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## *Ideological Realignment in the U.S. Electorate*

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Using data from the 1976–1994 American National Election Studies and the 1992–94 ANES panel survey, this paper demonstrates that the outcomes of the 1994 and 1996 elections reflected a long-term shift in the bases of support and relative strength of the two major parties. This shift in the party loyalties of the electorate was based on the increased ideological polarization of the Democratic and Republican Parties during the Reagan and post-Reagan eras. Clearer differences between the parties' ideological positions made it easier for citizens to choose a party identification based on their policy preferences. The result has been a secular realignment of party loyalties along ideological lines.

Since the publication of *The American Voter* in 1960, political scientists have generally divided the factors that influence voting decisions and election outcomes into two types: short-term forces and long-term forces (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1966). Short-term forces include the issues, candidates, and conditions peculiar to a given election, while the most important long-term force is the distribution of party identification within the electorate. Campbell et al. (1960) found that party identification was far more stable than attitudes toward issues and candidates. As a result, party identification exerted a strong influence on individual voting decisions both directly and indirectly, through its influence on attitudes toward the candidates and issues.

More recent research has confirmed that party identification is more stable than other political attitudes (Abramson and Ostrom 1991; Converse and Markus 1979; Fiorina 1981; Jennings and Niemi 1981) and exerts a much stronger influence on these attitudes than they exert on party identification during the course of a single election campaign (Green and Palmquist 1990, 1994). Therefore, the distribution of party identification remains a key influence on the outcomes of elections in the United States.

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For nearly 50 years following the Great Depression and the New Deal, the Democratic Party enjoyed a major electoral advantage over the Republican Party because far more Americans identified with the Democrats than with the Republicans. Since the early 1980s, however, the Democratic advantage in party identification has been shrinking. Despite the Democrats' victory in the 1992 presidential election, the difference between the percentage of Democratic and Republican identifiers in the electorate declined from 19 points in 1980 to 10 points in 1992 (Wayne 1996, 73).

Political scientists have long recognized that party identification has a dynamic component. Major realignments, or shifts in the partisan orientation of the electorate, have occurred periodically throughout American history, and these party realignments have been extensively described and analyzed by electoral scholars (Burnham 1970; Clubb, Flanigan, and Zingale 1980; Key 1955, 1959; Sundquist 1983). Some scholars have argued that realignments primarily involve the conversion of voters' party loyalties in response to changes in the issue context or the social and economic environment (Ladd with Hadley 1978). Other scholars have argued that realignments mainly involve the disproportionate mobilization of new or previously disenfranchised voters (Andersen 1979; Beck 1976; Campbell 1985; Carmines and Stimson 1989).

Critical elections are sometimes seen as harbingers of a partisan realignment. These critical elections, characterized by severe stresses to the political system resulting from some cataclysmic event such as the Civil War or the Great Depression, may set off a realignment of party loyalties that continues for several election cycles (Beck and Sorauf 1992; Burnham 1970; Key 1955, 1959; Sundquist 1983).

In light of realignment theory, however, it is difficult to explain the outcome of the 1994 elections. Confounding almost all of the experts, the Republican Party picked up 53 seats in the House of Representatives and 8 seats in the Senate to gain control of both chambers of Congress for the first time in forty years. In winning majorities in both the House and Senate for the first time since the Eisenhower administration, Republicans won majorities of Senate and House seats from the South for the first time since the end of Reconstruction. Furthermore, two years later Republicans retained control of both chambers, winning consecutive terms as the majority party for the first time since the 1928–30 election cycle.

The outcome of the 1994 election clearly reflected more than normal voter dissatisfaction with the performance of the president at midterm. Yet the social and economic situation of the nation seemed bereft of any of the factors normally associated with a critical election. There seemed to be no cataclysmic event that could have triggered such a dramatic change.

Given the existence of peace and prosperity, how can we explain the outcome of the 1994 election? We argue that 1994 was not a critical election in the traditional sense; rather, the Republican takeover of Congress was the culmination of

a secular realignment that had been occurring for several election cycles prior to the momentous Republican victory. This secular realignment reflected the increased ideological polarization of the two major parties and fundamental changes in public perceptions of the parties during this period. Our findings show that even without a cataclysmic precipitating event, changes in the parties' issue stances can produce dramatic changes in the distribution of party loyalties over the course of several election cycles.

### Theory: Ideological Realignment

Political scientists have discovered that partisan identification can be affected by a variety of short-term factors. This research has demonstrated that party identification at the individual level can be influenced by presidential vote choice (Markus and Converse 1979) as well as retrospective evaluations of party performance (Fiorina 1981; MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1989). However, neither of these factors would seem to offer a satisfactory explanation for long-term shifts in the distribution of partisan identification within the electorate, as neither has consistently favored one party or the other.

