

## CHAPTER 7

# The Development of Party Identification

Political parties, like sports teams, evoke strong loyalty and affection in the general public, but also animosity, rejection, or indifference. Most Americans, as the previous chapter showed, feel attached to either the Democratic Party or the Republican Party in a way that shapes their political attitudes, perceptions, and choices. With party identification occupying such a central place, one naturally wonders where this broad attachment comes from, how it develops, and how stable or changeable it proves to be. The discussion of these questions compels us to consider both a person's life experience and key events of the nation's political history.

### ORIGINS OF PARTY IDENTIFICATION

The political world penetrates the awareness of many people long before they reach voting age or cast their first vote. Studies of political socialization have shown that partisan attachments, in particular, begin to form in childhood and early adolescence (Jennings and Niemi 1974). Even without being able to express this sentiment at the ballot box, the typical American teenager has no problem expressing a partisan loyalty. And in most cases that loyalty bears a parental imprint. A young person's party identification is an inheritance from one's parents.

By the time an election survey encounters respondents, they have long outgrown that phase of their lives. Such a survey relies on respondents' recall to ascertain information about the preadult experience: What party *did* your parents identify with when you *were* growing up?

TABLE 7.1. Intergenerational Resemblance in Partisan Orientation, 1992 (in percentages)

Party Identification of Offspring	Both Parents Were Democrats	Both Parents Were Republicans	Parents Had No Consistent Partisanship
Strong Democrat	31	6	10
Weak Democrat	27	6	14
Independent Democrat	14	6	18
Pure Independent	7	7	17
Independent Republican	7	16	16
Weak Republican	8	32	14
Strong Republican	6	27	9
Apolitical	0	0	2
Total	100	100	100
Number of cases	885	436	882

Source: NES survey, 1992 (ICPSR Study 6067).

The correspondence between parental identification, as recalled that way, and a respondent's reported identification when interviewed as an adult may then be taken as a rough measure of the extent to which partisanship is passed on to the next generation.

The evidence for an intergenerational correspondence in partisan identification, shown in table 7.1, is very persuasive.<sup>1</sup> In families where both parents conveyed a consistent partisanship, close to three in four offspring adopted the parental party (including Independent leaners). Only about one in 10 offspring rebelled politically against their parents by crossing party lines (and becoming a strong or weak identifier of the opposition). Most of those who failed to follow in the partisan footsteps of their parents opted for an Independent stance. Whenever the parents offered mixed partisan cues or none whatsoever, as far as the respondent is able to recall, an Independent attitude in the respondent is most common, though not universal. In many households of that kind one of the parents may have impressed his or her partisan allegiance upon the offspring.<sup>2</sup>

1. The 1992 NES survey is the most recent one that used the recall question for parental party identification.

2. Conventional wisdom would accord the father the dominant role in cases where parents diverge, especially on something as political as party identification. Yet studies have shown that mothers manage to hold their own, and may even come out ahead, in the battle over the offspring's partisanship. They are the dominant voice for daughters: "when the chips are down, the child more often than not goes with the same-sex parent" (Jennings and Niemi 1974, 176).

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more like 1/5

Among Dem Parents      Among R Parents  
 72 D                      75 R  
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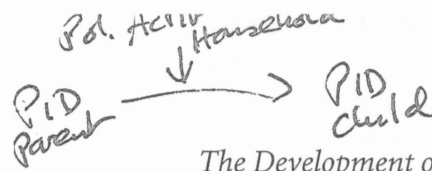
Hence most Americans grew up in families where party identification could be transmitted across generations. This is very much the pattern that was first reported nearly half a century ago (Campbell et al. 1960, 147). Parents continue to offer partisan guidance to their offspring.<sup>3</sup>

*Problem  
with  
Recall  
Measure*

The recall measure, of course, has weaknesses as an instrument for examining parental influence. The recollection may be flawed, and some respondents may have abandoned a party attachment acquired from their parents by the time they are asked about their own identification. A more reliable measure, which is not available in election studies, probes the party identifications of Americans when they are at a young age and the attachments of their parents at that very time. Such a survey of parents and offspring was conducted in 1965 (Jennings and Niemi 1974), with follow-up interviews of both cohorts in 1973 and 1982 (Jennings and Niemi 1981; Jennings and Markus 1984). What is more, in 1997, the by then middle-aged youth cohort of 1965 was interviewed one more time along with their offspring (Jennings and Stoker 2005). This research puts us in a fortunate position to observe not only the intergenerational transmission of partisanship at two distinct junctures, but also to track the persistence of partisanship over (much of) the life cycle. For now, we are interested in the most recent instance of transmission. How well did the parental cohort in the 1997 study transmit its partisanship to its offspring?

The data in table 7.2 do make a strong case for parental influence, confirming the pattern established with recall data in the previous table. Very few children deserted the parental party for the opposite one. If they deviated from the parental norm, they tended to embrace an Independent stance. The parent-offspring survey also allows us to capture the importance of family politicization. The transmission of party identification is far more successful in politically active homes than in inactive homes. When parents talk about politics at home often, as reported by the offspring, children are far more likely to adopt their parents' partisanship. In politically talkative homes, as can be seen in table 7.2, eight of 10 parents with a Democratic attachment imparted that partisanship to

3. The rise of single-parent households raises questions about the intergenerational process of partisan transmission. Unfortunately, the 1992 NES survey does not permit us to isolate respondents with only one parent. We suspect that a "don't know" response to the question about a parent's partisanship, in some instances covers for the absence of a parent. Even so, whatever the change in family structure, very few respondents probably grew up with just a single parent throughout their entire preadult stage of life.



