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Realignment and Macropartisanship

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Aggregate party identification (macropartisanship) has exhibited substantial movement in the U.S. electorate over the last half century. We contend that a major key to that movement is a rare, massive, and enduring shift of the electoral equilibrium commonly known as a partisan realignment. The research, which is based on time-series data that employ the classic measurement of party identification, shows that the 1980 election triggered a systematic growth of Republican identification that cut deeply into the overwhelming Democratic lead dating back to the New Deal realignment. Although short-term fluctuations in macropartisanship are responsive to the elements of everyday politics, neither presidential approval nor consumer sentiment is found responsible for the 1980 shift. Realignments aside, macropartisanship is guided by a stable, not a continuously moving, equilibrium.

[A]ll those millions of Democrats and Independents who I know are looking for a cause around which to rally and which I believe I can give them.

—Ronald Reagan

The study of party identification has entered the twilight zone. Gone seems to be the day when partisanship was regarded as an immovable object, impervious to the turbulence of politics and guiding everything else in the manner of an irresistible force. Instead, the view has dawned that this may be an object in perpetual motion, buffeted by the prevailing winds of politics and economics. There is no question that macropartisanship—the balance between Democrats and Republicans in the American electorate—has exhibited substantial movement over the last half century. What is less certain is how seriously to take such movement and where it originates.

We contend that a rare, massive, and enduring shift of the electoral equilibrium has occurred, commonly known as a partisan realignment. Although familiar to students of elections, the concept of realignment has so far attracted little interest in efforts to come to grips with macropartisanship. This research demonstrates a marked and lasting shift of the partisan equilibrium after 1980. The election of Ronald Reagan triggered a systematic growth of Republican identification, which cut deeply into the overwhelming Democratic lead that dates back to the New Deal realignment. The new GOP competitiveness enabled the Republican Party, among other things, to crack the solid Democratic control of the House of Representatives in the 1994

midterm election and to deliver unified control in 2000 for the first time in nearly fifty years.

The identification of a realignment distinguishes our model from recent efforts to come to grips with the dynamics of macropartisanship: the moving equilibrium (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 1998; also MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1989), the constant equilibrium (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 1998), and an intermediate type of equilibrium process known as “fractional integration” (Box-Steffensmeier and Smith 1998). Instead, we see a sharp but rare regime change in macropartisanship. There is one equilibrium before the Reagan presidency and another following it. Even though the shift was not an overnight phenomenon but a gradual adjustment, it should not be mistaken for a moving equilibrium. In our model, the equilibrium shift is a rare event, not a response to the flow of everyday politics. In large part, our account of macropartisanship preserves the *American Voter* paradigm of party identification (Campbell et al. 1960).

We begin by spelling out the case for a major realignment of partisanship in the 1980s and then test for its existence with data from the National Election Studies (NES). We next propose a dynamic model of partisan realignment to be tested with a version of macropartisanship that matches the NES standard (*New York Times/CBS News* surveys). We control for the influence of everyday economic and political forces, such as presidential approval ratings and consumer confidence. Moreover, alternate specifications of realignment will be considered. Finally, we discuss how our findings relate to changing theories of party identification.

PARTISAN REALIGNMENT

Students of American elections commonly describe the relationship between the major parties as one of domination, with Republicans or Democrats enjoying electoral superiority for long stretches of time. One observer likens the majority party to the “sun” of the electoral universe, orbited by the minority party “moon” (Lubell 1952). Like planetary configurations, the majority-minority alignment is not expected to

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change often, and a shift is akin to a cosmic upheaval, called a critical or realigning election (Burnham 1970; Campbell et al. 1960; Key 1955). Sellers (1965) postulates an "equilibrium cycle" in American politics: Realignments that lead to the ascendancy of one party are followed by a return to a more equal balance until the arrival of the next realignment. The elections of 1860, 1896, and 1932, according to most observers, can be designated as realigning.

The causes and consequences of realignment have received much scholarly attention (Clubb, Flanigan, and Zingale 1980; Sundquist 1973). A realignment requires "the presence of a great national crisis, leading to a conflict regarding governmental policies and the association of the two major parties with relatively clearly contrasting programs for its solution" (Campbell 1966, 76). During these periods politics becomes unusually ideological, and electoral defeats of the majority party are not simply deviations brought on by temporary lapses in judgment or by the personal appeal of a candidate. Instead, the vote begins to reflect a major reorientation of long-term party attachments. Some argue that the reorientation occurs through conversion of partisanship in the electorate (Erikson and Tedin 1981; Sundquist 1973), and others emphasize generational change or mobilization (Anderson 1979; Beck 1974; Campbell et al. 1960; Norpoth 1987). Moreover, the shift alters the composition of party coalitions in the electorate, giving some groups a stronger voice and weakening that of others (Petrocik 1981; Stanley and Niemi 1995).