The inability of either retrospective evaluations or presidential vote choice to explain long-term shifts in the party loyalties of the electorate leads us to consider a third explanatory variable: policy preferences. A considerable body of research has demonstrated that party identification can be influenced by policy preferences (Carmines, McIver, and Stimson 1987; Franklin 1992; Franklin and Jackson 1983; Luskin, McIver, and Carmines 1989; Page and Jones 1979). Although none of these studies attempted to explain long-term shifts in the distribution of partisanship, their findings imply that changes in the parties' policy stands or the salience of these policy stands could, over the course of several election cycles, alter the distribution of party loyalties in the electorate as individuals respond to these changes by bringing their party loyalties into line with their policy preferences.

We will demonstrate that the Republican victories in the 1994 and 1996 congressional elections reflected a long-term shift in the relative strength and bases of support of the two major parties and that this shift in the party loyalties of the electorate was in turn based on the increased ideological polarization of the Democratic and Republican parties during the Reagan and post-Reagan eras. Clearer differences between the parties' ideological positions made it easier for citizens to choose a party identification based on their policy preferences. The result has been a secular realignment of party loyalties along ideological lines.

The election of Ronald Reagan, the most prominent leader of the American conservative movement, resulted in a marked increase in ideological polarization among party leaders and activists in the United States (Stone, Rapoport, and Abramowitz 1990). Reagan's program of tax cuts, increased military expenditures, and reductions in domestic social programs divided the nation along

ideological lines and produced the highest levels of party unity in Congress in decades. Liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats found themselves under increasing pressure to follow the party line on key votes. Some went along with their party's leadership at the risk of losing support in their own constituencies. Others switched parties or retired. The result was an increasingly liberal Democratic Party and an increasingly conservative Republican Party (Rohde 1991).

The results of the 1992 elections accelerated the movement toward ideological polarization. Although he campaigned as a "new Democrat" rather than a traditional liberal, Bill Clinton moved quickly to reward liberal interest groups that had supported his candidacy by announcing policies such as permitting gays and lesbians to serve openly in the military and ending the ban on abortion counseling in federally funded health care clinics. The president further antagonized conservatives with his proposals to raise taxes on middle- and upper-income Americans and dramatically expand the role of the federal government in providing health insurance (Quirk and Hinchliffe 1996).

The actions of the Republican Party in the House of Representatives may have contributed even more to ideological polarization in the 1990s than President Clinton's policies. At the beginning of the 103rd Congress (1993–95), House Republicans chose Representative Newt Gingrich of Georgia as their minority whip. The election of Gingrich as the minority whip and heir apparent to Minority Leader Robert Michel (R-Illinois) reflected a long-term shift in the distribution of power within the House GOP. The older, relatively moderate wing of the party, based in the Midwest and the Northeast, and represented by accommodationist leaders such as Michel, was gradually losing influence to a younger, more conservative wing, based in the South, and represented by leaders such as Gingrich who preferred confrontation to accommodation in dealing with the Democrats (Wilcox 1995).

The 1994 election campaign was a direct result of the Republican leadership changes in the 103rd Congress. The Contract with America, a compendium of conservative issue positions chosen for maximum public appeal, was the brainchild of Newt Gingrich and Richard Armey (R-Texas), another hard-line conservative and Gingrich's top lieutenant. They decided what issues to include in the Contract, and they persuaded the overwhelming majority of Republican House candidates to publicly endorse its contents. The result was one of the most unified and ideological campaigns in the history of U.S. midterm elections: Republican candidates across the country ran as members of a party team committed to enacting a broad legislative program (Gimpel 1996; Wilcox 1995).

One of the conditions for a party realignment is the emergence of party leaders who take sharply contrasting positions on the realigning issue or issues (Sundquist 1983, chap. 3). In order to choose a party based on issue positions, voters must recognize the differences between the parties' positions. We believe that the increased ideological polarization of Democratic and Republican party

leaders and activists since 1980, and especially since 1992, has made it easier for voters to recognize the differences between the parties' positions and to choose a party based on its proximity to their own ideological position. The result has been an ideological realignment of party loyalties among the electorate—a realignment that contributed to the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994.