**TABLE 7.2. Intergenerational Transmission of Party Identification, Politically Active and Inactive Homes, 1997 (in percentages)**

Party Identification of Offspring	Talk about Politics at Home Often			Do Not Talk about Politics at Home Often		
	Parents' Party Identification			Parents' Party Identification		
	Democrat	Independent	Republican	Democrat	Independent	Republican
Strong Democrat	35	9	5	13	6	5
Weak Democrat	23	14	7	20	20	14
Independent Democrat	22	12	8	19	15	10
Pure Independent	4	20	9	26	26	20
Independent Republican	4	11	9	10	9	14
Weak Republican	5	18	25	10	16	18
Strong Republican	7	16	37	2	8	19
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
Number of cases	75	99	95	123	179	153

*Source:* Study of Political Socialization: Parent-Child Pairs Based on Survey of Youth Panel and Their Offspring, 1997 (ICPSR Study 4024).

their offspring (including leaners); the rate was seven in 10 for Republican parents. In not so active homes, the corresponding rate for partisan families was only five in 10. Adolescents from inactive homes, especially where the parents profess no identification with a major party, find themselves largely adrift in partisan terms. As with everything else, the adoption of partisan attachments requires parental nurturing.

#### PERSISTENCE OF PARTISANSHIP

It is one thing to be raised a Democrat or a Republican by one's parents and quite another to maintain such an attachment after leaving the parental nest and facing the thunder and lightning of the political world as an adult. It is also quite a challenge for social science to measure the fidelity with which adults stick to the norms and orientations acquired during their socialization.<sup>4</sup> Studies that monitor a cross-section of the general public through the life cycle are extremely rare. We are fortunate to track

4. Estimates of stability have often relied on recall of the kind that asks whether a person ever changed party identification, or what that orientation was when the individual was growing up. These measures often report a high incidence of stability for party identification, confirming a key theoretical claim for this concept as a long-term predisposition. But we cannot be sure whether such recall can be trusted. In any event, no such questions are available in recent election studies.

TABLE 7.3. Stability and Change in Party Identification, 2000–2004 (in percentages)

	Party Identification, 2004						
	Strong Dem.	Weak Dem.	Ind. Dem.	Pure Ind.	Ind. Rep.	Weak Rep.	Strong Rep.
Same party as in 2000	81	70	80	89	74	54	77
Change between 2000 and 2004							
Rep. → Dem.	3	3	—	—	—	—	—
Rep. → Ind.	—	—	4	6	21	—	—
Dem. → Ind.	—	—	16	5	5	—	—
Dem. → Rep.	—	—	—	—	—	8	3
Ind. → Dem.	16	27	—	—	—	—	—
Ind. → Rep.	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Total	100	100	100	100	100	38	20
Number of cases	178	98	99	43	99	112	190

Source: NES 2000-2002-2004 Full Panel File (ICPSR Study 4293).

the persistence of partisanship with panel surveys, where the same respondents were interviewed multiple times, with years elapsed between interviews. One such panel, which comprised the full electorate, was conducted between 2000 and 2004. Given the unusually turbulent events of that period, we may expect to find less stability in partisan attachments than in more normal times. The entries of table 7.3 nonetheless depict a pattern that can be described as “firm but not immovable” (Campbell et al. 1960, 148). On the average, roughly three in four respondents cling to the same broad allegiance in 2004 as they held four years earlier. Weak partisans, predictably enough, show more movement than do strong ones. What is quite rare is movement from one party to the other. The most common transition involves Independents, moving in and out of the parties.<sup>5</sup>

A four-year panel, of course, only offers a small glimpse of the life

5. The correlation between party identification (as measured by the seven-point scale) in 2000 and 2004 is .80. High as such a value is for an expression of public opinion over a four-year time period, it understates the true stability of party identification because of measurement error. It is worth noting that the correlations over two-year periods (.84 for 2000–2002, and .85 for 2002–4) are not much higher than the four-year correlation. That is a sign that a good portion of observed instability is due to unreliability of measurement rather than true change. This pattern is very similar to the one found in other four-year panels (Converse and Markus 1979, 37–39) as well as a 1980 panel (Green and Palmquist 1990). The two-year continuity coefficients for party identification in the current panel compare favorably to those reported for the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s (Converse and Markus 1979, 38).

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need just X-tab

cycle. To gauge persistence over a longer time period, we return to a most unique data set, described above. To recapitulate, that survey monitored two cohorts over a long, if not full, span of their lives. The younger cohort aged from about 17 years to 50 during those interviews (between 1965 and 1997), while the older (parental) cohort was followed only until 1982. Tables 7.4 and 7.5 have condensed the possible permutations of partisan transitions into a few basic ones. These tables are organized in such a way that they show the breakdown for each of the seven groups of the party identification scale in the final interview. To take an example from table 7.4, which covers the parental cohort, the share of Strong Democrats that maintained an identification with that same party at all time points was 83 percent in 1982. Another 6 percent of Strong Democrats started out as Democrats in 1965, abandoned this attachment later, and then returned to it. The initial socialization imprint may still be credited for this type of constancy. Among Strong Republicans, the persistence of partisanship also proves quite strong in the parental cohort. The rate, predictably, is lower for weak partisans and Independents with partisan leanings, but the degree of persistence over a nearly 20-year span of life is impressive for this cohort.

In contrast, the youth cohort proves less stable in its partisanship.

TABLE 7.4. Stability and Change in Party Identification, 1965–82: Adult Panel (in percentages)

Since 1965	Party Identification, 1982						
	Strong Dem.	Weak Dem.	Ind. Dem.	Pure Ind.	Ind. Rep.	Weak Rep.	Strong Rep.
Same party in three waves	83	69	40	56	40	65	77
Change and return	6	10	14	7	16	9	3
Total same party in 1965 and 1982	89	79	54	63	56	74	80
Change between 1965 and 1982							
Rep. → Dem.	3	4	—	—	—	—	—
Rep. → Ind.	—	—	6	14	30	—	—
Dem. → Ind.	—	—	40	23	14	—	—
Dem. → Rep.	—	—	—	—	—	9	10
Ind. → Dem.	8	17	—	—	—	—	—
Ind. → Rep.	—	—	—	—	—	17	10
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Number of cases	174	199	86	57	83	126	120

Source: Youth-Parent Socialization Panel Study, 1965–1982: Three Waves Combined (ICPSR Study 9553).

