90%	1%	10%
Republican 1926	2%	96%	2%
Not Registering 1926	10%	16%	75%
	<u>Democratic 1930</u>	<u>Republican 1930</u>	<u>Not Registering 1930</u>
Democratic 1928	84%	1%	15%
Republican 1928	1%	90%	9%
Not Registering 1928	1%	1%	98%
	<u>Democratic 1932</u>	<u>Republican 1932</u>	<u>Not Registering 1932</u>
Democratic 1930	98%	1%	1%
Republican 1930	1%	93%	7%
Not Registering 1930	16%	11%	74%
	<u>Democratic 1934</u>	<u>Republican 1934</u>	<u>Not Registering 1934</u>
Democratic 1932	93%	5%	2%
Republican 1932	12%	84%	5%
Not Registering 1932	2%	0%	98%

*Five States: New York, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, California, Oregon

in partisan loyalties did not reflect the redemption of claims pent up during the 1920s, but the creation of new demands that were not being met during the crisis. The situation from 1929 to 1932 was strikingly similar to that of the 1890s, when the Cleveland administration failed to solve an economic emergency. The political demands of the 1930s called not for the recasting of American society, but for the relief of distress and the restoration of opportunity. As Robert H. Zieger noted in a 1976 review essay, "New Deal reforms were partial, frugally funded, closely in line with prevailing conceptions about the role of government, and extremely sensitive to the rhetoric of decentralization and local control to the disadvantage of minorities, working people, and the poor."¹⁹

As in the 1890s, the realignment of the 1930s did not end a period of "dealignment." Contrary to the instability in party control of government that should be evident during dealignments, the Republicans controlled every branch of the national government from 1921 to 1931. Although voter turnout was low during the landslide elections of 1920 and 1924, the election of 1928 proved that an exciting contest could still produce a substantial turnout. Moreover, low rates of turnout during most of the 1920s were part of a trend that began immediately after 1896 rather than subsequent to the coming of age of voters untouched by conflicts of the 1890s.

Nonetheless, political change in the 1930s differed from that of the 1890s in several important respects. First, shifts in party power were far more substantial in the 1930s than in the 1890s. The realignment of the 1890s ended a twenty-year period of mixed control

of the national government and began a fifteen-year period of united Republican control. The realignment of the 1930s ended ten years of solid Republican domination and introduced fifteen years of unbroken Democratic rule. Second, the Republicans of the 1890s gained strength primarily from the recruitment of new voters, whereas the Democrats of the 1930s succeeded both in winning new loyalists and in converting the Republican faithful. Third, the realignment of the 1930s, unlike that of the 1890s, reorganized the social and economic composition of party coalitions. Fourth, only the realignment of the 1930s directly resulted in a major redirection of national policy.

The main features of the New Deal policy system, however, were put into place during FDR's first term and did not require extended control of government by the Democratic Party. Indeed, during the eras of alleged policy inertia between critical elections, innovative leaders have engineered significant and lasting changes in the policies of government. Examples include the reform measures of Woodrow Wilson's first term and the civil rights, welfare, and regulatory legislation of Lyndon Johnson's administration.

What remains from the critical election model is only the finding particular parties have dominated government for certain periods of time. For presidential administrations, at least, this phenomena can be explained without reference to party identification or any "long-term" force purported to extend beyond the interval between administrations. The physicist and mathematician V. I. Keilis-Borok and I have used the methodology of pattern recognition to fashion a situational logic of presidential elections that explains victory or

defeat for incumbent parties by reference only to circumstances that arise in the four years between campaigns.²⁰ Our analysis shows that the outcome of elections follows the dynamics of certain simple, integral parameters that are more sensitive than party identification to changes occurring during the four years of a presidential term. But the parameters transcend the decisions of individual voters, the movement of voter blocs, the unique issues of an election, and the strategems of campaigns. Thus the presidency is up for grabs every four years according to a logic that transcends either party allegiances or the turbulence of particular campaigns.

The parameters used to diagnose political situations are obtained from yes or no answers to the twelve questions listed in Table 8. This questionnaire can be answered prior to the coming election; most questions can be answered definitively by the time both major parties have selected their nominees. Each answer reflects diverse features of complex situations that may be both causes and symptoms of the prospects for incumbent and challenging parties. Social unrest, for instance, may indicate dissatisfaction with the status quo while itself becoming a reason for rejecting the incumbent party; the incumbent party, in turn, may attempt to exploit disorder to discredit the opposition and rally supporters. Answers to several of the questions, notably 8-12, require judgments about historical circumstance that are frequently put forth by historians but are not reduced to precise numerical criteria. Pattern recognition offers a systematic means of determining whether judgments of these matters yields an accurate division of presidential elections into victories

TABLE 8

QUESTIONNAIRE

The answers, given in brackets, favor the victory of incumbent party according to analysis of the whole data set in Table 2 (last kernel in Table 3).