In order to demonstrate that an ideological realignment has taken place in the U.S. electorate since the late 1970s, we will present evidence showing that:

1. Since 1980, there has been a gradual increase in the proportion of Republican identifiers and a corresponding decrease in the proportion of Democratic identifiers in the electorate. While this shift in party loyalties has been gradual, it has resulted in a substantial reduction in the size of the Democratic advantage in party identification.
2. Republican gains have been very uneven among different groups of voters. The largest gains have occurred among groups with conservative policy preferences, such as white males and white southerners.
3. There has been a substantial intergenerational shift in party identification in favor of the GOP—today's voters are considerably more Republican and less Democratic than were their parents.
4. The largest intergenerational differences are found among those groups with conservative policy preferences, such as white males and white southerners, and among voters of relatively high socioeconomic status.
5. Since 1980, and especially since 1992, voters have become more aware of differences between the parties' issue positions.
6. Because they are more aware of differences between the parties' issue positions, voters in the 1990s are more likely to choose a party identification based on issue positions than were voters before 1980.

### Data

The study reported here is based upon survey data collected in the American National Election Studies (NES) between 1976 and 1994, including the 1992–94 panel survey. These datasets contain measures of partisan identification, parental partisan identification, policy preferences, perceptions of party positions on policy issues, socioeconomic status, and other social background characteristics.

We chose 1976 as the beginning date of our study to establish a baseline that allows us to measure the effects of the so-called Reagan Revolution and other polarizing forces that may have affected partisanship during the 1980s and 1990s. The study concludes with the Republican takeover of the House and Senate in the 1994 elections.

Many of the analyses that we report in this paper utilize data from the 1978 and 1994 election studies. There are two major reasons for this. First, the 1978 and 1994 studies included identical questions concerning respondents' policy preferences and their perceptions of the parties' positions. This makes it

possible to compare respondents' awareness of party differences at the beginning and end of the time period of interest in our study. In addition, midterm elections may provide more accurate measures of the underlying partisan identification of the electorate than presidential elections. In presidential election years, strong positive or negative responses to the presidential candidates can result in substantial short-term fluctuations in the distribution of party identification (MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1989).

In examining trends in party identification between 1976 and 1994, we have attempted to minimize the effects of short-term fluctuations in party identification by combining data from adjacent presidential and midterm elections that form a single election cycle. Thus, data from the 1976 and 1978 elections are combined to form a single data point, as are data from the 1980–82, 1984–86, 1988–90, and 1992–94 election cycles.

Descriptions of the questions and measures used in this study can be found in the Appendix.

## Results

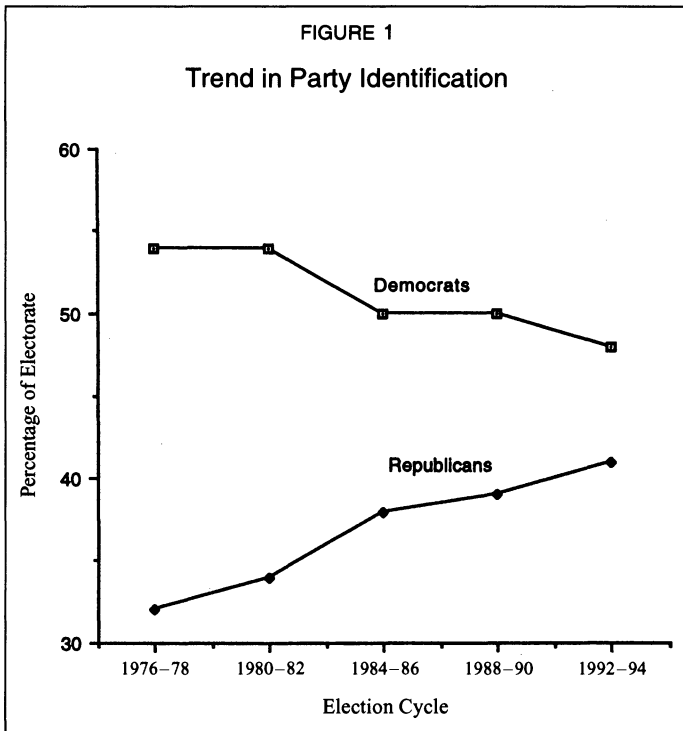
### *Trends in Partisanship*

Since the New Deal realignment of the 1930s, Democrats have held an advantage in partisan identification. This advantage has manifested itself in almost continuous control of the Senate and House of Representatives since 1952. We have hypothesized, however, that the Democratic advantage in voter identification has decreased significantly since the end of the 1970s. Figure 1 presents data bearing on this hypothesis.

Figure 1 shows the trend in party identification over five election cycles, combining each presidential election with the subsequent midterm election, from 1976–78 to 1992–94. Over this time period, the proportion of Democratic identifiers in the electorate has fallen from 54% to 48% while the percentage of Republican identifiers has risen from 32% to 41%. As a result of these shifts, the Democratic advantage in voter identification was reduced by two-thirds: from 22 points in 1976–78 to only 7 points in 1992–94. These results strongly support our hypothesis.