We contend that the 1980 presidential election, in and of itself, exhibited the symptoms of a realignment in five respects. First, for the first time since 1932, an elected president was defeated. Although the majority party had previously lost control of the White House in "deviating elections," Jimmy Carter was repudiated in a landslide. He garnered even fewer votes in the Electoral College than did Hoover in 1932, whose ouster ushered in the New Deal realignment (Burnham 1981; Pomper 1981).

Second, the national economy was in severe distress, suffering from a seemingly incurable combination of high inflation and high unemployment (stagflation). This adversity, along with humiliation in foreign policy, cost Carter the election (Markus 1982). More important, a dismal performance of the economy undermined the Democratic Party's New Deal reputation as the party of prosperity (Pomper 1981, 91).

Third, the winner in 1980 promised a radical departure from traditional Democratic ideology and a resolution of the national condition diagnosed as "malaise" by the losing incumbent. Ideological zeal set Reagan apart from the other victorious Republicans before him. As the "most conservative president since . . . 1928" (Burnham 1981, 99), Reagan would be able to count on a conservative tilt in the American public (Markus 1982, 551).

Fourth, Reagan was an intensely partisan Republican, determined to make the GOP the majority party. He was the "only president of the post-war era who

took office as an avowed partisan and unvarnished ideologue" (Miller and Shanks 1996, 168).

Fifth, the turmoil and discontent of the previous fifteen years softened the electoral terrain for a partisan realignment in 1980. Attachments to either major party had diminished through a process dubbed "dealignment" (Converse 1976; Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1976; Norpoth and Rusk 1982). By 1980, a huge pool of voters with weak or no partisan attachments waited to be tapped by a party with a new agenda.

Hence, there was opportunity, motive, and weapon in 1980 to fashion a partisan realignment out of an electoral victory. Yet, Republicans in the past had found ways to win presidential elections but could not crack the solid lead of the Democratic Party in partisanship. Would Reagan have more success?

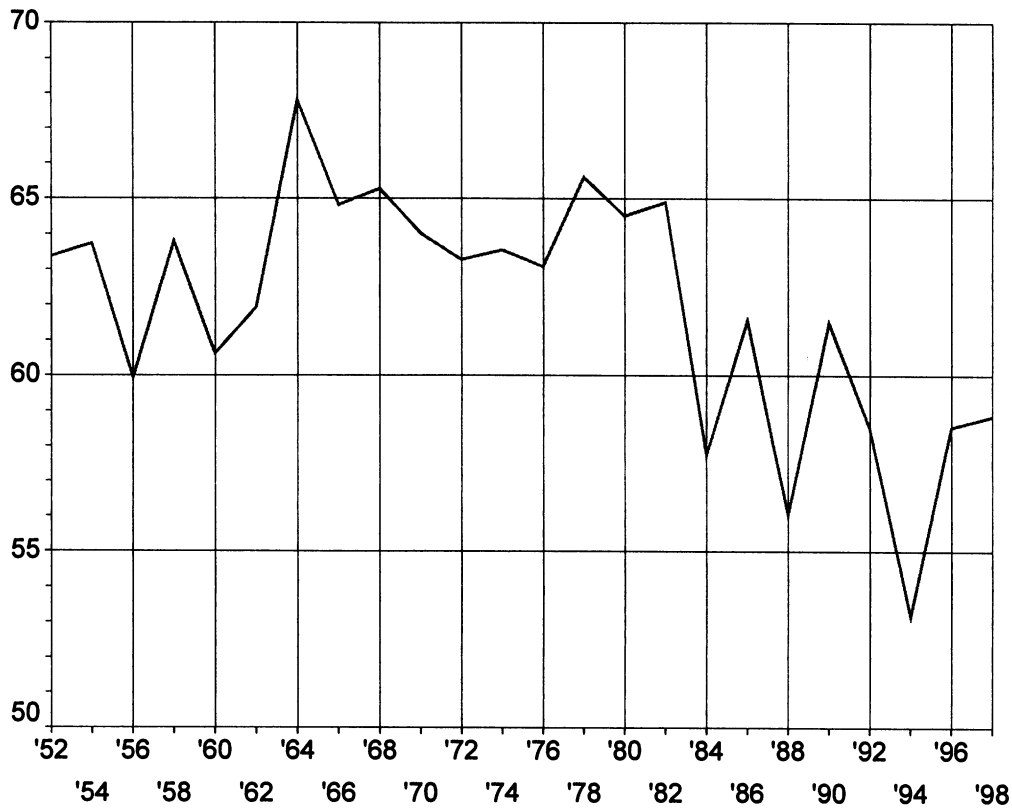
CHANGE OF MACROPARTISANSHIP

As is common in the study of macropartisanship, the variable of interest is the percentage of Democrats among those with a major party identification (Democrats and Republicans, regardless of the strength of the identification). Independents, including those who profess to lean toward either party, are excluded. Macropartisanship simply registers the relative weight of Democratic vis-à-vis Republican identification. For example, a figure of 62 indicates that among 100 respondents expressing a partisan identification, there are 62 Democrats and 38 Republicans. The focus on partisans at the expense of independents is quite congenial for the examination of a possible realignment, since we are concerned with shifts of the partisan balance.