Barely one-quarter of Strong Republicans in table 7.5 maintained their loyalty throughout the full period; another 10 percent returned after straying. Nearly as many contemporary Republicans in this cohort started out with a Democratic as with a Republican identification, or with none at all. Change is also rampant in the Independent groups. Many Independents with a partisan leaning originated as straight partisans, and may find it easy to migrate back to that orientation. Hence, identification with political parties as established in preadult years may not always be an immovable attachment. It is clearly vulnerable to forces of change in one's adult life. Many members of the particular youth cohort examined in table 7.5 ended up with a partisan attachment other than the one of their youth. Such a degree of instability, however, may not be typical of what happens during the adult life cycle. If it were typical, it would be hard to sustain a key claim for the concept of party identification, namely its long-term stability.

The 1965 youth cohort experienced a barrage of turbulent events during its transition to adulthood (the war in Vietnam, antiwar protests, the counterculture, civil rights demonstrations, urban riots, etc.). These were historic circumstances of rare potency that young cohorts growing up in normal times are not exposed to. What is more, the partisanship of

TABLE 7.5. Stability and Change in Party Identification, 1965-97: Youth Panel (in percentages)

Since 1965	Party Identification, 1997						
	Strong Dem.	Weak Dem.	Ind. Dem.	Pure Ind.	Ind. Rep.	Weak Rep.	Strong Rep.
Same party in four waves	51	31	32	46	32	14	26
Change and return	18	24	8	16	12	21	10
Total same party in 1965 and 1997	69	55	40	62	44	35	36
Change between 1965 and 1997							
Rep. → Dem.	10	12	—	—	—	—	—
Rep. → Ind.	—	—	22	16	29	—	—
Dem. → Ind.	—	—	38	22	27	—	—
Dem. → Rep.	—	—	—	—	—	32	34
Ind. → Dem.	21	33	—	—	—	—	—
Ind. → Rep.	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Total	100	100	100	100	100	33	30
Number of cases	114	170	142	45	132	168	112

Source: Youth-Parent Socialization Panel Study, 1965-1997: Four Waves Combined (ICPSR Study 4037).

middle-age adults (table 7.4) proved far more resistant to such forces of change that affected a young cohort just coming of age with an untested sense of partisanship. Of the two cohorts, the parental one is clearly more representative of the overall American electorate than is the youth cohort. Two other long-term longitudinal projects confirm the strong persistence of partisanship across decades: Newcomb's Bennington study, spanning from the 1930s to the 1980s (Alwin, Cohen, and Newcomb 1991) and the Terman study, which reported an impressive correlation (.50) for party identification between 1940 and 1977 (Sears and Funk 1999, 10–12).

### THE PARTISAN LIFE CYCLE

The stronger partisan commitments of older cohorts suggests there may be gradual and commonplace experiences associated with successive phases of the life cycle. In particular, we expect the intensity of partisanship to increase with age: The older the voter, the stronger the partisan attachment and the lower the tendency to stay aloof from partisan commitments. The expectation of age-related changes in partisan intensity is firmly supported by evidence accumulated from election surveys covering a dozen years (1992–2004) and comprising several thousands of cases.

There is a steady increase in strong identification with either party as we move from the youngest to the oldest age cohort in table 7.6. The change is clearly systematic, not random. Few young adults (18–20), eligible for the first time to cast a vote, express a strong party attachment, whereas close to half of the oldest cohort (over 75), with a lifetime of political experiences behind it, does so. An intense attachment to a political party must be regarded as an acquired taste. By the same token, there is a steady decline of independence from parties as we move through the age cohorts in table 7.6. Many of the newly eligible voters enter active lives as citizens without a partisan attachment. Only few in the oldest cohort, in contrast, manage to stay aloof from the political parties. So for some portion of the American electorate, even party attachment itself is a taste acquired in adulthood.

Strength  
with  
Age

A tabulation by age of the sort shown in table 7.6, however, does not prove that aging explains the change in partisan intensity. Age differences always allow for two competing interpretations. One focuses on age as a moment in history that shaped a person's attitudes in a lasting



TABLE 7.6. Relation of Age to Party Identification (in percentages)

Party Identification	Age												
	18-20	21-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60-64	65-69	70-75	>75
Strong Democrat	10	12	12	11	14	15	18	20	22	23	25	29	30
Weak Democrat	18	18	19	20	18	19	18	14	17	19	17	14	17
Independent	49	48	42	40	34	39	36	38	33	30	28	30	26
Weak Republican	16	14	16	17	18	14	14	13	14	12	13	13	12
Strong Republican	7	8	11	12	16	13	14	15	14	16	17	14	15
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Proportion of strong identifiers	17	20	23	23	30	28	32	35	36	39	42	43	45
Number of cases	457	824	1,085	1,278	1,418	1,303	1,057	846	761	629	582	620	723

Note: These data are combined from seven National Election Studies conducted between 1992 and 2004. They are included in the 1948-2004 NES Cumulative Data File (ICPSR Study 8475).

fashion. The alternative treats age as shorthand for length of experience relevant for an attitude or behavior of interest. Turning to the intensity of partisan attachments, the historical interpretation of age attributes the strong feelings of the older cohorts to the kind of politics prevailing in America decades ago. If this interpretation is correct, we would not expect older cohorts always to be the most partisan. Results would depend on when we observe the age-partisanship relationship. At some other point in time, the youngest or some cohort in between might prove to be most intense in its partisanship.