The data in Figure 1 show a substantial decrease in the Democratic advantage in voter identification since the late 1970s. However, these data conceal the wide variation in the size of this shift across subgroups. Table 1 presents data on the party loyalties of several key groups within the electorate at the beginning and end of the time period of interest to our study.

We have hypothesized that the largest shifts in party identification since the late 1970s have occurred among groups with conservative policy preferences, such as white males and white southerners. The data in Table 1 strongly support this hypothesis. While support for the Democratic Party in the entire electorate



declined by 8 points, from 60% to 52%, support among white males declined by 14 points and support among white southerners plummeted 16 points.

The results of these trends were the emergence of a gender gap and a reversal of the traditional regional gap in party identification. In the late 1970s, white males and females supported the Democratic Party at identical rates. By the mid-1990s, white females were 11 points more Democratic than white males. Similarly, in the late 1970s, southern whites still identified with the Democratic Party at a higher rate than northern whites. By the mid-1990s, southern whites had become more Republican than their northern counterparts.

### *Intergenerational Change*

According to students of political socialization, Americans generally learn their party identification from their parents during their preteen and adolescent years. Moreover, once formed, this party affiliation is usually resistant to change. The result is a high degree of continuity in party affiliation between generations (Campbell et al. 1960; Jennings and Niemi 1974). During a realigning era, however, this intergenerational continuity may be interrupted (Beck 1976). To the



TABLE 1  
Change in Party Identification among Subgroups  
between 1976–78 and 1992–94

	Support for Democratic Party (%)			(n of cases)
	1976–78	1992–94	Change	
Blacks	93	90	-3	(442/500)
Whites	58	49	-9	(3,889/3,546)
Male	58	44	-14	(1,732/1,697)
Female	58	55	-3	(2,157/1,849)
North	56	51	-5	(2,946/2,570)
South	64	48	-16	(943/890)

*Source:* American National Election Studies, 1976–1994

*Note:* Support for Democratic Party is based on Democratic identifiers, including independent leaners, divided by combined total of Democratic and Republican identifiers.

extent that citizens choose their party identification on the basis of current issues, the influence of parental partisanship should be attenuated.

In order to test for the occurrence of a partisan realignment since the late 1970s, we compared the party identification of survey respondents in 1994 with the recalled party identification of their parents when the respondents were growing up. We have hypothesized that the current generation of voters are more Republican than were their parents. Furthermore, we have hypothesized that the largest intergenerational shifts should be found among groups with conservative policy preferences, such as white males and white southerners, and among respondents of higher socioeconomic status. Table 2 presents data bearing on these hypotheses.

The data in Table 2 provide strong support for all of our hypotheses. The magnitude of the intergenerational shift toward the Republican Party is especially impressive considering that this sort of recall data is likely to underestimate change. There was a net gain of 13 points in Republican identification in the overall electorate, representing a major shift toward the Republican Party between generations. However, the pro-Republican shift was much larger among several subgroups: 22 points among upper-income whites, 24 points among white males, and 27 points among white southerners. White males were just as likely to report growing up in Democratic families as white females. In 1994, however, white males were 16 points more Republican than white females. Two-thirds of southern whites reported growing up in Democratic families. In 1994, however, three-fifths of these southern whites identified with the Republican Party. Thus, even though southern whites were much more likely to report growing up in Democratic families than northern whites, by 1994 they were substantially more Republican in their party loyalties than northern whites.

TABLE 2

## Intergenerational Difference in Party Identification by Subgroups in 1994

Group	Support for Democratic Party (%)			(n of cases)
	Parents	Respondents	Difference	
Overall	65	52	-13	(723)
Blacks	95	91	-4	(85)
Whites	61	46	-15	(597)
North	57	49	-8	(420)
South	68	41	-27	(177)
Male	62	38	-24	(294)
Female	60	54	-6	(303)
High School	63	54	-9	(261)
College	59	42	-17	(318)
Lower Income	65	67	+2	(122)
Middle Income	58	43	-15	(281)
Upper Income	59	37	-22	(160)

Source: 1992–94 American National Election Study Panel Survey

Note: Support for Democratic Party is based on Democratic identifiers, including independent leaners, divided by combined total of Democratic and Republican identifiers.