1. Has the incumbent party been in office more than a single term? [no]
2. Did the incumbent party gain more than 50% of the vote cast in the previous election?* [yes]
3. Was there major third party activity during the election year? [no]
4. Was there a serious contest for the nomination of the incumbent party candidate? [no]
5. Was the incumbent party candidate the sitting president? [yes]
6. Was the election year a time of recession or depression? [no]
7. Was the yearly mean per-capita rate of growth in real GNP during the incumbent administration equal to or greater than the mean rate of the previous eight years and equal to or greater than 1%? ** [yes]
8. Did the incumbent president initiate major changes in national policy? [yes]
9. Was there major social unrest in the nation during the incumbent administration? [no]
10. Was the incumbent administration tainted by major scandal or failure? [no]
11. Is the incumbent party candidate charismatic or a national hero? [yes]
12. Is the challenging party candidate charismatic or a national hero? [no]

*Rounded to the nearest percent.

**Prior to the 1890s, the available statistics are approximate.

by incumbent or challenging parties.

When the questionnaire is applied to all American presidential elections from 1860 to 1980, the algorithm of pattern recognition yields the set of yes/no answers that are most favorable to victory by the incumbent party (these answers are listed in Table 8). These preferential responses to the questionnaire are compared to the actual answers for a given election, producing from zero to twelve discrepancies; the fewer the number of discrepancies the more favorable the situation for victory by the incumbent party. Taken together, the answers to the questionnaire divide elections into incumbent and challenging party victories as shown in Table 9. Whenever there are fewer than five discrepancies from the answers listed on Table 8, the incumbent party retained control of the White House. Whenever there are more than five discrepancies, the challenging party triumphed. Only three elections attained the indeterminate number of five discrepancies. Two of them are victories by the incumbent party and one -- the election of 1912 in which ex-president Roosevelt split the Republican party²¹ -- is a victory for the challenging party.

Considering the period following the realignment of 1896, critical election theory would incorrectly anticipate the result of eight of twenty-one presidential elections; in the contests of 1912, 1916, 1932, 1952, 1956, 1968, 1972, and 1980 the minority party gained the presidency. Our situational logic, in contrast, generates no incorrect predictions and only two indeterminate verdicts -- for the presidential elections of 1908 and 1912. For the years following the death of FDR in 1945, critical election theory incorrectly forecasts

Without becoming an innovator of new policy, McKinley profited from a newly rising economy, a "splendid little war," domestic tranquility, and party unity. A diagnosis of the political situation in 1900 reveals only two discrepancies from the twelve traits favorable to an incumbent victory (Table 8). With Bryan's defeat in 1896 and 1900, voter groupings again came to resemble those of the 1880s; McKinley never succeeded in winning over the Democratic loyalists necessary for reorganizing the coalitional bases of the two parties. In addition, after 1896, voter turnout began a steady decline that was not reversed until the dramatic confrontation between Al Smith and Herbert Hoover in 1928. Contrary to the generational version of realignment theory, critical elections of the 1890s seem actually to have weakened voters' attachment to the political system.

In 1932, Roosevelt defeated an incumbent president burdened with personal responsibility for three years of unrelieved economic distress. Unlike McKinley, Roosevelt did not experience a favorable turn in the business cycle that coincided with his arrival in the White House. To combat depression and reform the economy, FDR instituted important, if nonradical, changes in national policy. For the first time since the Civil War, Roosevelt's policy innovations and political leadership produced major shifts in the composition of party coalitions. His campaign for reelection in 1936 also contributed to the rising trend in voter turnout that had begun in 1928. Once FDR himself passed from the scene, however, the Democrats were able to win only four of nine presidential contests between 1948 and 1980.

Examination of the historical record also suggests several broad guidelines for interpreting the election of 1980. First, even if 1980 presages a durable redirection of American politics, realignment in the 1980s will likely exhibit distinctive features that cannot be anticipated by prevailing theory. Crucial differences between what happened in the 1890s and the 1930s show the deficiencies of a static model -- like that incorporated in critical election theory -- that imposes a common cyclical pattern on the process of political change. In 1980, for instance, unlike either 1896 or 1932, voter turnout continued a long-term decline, dropping to but 51 percent of the eligible electorate. In 1980, moreover, the triumphant candidate was weakest amongst the youngest voters participating in the election.