Figure 1 displays the percentage of Democrats among party identifiers in all NES surveys, including midterm elections, from 1952 to 1998. The imprint of the Reagan innovation on the partisan balance in the electorate is unmistakable. Between 1980 and 1988, Democratic identification fell from 64.5% to 56%, which is by far the single largest shift in half a century. From 1952 to 1980, the Democratic Party maintained the overwhelming lead in partisanship forged in the New Deal realignment, despite defeats in presidential elections. If there exists a steady-state period for macropartisanship, it extends far beyond 1964, all the way to 1980. Although partisan identification unraveled during the 1960s and 1970s, the relative proportion of Democrats among identifiers was virtually the same in the 1980 NES survey (64.5%) as in 1952 (63.4%). Only in the aftermath of the 1980 election did the Democratic share fall sharply, and, while continuing to fluctuate, remained at a lower level.

Table 1 provides a statistical account of the change. For each presidential election for which there are sufficient time points before and after in the NES series, we determined how strongly macropartisanship shifted after the election. The higher the correlation between the binary time variable and macropartisanship, the stronger is the change; a negative sign indicates a shift favoring the Republican Party. Consider the correlations in the first column of Table 1, where no controls are applied. It appears that after all elec-

FIGURE 1. Macropartisanship, 1952–98 NES Surveys



Source: 1948–98 cumulative NES File.

Note: The series represents the percentage of respondents with Democratic Party identification among all respondents with a major party identification (excluding independents).

tions from 1972 to 1988 the GOP made significant gains in macropartisanship, but not all instances remain significant once controls are applied. Only two elections stand out: 1980 and 1984. Clearly, something important happened to macropartisanship after these

elections. The control for any of the other elections that initially proved significant (1972, 1976, and 1988) does not make much difference for the two Reagan elections. At the same time, controlling for either 1980 or 1984 renders all others nonsignificant. It is safe to

TABLE 1. Change in Macropartisanship after Presidential Elections

Presidential Election	Correlation between Time and Macropartisanship					
	No Control	Controlling for				
		1972	1976	1980	1984	1988
1956	-.05	.16	.16	.22	.17	.08
1960	-.06	.25	.24	.32	.25	.12
1964	-.21	.14	.12	.20	.11	-.02
1968	-.36	.01	.00	.08	-.02	-.17
1972	-.44*	—	.02	.10	-.05	-.22
1976	-.50*	-.28	—	.17	-.04	-.27
1980	-.68***	-.59**	-.55**	—	-.27	-.48*
1984	-.69***	-.60**	-.55**	-.31	—	-.46*
1988	-.58**	-.48*	-.42*	-.24	-.07	—

Source: 1948–98 cumulative NES file.

Note: Entries are correlations between NES macropartisanship and a binary time variable. For each election, the time variable was scored 0 for all time points up to and including that election, 1 for all time points afterward. For example, the correlation of $-.05$ between the 1956 time variable and macropartisanship indicates that macropartisanship was lower (less Democratic) after the 1956 election than before, although not by much or significantly so. * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$.

conclude that, in the nearly 50 years of NES polling, the only marked and lasting shift in macropartisanship occurred in the wake of the Reagan elections. All the others either made no dent or only appear to do so because of their proximity to the Reagan elections.

These findings are based on an analysis that includes midterm as well as presidential elections. Some of the midterm readings for macropartisanship in Figure 1, to be sure, do not boost our claim. The first Reagan midterm (1982) shows no decline whatsoever in Democratic partisanship relative to 1980. Had realignment not yet begun? Or was this a temporary delay in Republican consolidation due to an unusually bad mix of economic and political forces that obscured an on-going realignment? The analysis below provides an answer. Although some of the pro-Republican shift was left intact by the second Reagan midterm (1986) and the Bush midterm (1990), they raise doubts about realignment claims (Hurley 1991). Whatever the economic and political fallout in those elections, the pronounced fluctuation in macropartisanship between on-year and off-year elections is a novelty. This is not the place to delve into a resolution of this complication. Suffice it to say that the erratic behavior of partisanship in midterms notwithstanding, the Reagan years are the only significant instance in nearly half a century when macropartisanship moved with lasting consequence.