Table 3 presents additional data on the movement toward the Republican Party by cross-tabulating respondent partisan identification with parental partisan identification in 1978 and 1994. In comparing the results from 1978 and 1994, we find little difference between respondents from Republican families. However, respondents from independent or Democratic families were much more likely to identify with the Republican Party in 1994 than in 1978. Whereas 73% of respondents with Democratic parents maintained their parents' Democratic legacy in 1978, only 65% followed their parents in 1994. While only 17% of respondents with Democratic parents had switched to the Republican Party in 1978, 29% had abandoned their parents' party affiliation and identified themselves as Republicans in 1994. At least among voters raised in Democratic families, the link between parental partisanship and party identification was considerably weaker in 1994 than in 1978.

### Awareness of Party Differences

We have hypothesized that the connection between parental partisanship and party identification has weakened since the late 1970s because of the increasing importance of ideology. According to this hypothesis, with the growing polarization of the parties in the Reagan and post-Reagan eras, voters are more likely to choose a party identification based on their policy preferences, because they

TABLE 3

## Party Identification by Parental Party Identification in 1978 and 1994

Respondent Party Identification	Parental Party Identification					
	Democratic		None or Independent		Republican	
	1978	1994	1978	1994	1978	1994
Democratic	73%	65%	44%	38%	23%	23%
Independent	10	6	24	15	12	7
Republican	17	29	32	47	65	70
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
(n of cases)	(1,136)	(353)	(559)	(179)	(549)	(191)

Source: 1978 American National Election Study and 1992–94 American National Election Study Panel Survey

are more likely to recognize the differences between the parties' positions. As a result, many conservative whites who were raised as Democrats have moved into the Republican camp.

In order to test our hypothesis of growing awareness of ideological differences between the parties, we compared respondents' awareness of party differences on four issues (overall liberalism–conservatism, government responsibility for jobs and living standards, private vs. government health insurance, and government aid to blacks) in 1978, 1988, and 1994. These were the only years in which respondents were asked to place the parties on all four issues. Table 4 presents data bearing on this hypothesis.

The data in Table 4 strongly support our hypothesis of increasing public awareness of party differences. Respondents in the 1994 NES were much more likely to recognize the differences between the parties' positions on these four issues than respondents in the 1978 NES. Respondents in the 1988 NES fell between the 1978 and 1994 respondents on our measure of ideological awareness. In 1978, 59% of respondents were unable to differentiate between the parties' positions on more than one of the four issues; by 1994, only 37% of respondents displayed this level of ignorance of ideological differences. At the same time, the proportion of respondents who achieved a perfect score (4) doubled, from 16% in 1978 to 32% in 1994.

We have demonstrated that respondents were much more aware of differences between the parties' issue positions in 1994 than in 1978. But did this increased awareness of party differences lead to a closer connection between ideology and party identification? In order to address this question, we compared the correlations between party identification and ideology in 1978 and 1994 while controlling for awareness of party differences. The results of this comparison are presented in Table 5.

TABLE 4  
 Awareness of Party Issue Differences in 1978, 1988, and 1994

Awareness of Party Issue Differences	1978	1988	1994
Low (0–1)	59%	49%	37%
Moderate (2–3)	25	30	32
High (4)	16	21	32
Total	100%	100%	100%
(n of cases)	(2,304)	(2,040)	(1,795)

Source: 1978, 1988, and 1994 American National Election Studies

TABLE 5  
 Correlations between Party Identification and Ideology by Awareness of Party Differences in 1978 and 1994

Awareness of Party Differences	1978	1994	(n of cases)
Low (0–1)	.06	.06	(1,295/579)
Moderate (2–3)	.37	.40	(568/544)
High (4)	.48	.67	(361/589)
All Respondents	.23	.42	(2,224/1,712)

Source: 1978 and 1994 American National Election Studies

Note: Entries shown are Kendall's tau-b.

The data in Table 5 show that among all respondents the correlation between ideology and party identification increased dramatically between 1978 and 1994—going from .23 to .42. Furthermore, much of this increase was due to increased awareness of ideological differences between the parties. Among respondents with little or no awareness of party differences, there was no relationship between ideology and party identification in either year. However, this group made up a much larger proportion of the entire electorate in 1978 than in 1994.

### *Ideology and Partisan Change*

Given increased awareness of ideological differences between the parties, the increase over time in the correlation between ideology and party identification could have been caused either by voters choosing a party identification based on their ideology (ideological realignment), or by voters shifting their ideological stance to bring it into line with their party identification (partisan persuasion). It