The alternate interpretation maintains that older adults are invariably more intensely attached to a political party than are younger ones, because age-related experiences strengthen the partisan bond. What favors this explanation is the smooth shape of the age-party relationship shown in table 7.6. The intensity of partisanship rises inexorably and, as might be expected, at a diminishing rate. It does not change abruptly from one historical period to another. It should also be noted that the pattern displayed in table 7.6 for the present period is a faithful replica of the pattern found in another period, half a century ago.<sup>6</sup>

The evidence for age gains in partisan intensity, admittedly, is more ragged in the panel of young adults, who were tracked from 1965 to 1997. In fact, the proportion of strong identifiers in that cohort dropped during their first 10 years or so of early adulthood (table 7.7). Why? Because the life-cycle hypothesis is mistaken? We do not believe so. Instead, abnormal forces of the period (1965–73) overrode the tendency to grow more attached to one's party with increasing exposure. It was a fairly rare instance, where the trajectory of the age-partisanship relationship was thrown off course and distorted beyond recognition (Converse 1976). A heavy dose of bad news for a major party can easily discourage young adults with a budding attachment to that party from growing closer to it. This could lead to a temporary weakening of party attachments overall, especially if the party in question is dominant and the other party is unattractive. But partisan attachments of the youth cohort

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6. See table 7.5 of *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960, 162). Then as now, nearly 50 years later, the proportion of strong partisans rises steadily from the youngest to the oldest cohort (from 24 percent to 51 percent then, compared to a rise from 17 percent to 45 percent nowadays). And the proportion of Independents steadily falls to half the size (from 31 percent to 16 percent then, compared to a drop from 49 percent to 26 percent now). While the intercept of the age-partisanship relationship may have changed (more Independents and fewer strong partisans now), the slope of the relationship (the change per year of age) is practically the same.

did not evaporate or get stuck at this low point. Partisan strength rebounded and resumed its upward move in later years. It should be noted that while the parental cohort follows a parallel path, its gyrations are far more restrained. Whatever forces affected partisanship in that period swayed the youngest cohort far more than the older ones (Jennings and Markus 1984).

*Age does not make voters more Republican*

While supporting the hypothesis that age makes individuals more firm in their partisan attachments, our analysis fails to lend any support to another age-related hypothesis that enjoys wide currency. Political lore has it that with age Americans become more Republican. Whatever the theoretical basis of this expectation—most likely that age makes us more conservative and hence more fond of the more conservative party—the entries of table 7.6 refute it. The percentage of Republicans (strong and weak) from the youngest to the oldest forms a flat line. The Republican hold on the 25–29-year-old cohort is exactly the same as its hold on the over-75-year-old cohort (27 percent), and it barely budes in the cohorts between. If anything, it is the support for the Democratic Party that appears to rise with age, proving perhaps that it is the more conservative party. But the pattern of growth is more abrupt than smooth, suggesting that something other than the life cycle may be at work. We shall probe for explanation of the Democratic edge among some older cohorts in the next section of this chapter.

The age-partisanship pattern established thus far accords well with a more general notion of group theory, which holds that identification with any group depends on the length of one's affiliation with it. As for

TABLE 7.7. The Strength of Party Identification in the Youth Panel, 1965–97 (in percentages)

Strength of Party Identification	Year of Panel Wave			
	1965	1973	1982	1997
Strong	25	14	15	25
Weak	39	39	41	38
Independent	36	47	44	37
Total	100	100	100	100
Number of cases	925	929	907	922

Source: Youth-Parent Socialization Panel Study, 1965–1997: Four Waves Combined (ICPSR Study 4037).

Note: The entries in this table are based on the same respondents of the youth panel interviewed at four time points. Over that time span they aged, on average, from 17 years (1965), to 25 (1973), 34 (1982), and 49 (1997).

*Intensity + Direction  
Age Cohort*

political parties, the longer individuals think of themselves as either Democrats or Republicans, the stronger the attachment to that party becomes. It is not biological age that is important so much as the time elapsed since the attachment was formed. For many Americans the attachment goes back to preadult experiences, but for some portion of the electorate, as we have seen, the bond is forged later in adult years. For this group the learning clock starts only then, as it would for others who switch over to a new party later in life. The clock must also be adjusted for some "forgetting" of partisan attachments if, as happened in Germany, the democratic process is interrupted (Converse 1969). Whatever the complications, as a person settles into a partisan attachment, increasingly strong pressures are needed to prompt a shift in the attachment, or a vote for a candidate of the opposite party.

We may be able now to outline a general pattern by which party identification develops through the life cycle. Most Americans become familiar with political parties in some form while growing up at home. But even as they enter adulthood few are greatly interested in politics, or feel a strong attachment to a party. One clear manifestation of this aloofness among young adults, as we have seen already, is a widespread failure to turn out to vote in elections. It takes some time for the salience of politics to increase for young adults. Perhaps they are drawn into groups and associations that have a political connection, or become integrated in a community through holding a steady job, buying a home, raising a family, and getting involved in local issues. All these steps would make young adults more aware of their own political interests, the impact of political decisions on these interests, and the central role of political parties in processes of governance.

Once an individual has formed a party attachment, however embryonic, and at whatever stage in life it happened, a self-reinforcing process of momentum takes over. A partisan finds it easy to construe ambiguous events to the advantage of the adopted party and to the disadvantage of the opposite party. The more a person engages in this selective perception, the more likely it is that the bond to the group providing this guidance also strengthens. It is a compelling learning experience to say, if my party is right in most instances of everyday politics, then I must be right in sticking with that party in the long run. What is more, the act of voting for candidates of one's party tends to reinforce the attachment as well. An unbroken string of voting for the same party in successive elections is bound to leave individuals with a more fervent partisan commitment

than frequent defections to the other party in the voting booth. Yet no matter how strong the attachments, few Americans are utterly blinded by their partisanship. Some short-term events, be it an economic downturn or a scandal, may defy the ability of partisans to interpret them to the credit of the favored party and invite crossing party lines in an election. And on rare occasions, cataclysmic events or profound social changes operating more gradually have the power to produce a long-term change in partisan loyalties.