Second, the results of a single election or even a short series of elections do not necessarily indicate whether the newly advantaged party will be able to consolidate its gains. The New Deal realignment, for example, was a two-stage process that required not only the rejection of Hoover's approach to combatting depression, but also the successful leadership of FDR. In other instances, political turnabouts even more dramatic than that of 1980 have failed to produce lasting change in the control of government. Between 1910 and 1912, for instance, the Democrats recaptured the White House, transformed a 219 to 172 deficit in the House to a 291 to 127 lead, and turned around a 61 to 32 deficit in the Senate to a 51 to 44 lead. By 1920, however, the Republicans had regained complete control of the national government, a position they would maintain until after the Great Crash of 1929.

Third, irrespective of the results of upcoming elections, Ronald Reagan and a sympathetic Congress may generate lasting changes in American governance. Like those of Wilson's first term, the initiatives of Reagan's administration may alter the policymaking context for whomever comes to control the national government. Even if the Democrats should regain domination of Congress and the presidency in 1984, they may find themselves functioning in a very different environment from that of the 1970s. Thus durable change in government policy need not depend on a realignment that follows the precepts of critical election theory.

FOOTNOTES

1. See, for example, V. O. Key, Jr., "A Theory of Critical Elections," The Journal of Politics 17 (1955):3-18; Angus Campbell et al., The American Voter (New York, 1960); Walter Dean Burnham, Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics (New York, 1971).
2. Burnham, Critical Elections, 181.
3. Paul Allen Beck, "The Electoral Cycle and Patterns of American Politics," British Journal of Political Science 9 (1979):129-156; and "A Socialization Theory of Partisan Realignment," in The Politics of Future Citizens, Richard G. Niemi, ed. (San Francisco, 1974), 199-219; Kristi Andersen, The Creation of a Democratic Majority 1928-1936 (Chicago, 1979).
4. Beck, "The Electoral Cycle," 131-32.
5. Jerome Clubb, William H. Flanigan, and Nancy H. Zingale, Partisan Realignment: Voters, Parties and Government in American History (Beverly Hills, 1980), 252.
6. Benjamin Ginsberg, "Elections and Public Policy," American Political Science Review 70 (1976):49.
7. Key, "A Theory," 3-18.

8. Richard Jensen, The Winning of the Midwest: Social and Political Conflict, 1888-1896 (Chicago, 1971); Paul M. Kleppner, The Cross of Culture: A Social Analysis of Midwestern Politics, 1850-1900 (New York, 1970) and The Third Electoral System, 1853-1892 (Chapel Hill, 1979).
9. Jensen, The Winning.
10. Kleppner, The Cross.
11. Burnham, Critical Elections, 90.
12. Walter Dean Burnham, "Party Systems and the Political Process," in The American Party Systems: Stages of Political Development, William Nisbet Chambers and Walter Dean Burnham, eds. (New York, 1967), 301.
13. Samuel Lubell, The Future of American Politics (New York, 1952); John M. Allswang, A House for All Peoples: Ethnic Politics in Chicago, 1890-1936 (Lexington, 1971); Andersen, The Creation.
14. Lubell, The Future.
15. Andersen, The Creation.

16. For a detailed description of how to compute changes in the behavior of voter groups from aggregate-level regression coefficients, see Laura Irwin Langbein and Allan J. Lichtman, Ecological Inference (Beverly Hills, 1978), 50-58.
17. An examination of defection rates for presidential voting reveals precisely the same pattern of relationships with electoral coalitions shifting only after the election of 1932.
18. Allan J. Lichtman, Prejudice and the Old Politics: The Presidential Election of 1928 (Chapel Hill, 1979), 40-75.
19. Robert H. Zieger, "Herbert Hoover: A Reinterpretation," American Historical Review 51 (1977):808-809.
20. Allan J. Lichtman and V. I. Keilis-Borok, "Pattern Recognition Applied to Presidential Elections in the United States, 1860-1980," Proceedings of the National Academy of Science 78 (1981).
21. Allan J. Lichtman and Jack Lord II, "Quantitative Analysis of the Vote for President in 1912," Annual Meeting of the Organization of American Historians, April 1979.