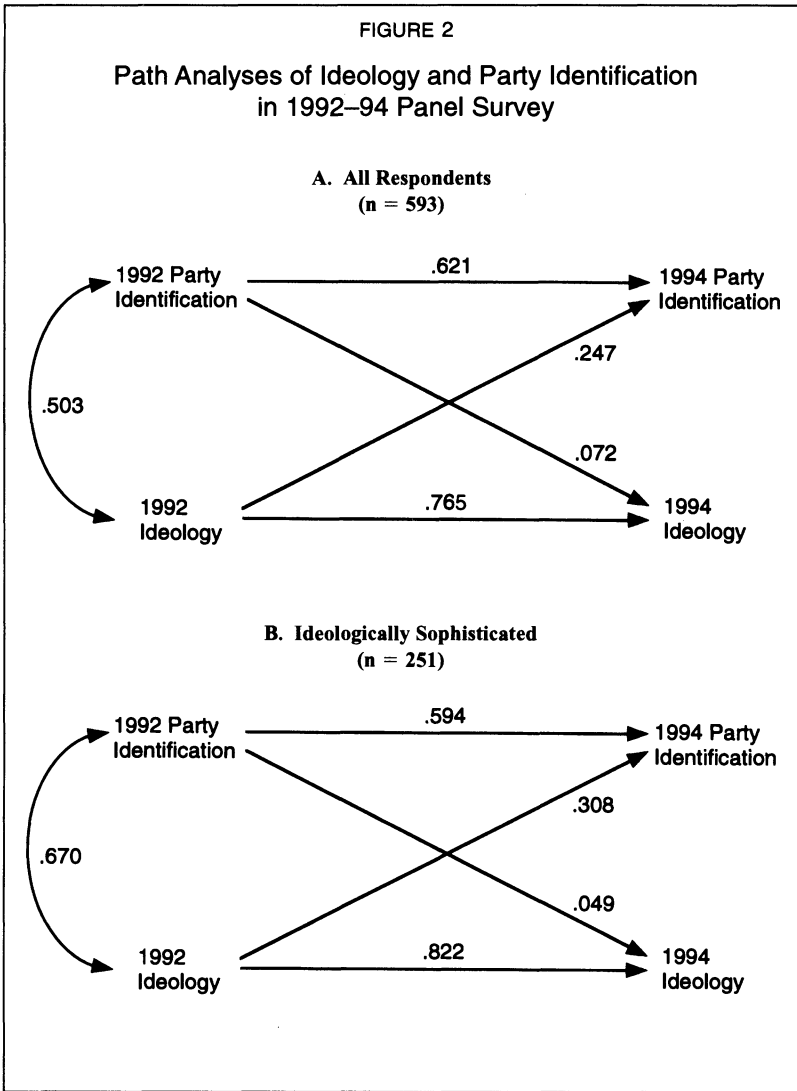
is important to know which of these two processes was at work during the 1980s and 1990s.

We have already presented strong evidence of Republican gains in party identification in the overall electorate and especially in subgroups with conservative policy preferences, such as white males and white southerners, between 1978 and 1994. These shifts in the aggregate distribution of party identification are consistent with the ideological realignment hypothesis. However, in order to compare the relative importance of ideological realignment and partisan persuasion at the individual level, we performed a path analysis, using data from the 1992–94 NES panel survey to compare the influence of 1992 ideology on 1994 party identification with the influence of 1992 party identification on 1994 ideology. We also performed a separate path analysis for ideologically sophisticated respondents because we would expect to find the strongest evidence of either ideological realignment or partisan persuasion among this group. The results of the path analyses are presented in Figure 2.

The results in Figure 2 show that among all panel respondents, and especially among ideologically sophisticated respondents, ideology was more stable than party identification; furthermore, the influence of 1992 ideology on 1994 party identification was much stronger than the influence of 1992 party identification on 1994 ideology. These results provide strong support for the ideological realignment hypothesis: the increase in the correlation between ideology and party identification between 1992 and 1994 (from .50 to .58 among all respondents and from .67 to .75 among ideologically sophisticated respondents) was due almost entirely to respondents bringing their party identification into line with their prior ideological preference.

We have demonstrated that citizens were much more aware of differences between the parties' issue positions in 1994 than in 1978. But were they also more likely to choose their party identification on the basis of these issues, and does this explain Republican gains in voter identification? In order to address these questions, we compared the relationship between party identification and ideology for 1978 and 1994 among respondents raised by Democratic parents. The data are presented in Table 6.

The data presented in Table 6 show a stark contrast between the influence of ideology on party identification in 1978 and 1994. Liberals raised in Democratic families were just as loyal to the Democratic Party in 1994 as in 1978. For conservatives, however, the story was dramatically different. In 1978, conservatives raised by Democratic parents favored the Democrats over the Republicans by a 56% to 32% margin. In contrast, in 1994, conservatives raised by Democratic parents preferred the GOP over the Democrats by an overwhelming 63% to 28% margin. These data demonstrate that the intergenerational shift toward the Republican Party was based largely on ideology. Conservatives raised by Democratic parents were abandoning the party of their fathers and mothers and flocking to the GOP.