### HISTORICAL CHANGE IN PARTISANSHIP

While the intensity of party identification waxes quite predictably with the life cycle, the partisanship of the identification is subject to less predictable patterns of change. We subscribe to the view that an attachment with a party, for the most part, is highly resistant to change. To be sure, reports of party identification in survey interviews are not rock solid over time and may be prone to sway, especially among voters in their early years. But many of these moves, few as they are, occur for purely *personal* reasons, which operate idiosyncratically and do not relate to broader characteristics of voters. These forces should be distinguished from *social* forces, which affect groups of voters based on some politically relevant characteristic. Personal forces, such as marriage, a new job, or a new location, may exert pressure on a person to adopt views at odds with his or her own. Even though many citizens find themselves in these situations at various times of their lives and may adapt their party attachments accordingly, the resulting changes in partisanship are uncorrelated with larger social categories. Nor do they affect the prevailing balance of partisanship in the overall electorate or among politically relevant segments of the electorate.

In contrast, an economic crisis or a divisive issue tearing the country apart leaves a similar imprint on groups of voters with political consequences. If the stimulus moves one segment of the electorate in one partisan direction while moving another and equally large one in the opposite direction, the electoral makeup of the parties will undergo a profound change, but the overall partisan balance is not disturbed. If these movements do not offset each other, the comparative strength of the parties in the total electorate will shift substantially, perhaps ending the rule of one party and ushering in a new majority party. It is widely accepted that two national crises in American history have shaken party loyalties so vio-

lently as to reverse the prevailing balance of partisanship in the nation as a whole: the Civil War and the Great Depression.

The upheaval associated with the Civil War realigned party attachments along regional lines while putting the newly formed Republican Party in a dominant position in the Union. The South, which had been quite competitive in the antebellum period, turned into the Solid South for the Democrats. It stayed that way for a hundred years or so, occasional defections to Republicans in presidential elections notwithstanding. The Northeast and Midwest, in contrast, with their strong abolitionist sentiments, became strongholds of the Republican Party. The Great Depression, which struck the American economy under a Republican administration and control of Congress, ousted the GOP from the White House for 20 years and, with rare breaks, from control of Congress for over half a century.

This sweeping change is not only evident in election returns, but can also be gauged from reports of party identification as early as 1936 in Gallup polls (Erikson and Tedin 1981). The National Election Studies (NES) conducted in the 1950s demonstrate a massive swing in partisan attachments attributed to the impact of the Great Depression and the New Deal. The partisan balance in the American electorate shifted sharply in favor of the Democrats. As far as distinctive groups are concerned, the Democratic Party drew its new strength mostly from the economically disadvantaged, minorities, especially black and Jewish Americans, and the young generation. The South remained solidly in the Democratic fold, while Catholics, whose association with the Democratic Party predated the 1930s, may have become more strongly attached to it under the impact of the Depression. Though overwhelming in size, this new Democratic alignment was a volatile mix of constituent groups that, sooner or later, would prove hard for political leaders to keep in line. Yet as captured by our measure of party identification, the Democratic Party managed to hold on to a lead over the Republican Party for about half a century following the Depression. It is an impressive testimony to the persistence and resilience of partisan attachments in the face of stressful circumstances.

While no single national crisis has occurred since then that would rival the Depression or the Civil War in their sheer power to shake up prevailing partisan loyalties so violently, the turmoil of the 1960s weakened the Democratic hold on the electorate. The upheavals over the Vietnam War, race, and law and order precipitated an irreversible drop in

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Democratic identification, though without awarding the Republicans a commensurate gain. It was not until the Reagan presidency that Republicans scored substantial gains in party identification. The “peace and prosperity” failures of the 1970s led to the election of a president who combined ideological zeal with partisanship in an unprecedented effort to overturn the New Deal agenda. The growing Republican strength in party identification helped break the Democratic control of the House in 1994. And in 2004, with Republicans retaining control of both the White House and Congress, the National Election Studies survey, for the first time ever, gave this party the lead in partisan attachments among voters.

In locating the major groups from which a newly ascendant party draws its strength, we invariably turn to one that feels the events of a period most sharply—youth. With survey data at hand as events likely to shake an attitude such as party identification unfold, we can observe immediately how a certain group responds, not how it remembers its behavior years later. When we compare in table 7.8 the partisanship of young adults in the elections of the Reagan years with elections before and after, we see a sharp turn toward the Republican Party between 1980 and 1988, from barely 30 to almost 50 percent. By comparison, no such movement stirred during Nixon’s landslide victory in 1972 among young adults, when most of them embraced an Independent stance. And the upward trend halted and ebbed back once Reagan had departed from the White House. There is no inherent proclivity of the young to the GOP, or the Democratic Party, for that matter. For the most part, the

TABLE 7.8. The Partisanship of Young Adults (under 30 years of age)

Year	Percentage Republican of Two-Party Total	
	Party Identifiers	Presidential Vote
1972	30	62
1976	31	49
1980	37	55
1984	43	59
1988	48	54
1992	47	47
1996	42	45
2000	36	50

Source: The 1948–2004 NES Cumulative Data File (ICPSR Study 8475).

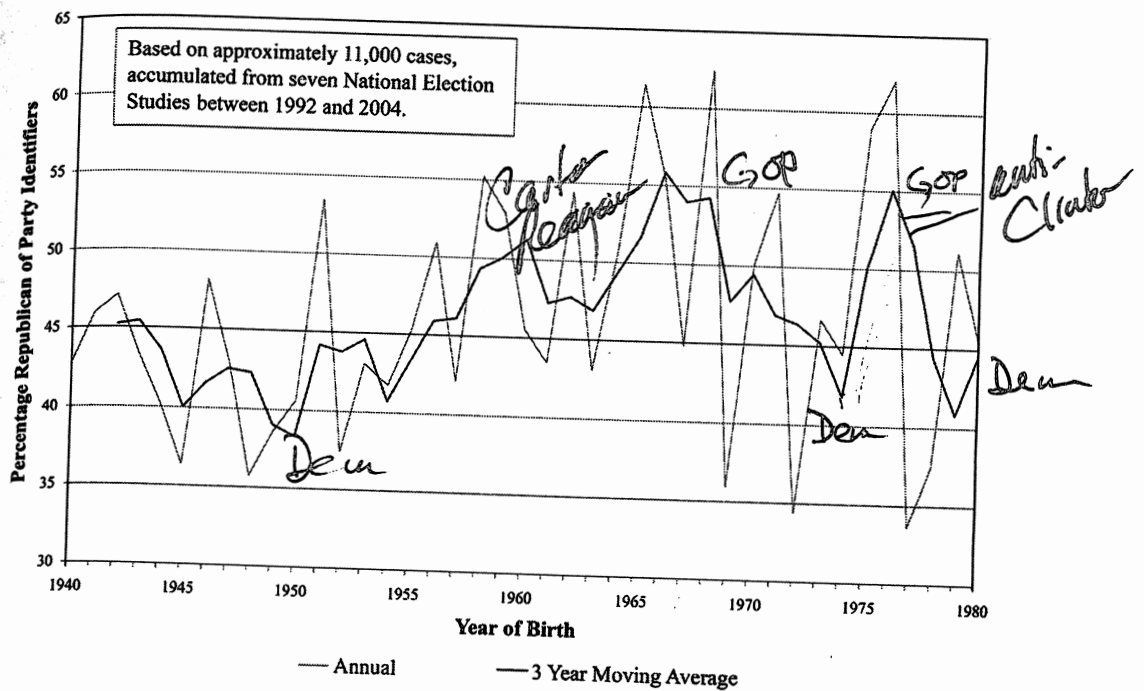


Fig. 7.1. Party identification of party identifiers born between 1940 and 1980

young follow in the partisan footsteps of the adult world represented by their parents. But when, at a given moment in history, the winds of change suddenly blow from one partisan direction, the younger cohorts will follow the political drift more sharply than the rest of the electorate.

Further evidence of how the events of the Reagan years affected those coming of age at that time comes from an accumulation of surveys conducted during the last 10 years or so. In figure 7.1, we can see a visible surge of Republican identification in the cohort born roughly between 1960 and 1970. Many of them cast their first vote in an election that featured Ronald Reagan as a candidate or sitting president. The Republicans have retained the upper hand in this cohort, unlike in older cohorts where Democrats have a decided edge. The Republican surge appears to abate in cohorts born after 1970, when events of the times, especially under a Democratic president, were not as favorable to the Republican Party any more.

All by itself, the embrace of a party by a new generation is not likely to overturn the domination by the other party in the full electorate, even if all the offspring of that generation were to follow suit and so on; it certainly would take a long time. Another group we would expect to be highly susceptible to the winds of change is Independents, whose ranks

*The Reagan Generation*



began to swell in the 1960s. This expectation is confirmed by the behavior of the high school class of 1965 as it passed through the events of the 1970s and 1980s. Just like the American electorate overall, the partisan complexion of this group changed from heavily Democratic in 1965 to parity between Democrats and Republicans more than 30 years later. Only one of three latter-day Republicans in this group started out that way, as was shown in table 7.5. Most of them came of age as Democrats or Independents. Yet few of the Democrats who had become Republicans by 1997 did so through a straight conversion. Most of them navigated this change through a two-step process, first by abandoning the Democratic allegiance for independence, and then adopting a Republican identification. Hence the roots of the new partisan alignment may reach as far back as the upheavals of the 1960s that tore Democrats from their partisan moorings.

A new partisan alignment typically comes with a distinctive group appeal and ideological coloration. Like the New Deal, Reaganomics was heavily ideological in nature, if in another direction (with less government involvement in the economy and on issues like racial equality, holding a tough line in battling communism, and a push for traditional values). This may have had a special resonance for an old constituency of the Democratic Party that had grown estranged from it for some time over these issues, especially on matters of race. Presidential victories in southern states had become commonplace for Republicans since 1972, when Nixon carried every state of the former Confederacy, although many Democrats managed to hang on to their seats in the House and Senate as well as to state-level offices. Republicans had cracked the Solid South, and the loyalties of white southerners to the Democratic Party were ebbing.

During the Reagan years, as shown in figure 7.2, Republicans made significant gains in the party attachments of white southerners, enough to cross the 40 percent mark and shed their image as a party with a chip on its shoulder in that region. Yet when seen over the long haul of half a century, the Republican growth in the American South during the 1980s was undramatic. It was more a continuation of an ongoing trend than a surge. Most surprisingly, the upheavals over civil rights in the 1960s appeared to have slowed rather than sparked any rush toward the GOP in the white South. Perhaps race had less to do with the partisan transformation of the white South than is commonly assumed.

There is no question, though, that this issue left its imprint on the partisanship of black Americans. Whatever residual affection the Re-