*Note:* Entries shown are standardized regression coefficients. Curved double-headed arrows represent correlation coefficients.

Liberals raised by Republican parents were also abandoning the party of their fathers and mothers: in 1994, 54% of these respondents indicated a preference for the Democratic Party while only 39% remained loyal to the GOP. However, this group was only about half the size of the group of conservatives raised by Democratic parents. Therefore, the net result of this intergenerational

TABLE 6

**Party Identification by Ideology in 1978 and 1994, Respondents with Democratic Parents**

Party Identification	Ideology					
	Liberal		Moderate		Conservative	
	1978	1994	1978	1994	1978	1994
Democratic	85%	85%	78%	68%	56%	28%
Independent	9	5	10	6	12	10
Republican	6	10	13	26	32	63
Total	100%	100%	101%	100%	100%	101%
(n of cases)	(393)	(146)	(428)	(116)	(295)	(90)

*Source:* 1978 American National Election Study and 1992–94 American National Election Study Panel Survey

movement was a substantial increase in Republican identification in the electorate.

The results presented thus far indicate that the growing influence of ideology resulted in a weakening of the connection between parental partisanship and party identification in the electorate. In order to provide a more definitive test of this hypothesis, however, we conducted parallel multiple regression analyses, using data from the 1978 and 1994 election studies, with the 7-point party identification scale as the dependent variable. The independent variables in the regression analyses were the ideology scale and parental partisanship. Age, gender, education, family income, race, and region (South vs. non-South) were included in the regression analyses as control variables. The results of these regression analyses are presented in Table 7. For clarity of presentation, we have excluded the coefficients for the control variables from this table.

The data presented in Table 7 strongly support our hypothesis concerning the changes in the influence of ideology and parental partisanship between 1978 and 1994. The unstandardized regression coefficients in this table indicate that the influence of parental partisanship was about 25% weaker in 1994 than in 1978, while the influence of ideology was almost 75% stronger in 1994 than in 1978. Based on these results, it appears that voters in 1994 were less likely to maintain the party identification of their parents and more likely to choose a party identification based on their own policy preferences.

### Discussion and Conclusions

The dramatic Republican victory in the 1994 midterm election and the reelection of a Republican Congress in 1996 reflected a long-term shift in the party loyalties of the U.S. electorate. Since the late 1970s, the electorate has undergone a secular

TABLE 7

The Effects of Parental Partisanship and Ideology on Party Identification  
in 1978 and 1994

Independent Variable	1978	1994
Parental Partisanship	.531* (.024)	.397* (.044)
Ideology	.115* (.009)	.197* (.015)

*Source:* 1978 American National Election Study and 1992–94 American National Election Study Panel Survey

*Note:* Entries shown are unstandardized regression coefficients with corresponding standard errors. Based on multiple regression analyses including age, gender, education, family income, race, and region as control variables.

\*  $p < .001$

realignment. As a result of this realignment, the advantage in voter identification that the Democratic Party enjoyed from the 1930s through the 1970s has been drastically reduced. Today's voters are considerably less inclined to identify with the Democratic Party than voters in the 1960s and 1970s. They are also considerably less likely to identify with the Democratic Party than were their own parents.

Republican gains in party identification since the late 1970s have varied widely across subgroups of the electorate. In general, GOP gains have been greatest among members of groups with conservative policy preferences, such as white males and white southerners. GOP gains have been much smaller among blacks, northern whites, and white females. Southern whites, whose parents overwhelmingly supported the Democratic Party, are now one of the most Republican segments of the electorate. College-educated and upper-income whites are also much more Republican than were their parents.

We have presented evidence in this study that the secular realignment of the electorate since the late 1970s was based largely on ideology. Although past research has shown that individuals can shift their party identification based on their policy preferences (Franklin and Jackson 1983; Page and Jones 1979), the overall distribution of partisanship in the electorate has been seen as highly stable except during periods of extreme social or economic distress (Green and Palmquist 1990, 1994). However, our findings show that even without a cataclysmic precipitating event, changes in the parties' issue stances can produce dramatic changes in the distribution of party loyalties over the course of several election cycles.

Our theory of ideological realignment has much in common with Carmines and Stimson's (1989) theory of "issue evolution." However, we disagree with Carmines and Stimson concerning both the timing of this realignment and the



role played by racial issues. Carmines and Stimson argue that the process of realignment was set off by the growing polarization of the parties on the issue of civil rights during the 1960s; we argue that this process did not begin until the 1980s and that civil rights was only one of a host of issues involved in the realignment (see Abramowitz 1994).