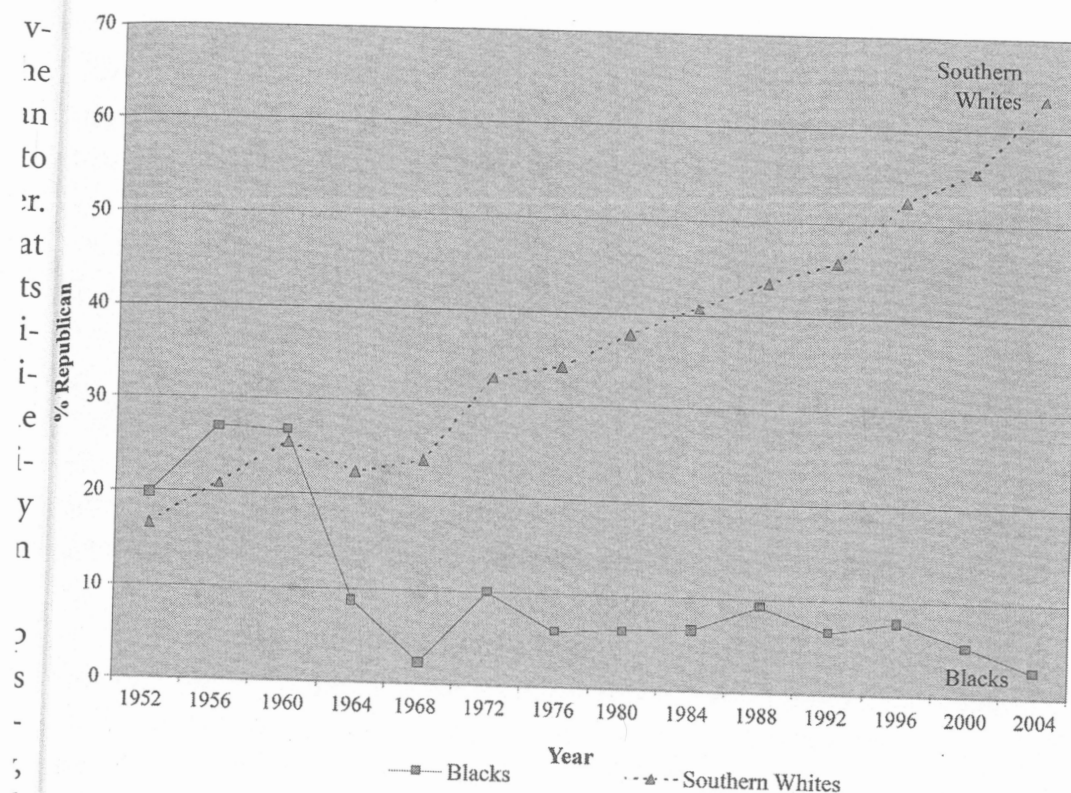


Fig. 7.2. Percentage Republican of party identifiers among blacks and southern whites, 1952–2004. (Data from 1948–2004 NES Cumulative Data File ICPSR Study #8475.)

Republican Party still enjoyed in this segment of the electorate vanished in the wake of the civil rights legislation sponsored by a Democratic president in the 1960s. It is worth remembering nonetheless that up until that moment the Republican Party was held in higher esteem by black Americans than by white southerners.

The realignment of the white South, however, does not appear to be primarily the story of specific historic events or the legacy of a particular administration. Instead the pattern so evident in figure 7.2 appears to confirm the hypothesis of a slow, but inexorable “convergence” of the South with the rest of the country (Converse 1966b). Still, the pace of southern change did not halt once convergence was reached in the 1980s. What is striking is that the Republican growth in partisan attachments kept on going among white southerners. Even the White House tenure of a southern Democrat (Bill Clinton), who left office with impressive approval ratings, was unable to stem, let alone reverse, this partisan tide toward the other party. Republicans kept making further strides during George W. Bush’s first term; by 2004 they outnumbered Democrats by about two to one among southern whites. This group, which was a solid

GOP  
in  
South

pillar of Democratic strength for about a century, has now become one of the most distinctive and dependable constituencies of the Republican Party. Were it not for the consolidation of the black vote in the Democratic fold, the region of the former Confederacy might be on the verge of reverting to a "Solid South" again, but this time under the banner of, yes, Lincoln's old party.

## COMMENTARY AND CONTROVERSY

### *Partisan Genes*

The close match between the party identification of parents and offspring has long tantalized observers with the possibility of a genetic transmission, though others find the prospect deeply disturbing. Are we born as Democrats, Republicans, or Independents? It is not unreasonable to ask. How else could something that in many families is treated so casually leave such an enduring imprint on children? How else could it correlate across generations as strongly as a trait with a definite genetic component, a person's height?<sup>7</sup> Yet until very recently, a claim made by an early voting study still held true: "Virtually nothing is known about the genetic development of personal identification with political parties" (Campbell, Gurin, and Miller 1954, 97).

Now the study of genetics is finally venturing into political behavior. Research using twins has begun to estimate the genetic component, as separate from the environmental one, of political attitudes about a wide range of concerns (Alford, Funk, and Hibbing 2005). The findings are intriguing and somewhat ambiguous, as the authors themselves concede. While party identification, in the sense that it has been treated in this chapter, is not primarily genetically formed, affect toward each of the major parties is (2005, 161). In other words, we largely become Democrats or Republicans through parental nurturing, but our devotion to a party may be genetically primed. This conclusion, however, runs starkly against some major findings reported in the chapter. The adoption of a particular party seems to come fairly early in one's life, when the political world is but a dim outline, while the intensity of one's partisan attachment grows with exposure to the political world as an adult, and the act of voting, in particular.

7. The intergenerational correlation for party identification (.59) in the 1965 socialization study (Jennings and Niemi 1974, 38) actually surpasses the one reported for height (.50) in Pearson's classic study on the laws of inheritance (Pearson and Lee 1903, 378).

Nature  
✓  
Nurture

Genetics

### *Dealignment*

For quite some time, much of the discussion of party identification has been preoccupied with decline. Observers have noted the weakening of partisan ties, the growth of the ranks of Independents, and more frequent defections from the party line, all of which seems to be well embodied by the concept of partisan dealignment (Beck 1984; Wattenberg 1998). Most students of elections, however, do not view this as a continuing process that will unravel partisan ties and spell the demise of the major political parties. Rather it is a historic episode, however traumatic, essentially a closed chapter of American electoral history, bracketed by the elections of 1964 and 1976. Studies by Nie, Verba, and Petrocik (1976) and by Jennings and Niemi (1981) made a strong case for the generational hypothesis, with dealignment concentrated among younger cohorts. Yet the contribution of the younger cohorts was not enough to account for the partisan decline in the overall electorate. Converse (1976) emphasized the effect of period forces, working on all cohorts of the electorate, though with a lessening impact for older cohorts with more established partisan attachments. Support for such a period-aging model also came from Norpoth and Rusk (1982). There are strong signs that the process of dealignment was halted and even reversed after 1976 (Miller and Shanks 1996), with the electorate even growing more polarized along party lines (Hetherington 2001). Yet a dissenting voice argues for dealignment as an ongoing process that is bound to alter the meaning and function of party identification as we know it (Dalton 2007).