The increasing ideological polarization of the Democratic and Republican Parties in the Reagan and post-Reagan eras made it easier for voters to recognize the differences between the parties' policy stands. As a result, voters have been choosing their party identification on the basis of their policy preferences rather than maintaining the party allegiance that they inherited from their parents. Conservatives who were raised by Democratic or independent parents have moved dramatically toward the Republican Party.

Our results show that the issue-based model of partisanship is the best explanation for changes that have occurred over the the past few election cycles. The voting models (Markus and Converse 1979) would have predicted that the Democrats would have been assisted by the Clinton victory in the 1992 presidential election, but the Democrats continued to decline in 1994. The retrospective evaluation theory (Fiorina 1981; MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1989) would have predicted that the 1991 recession and the poor performance evaluations that George Bush received from the public would have signaled the end of any Republican realignment, but the Republicans continued their secular advance after 1992.

The secular realignment of party loyalties since 1980 has not produced a new majority party in the U.S. Even in 1994, Democratic identifiers slightly outnumbered Republican identifiers. Moreover, there is no guarantee that the electorate will continue to move toward the Republicans. It is even possible that the Democrats will regain some of the ground that they have lost. However, the data presented in this study suggest that the era of Democratic domination of Congress is over. A new era of intense party competition for control of Congress as well as the White House has begun.

## Appendix: Questions and Measures

### *Party Identification*

The dependent variable in our analyses is the standard 7-point NES party identification scale, ranging from 1 (strong Democrat) to 7 (strong Republican). In some of our analyses we classified independents who "lean" toward the Democratic or Republican Party as partisans along with strong and weak identifiers, leaving only "pure" independents in a middle category. We believe that this approach best captures the long-term component of party identification. However, when we replicated our analyses with "leaners" classified as independents, the overall results were almost identical.

In some of our analyses, we use the 7-point party identification scale to create a single overall party support score. This summary score is defined as the Democratic proportion of all party identifiers. It is constructed by combining all Democratic identifiers, including independent leaners, and dividing by the combined total of Democratic and Republican identifiers.

### *Parental Partisanship*

For our study, we created a measure of parental partisanship that combined the recalled party identification of the respondent's mother and father at the time that he or she was growing up. This measure ranged from 1 (both parents Democrats) to 5 (both parents Republicans) with a middle category of 3 (both parents independents or one Democrat and one Republican). This type of recall measure may tend to exaggerate agreement between respondents and their parents (Jennings and Niemi 1974). Thus, our results may somewhat underestimate the true extent of intergenerational change in party identification.

### *Ideology*

In order to measure respondents' ideological preferences, we combined four individual items: liberal-conservative self-placement, government vs. personal responsibility for jobs and living standards, government help for disadvantaged minority groups, and government vs. private responsibility for health insurance. We selected these items because they tap important aspects of the ideological conflict between the Democratic and Republican Parties and because these are the only four issue-related questions that were included in both the 1978 and 1994 election studies. This makes it possible to compare awareness of party differences at the beginning and end of the time period of interest.

All four items were measured by 7-point scales, with the most liberal response coded as 1 and the most conservative response coded as 7. Respondents with no opinion on an item were placed in the middle category (4). Scores on the four items were summed to form a liberalism-conservatism scale ranging from 4 (consistently liberal) to 28 (consistently conservative). An analysis of the interitem correlations indicates that these four items constitute a reasonably reliable measure of ideological orientations (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .68$  for 1978 and  $.75$  for 1994).

For our analysis of the 1992-94 panel survey, we constructed a more elaborate measure of ideology, using 14 individual questions that were asked of panel respondents in both 1992 and 1994. In addition to the four items included in our original measure of ideology, the expanded ideology scale included seven questions dealing with the level of government spending on domestic programs (environmental programs, social security, welfare, AIDS research, public schools, food stamps, and child care), a question on support for affirmative action in hiring decisions, and a question on abortion policy. By combining these

14 items, we were able to construct a general measure of ideology with a high degree of reliability (Cronbach's alpha = .80 for 1994 and .76 for 1992).

### *Awareness of Party Differences*

Using the four issues included in our original ideology scale, we constructed a scale measuring respondents' awareness of party differences in 1978, 1988, and 1994—the only years in which respondents were asked to place the Democratic and Republican Parties on all four scales. A respondent was coded as aware (1) or not aware (0) on each issue based upon the relative placement of the two major parties on the issue. Respondents who were able to place both parties on an issue scale and who placed the Democratic Party to the left of the Republican Party were coded as aware of the difference between the parties on that issue. We then combined the scores on the four issues to form a scale ranging from 0 (low awareness) to 4 (high awareness).

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