One manifest consequence of partisan dealignment, to be sure, has been a greater incidence of split-ticket voting. Between the 1950s and 1980s, ticket splitting in voting for president and House members increased sharply (Fiorina 1992, 12-14). In terms of governance, this has meant prolonged periods of divided government, with Republicans controlling the White House and Democrats the House of Representatives being the most common pattern. Balancing theories have been applied to explain the kind of electoral choices that lead to divided government (Fiorina 1992; Jacobson 1990), but the statistical evidence is mixed. Some studies show voters lacking the necessary information and sophistication for such strategic behavior (Sigelman, Wahlbeck, and Buell 1997); or else their choices may be driven by incumbent support (Burden and Kimball 2002). Others have found support for "cognitive Madisonianism," with a

↑ ticket  
splitting  
but  
now  
down

portion of American voters consciously exercising a preference for divided government in the way they split their tickets (Lewis-Beck and Nadeau 2004b).

Partisan dealignment also appears to be related to the stronger showing of third-party candidates. It makes sense to expect that “third-party voting should be easier for citizens who have weaker attachments, or who never developed . . . party loyalties in the first place” (Rosenstone, Behr, and Lazarus 1996, 144). Partisan dealignment has greatly enlarged the pool of potential voters for other than Democratic and Republican candidates. The success of George Wallace in getting 13 percent of the presidential vote in 1968 fed on strong discontent of white southern Democrats with their party (Converse et al. 1969). Both John Anderson and Ross Perot drew heavily on voters lacking party allegiance, although dealignment is not able to explain why Perot did so much better than Anderson (Rosenstone, Behr, and Lazarus 1996, 245–48; also Burden and Lacy 1999).

### *Realignment*

Historic change in party identification, where the partisan balance undergoes a dramatic transformation, is closely tied to the concept of electoral realignment.<sup>8</sup> As one of the major proponents of this concept put it, realignments help “divide much of American political history into clearly demarcated ‘party-systems eras,’ bounded by realigning upheavals from preceding and succeeding eras” (Burnham 1991, 101). By nature, realignments are rare events that are thought to require “the presence of a great national crisis, leading to a conflict regarding governmental policies and the association of the major parties with relatively clearly contrasting programs for its solution” (Campbell 1966, 76). Some voices of dissent (Mayhew 2002) notwithstanding, there is compelling evidence for the realigning status of a few historic elections (Norpoth and Rusk 2007). Realignments are often concentrated in specific regions of the country (Nardulli 1995) or electoral groups (Petrocik 1981; Stanley and Niemi 1995). Central to a realignment as an *electoral* phenomenon is a condition embodied in V. O. Key’s definition of a “critical election”: a “profound readjustment” in the electorate’s “standing decision” that proves “durable” (Key 1955). What is being adjusted is a voter’s long-standing attachment

8. The literature is too voluminous to be reviewed here in any detail. For a reader’s guide and bibliography listing over 600 publications, see Bass 1991. For a current overview of the realignment literature, see Rosenof 2003.

to a political party that is hard to change in normal times. It is in electoral realignments where the distribution of party identification undergoes lasting change.

To accommodate some changes that do not proceed in the manner of "critical" realignments, Key (1959) introduced the notion of a "secular" realignment. This is a gradual type of change that may help capture the realignment associated with the South, especially white voters in that region in recent years (Black and Black 1992). In such a process partisan loyalties decay over time and are replaced by those for another party. Such change may also conform to the "issue evolution" model, where polarization of elites on issues of great importance such as civil rights triggers a large-scale sorting out along party lines in the mass public (Carmines and Stimson 1989). The unabated pace of the southern white realignment, however, suggests that the "evolution" of issues goes beyond race and involves moral-cultural issues (Carmines and Layman 1997).

One realignment theory that requires no movement in individual party identification is based on a process of generational replacement. According to this view, the partisan balance shifts when a new generation of young voters enters the electorate with a partisan imprint that distinguishes it from the rest of the electorate, which stays put. Campbell et al. (1960) make a strong case for this process of change to account for the New Deal realignment. Another theory that does not require the conversion of partisans focuses on the mobilization of the nonpartisan segment of the electorate that had largely stayed aloof from the electoral politics and then turned out heavily for the Democratic side in the 1930s (Andersen 1979). Others, however, find it impossible to account for large-scale shifts in the partisan balance without conversion. Erikson and Tedin (1981) offer evidence from Gallup polls that by 1936 both established and young voters had swung toward the Democratic side in party attachments.

Whatever the explanation for the partisan change during the New Deal era, critics of the realignment concept have noted the failure of a certifiable realignment to materialize since then (Shafer 1991; Mayhew 2002). The Reagan years, however, have proved quite compelling for realignment claims (Aldrich 1995; Hurley 1991; Miller and Shanks 1996; Norpoth 1987). Miller and Shanks (1996, 166) concluded that "between 1980 and 1988, at least a limited version of the long-heralded partisan realignment took place." The Reagan years sparked a "growth in Republican identification

see my response WPO

1960s  
Realigner

that shrank the overwhelming Democratic lead dating from the New Deal realignment" (Meffert, Norpoth, and Ruhil 2001, 961). While there were strong signs of generational change, large-scale mobilization of Independents into Republican ranks among established cohorts was also required to account for the overall shift toward that party, though there was very little in the way of straight conversion (Norpoth 1987). Still, the tenuous lead of Republicans leaves many observers skeptical of realignment claims.