We agree that “between 1980 and 1988, at least a limited version of the long-heralded partisan realignment took place” (Miller and Shanks 1996, 166; also Miller 1991, 564). It was limited in that it did not entirely sweep the Democratic Party from majority status (among identifiers) in the American electorate. And it did not give the GOP immediate control of both houses of Congress, although that finally materialized in 1994. In some way, the 1980s realignment is the mirror image of the one in 1896, which turned a highly competitive balance between the two parties into a decided advantage for the Republicans. Almost a century later, a decided advantage for the Democrats that dated back to the New Deal was turned into a highly competitive balance. What type of realignment model can explain such a marked shift of the partisan equilibrium in the American electorate?

A MODEL OF REALIGNMENT

By definition, realignment presumes durable, not transient, change. That does not mean that the new condition must prevail forever, but it must last a reasonably long time. The concept of realignment is ambivalent, however, about whether such change takes place at a single critical moment or occurs more gradually. A model of gradual change with permanent consequences has the form (minus the error term):

$$Y_t = [\omega/(1 - \delta)]X_t.$$

In the case at hand, Y denotes the macropartisanship index and X the onset of realignment; ω and δ refer to parameters that capture the dynamic of change (explained below). The gradual-permanent model is

rooted in transfer function analysis (Box and Jenkins 1976; Box and Tiao 1975; Clarke, Norpoth, and Whiteley 1998). Carmines and Stimson (1989) apply this model with much success in their analysis of issue-evolution realignments. In their “dynamic growth” model, the central features are as follows (p. 143):

The model is dynamic because it presumes that at some point the system moves from a fairly stationary steady-state period to a fairly dramatic change; the change is manifested by a “critical moment” in the time series. Significantly, however, the change—the dynamic growth—does not end with the critical moment. Instead, it continues over an extended period, albeit at a much slower place.

In other words, a critical shock gradually moves a system from one steady state to another. The effect is enduring for the foreseeable future, but it is not accomplished in a single step. Two parameters govern this process: ω captures the initial shock, and δ summarizes the aftershocks. Think of ω as initiating either a climb or a descent to a new equilibrium. Either way, the initial effect may be positive (a gain) or negative (a loss), but the rate at which it continues to build invariably has a positive sign. In the long run, the total accumulation of change predicted by the gradual-permanent model will add up to the ratio $\omega/(1 - \delta)$. It is by such an amount that the aftermath equilibrium will differ from the one prevailing before the realignment. Technically, the period of change is infinite, but in practical terms most of the change will register within a foreseeable time frame.

The requirement that change is supposed to occur over some longer period sets the gradual-permanent model apart from the theory of critical elections, which posits a relatively sudden conversion (Burnham 1970; Key 1955). Furthermore, the gradual model is not the same as a secular realignment framework, which views change as proceeding incrementally (Converse 1966; Key 1959), on southern convergence). The gradual-permanent model captures the story of a rapidly unfolding change during a “realigning electoral era” (Campbell 1966, 75). Even if the change turns out to be abrupt, the model still proves useful. The aftershock parameter will drop to zero, and all the weight will rest on the initial shock. The difference between a gradual and an abrupt model is in the delta parameter. We can let the parameter estimate settle this issue, but we need guidance as to the onset of change. How certain is it that the equilibrium shift commenced with the 1980 election? Why not with the policy success of Reagan’s first year in office? Or with the recovery following the 1981–82 recession? Or with the “It’s morning in America, again” reelection campaign of 1984?

To settle these questions, we need a more frequent sounding of partisanship than the biennial NES but one that nonetheless relies on the same instrument. The NES party identification question, with its “generally” and “usually” qualifiers, aims to determine not just any partisan but especially the “long-term identifier who is momentarily piqued at his own party, or tempted to defect temporarily to vote for a charismatic candidate of another party” (Converse 1976, 35).

TABLE 2. Annual Shifts in Macropartisanship during the Reagan Era, *New York Times/CBS News Surveys*

Independent Variable	Estimate
1980	-6.72*** (1.15)
1981	2.82 (1.48)
1982	-1.35 (1.48)
1983	-2.02 (1.48)
1984	-4.22** (1.48)
1985	1.07 (1.48)
1986	.57 (1.48)
1987	.20 (1.47)
1988	-1.97 (1.09)
Constant	65.60*** (.47)

Source: *New York Times/CBS News* polls, quarterly aggregates, 1976:01-1998:04 ($N = 92$).

Note: Entries are parameter estimates of an OLS regression (with standard errors in parentheses) of *New York Times/CBS News* macropartisanship on binary time variables. Each of those variables was scored 0 from the first quarter of 1976 to the fourth quarter of the respective year and 1 afterward through the fourth quarter of 1998. * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$.

Among available surveys that probe this sentiment with some regularity, the *New York Times/CBS News* polls offer by far the best alternative: “Generally speaking, do you usually consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what” (emphasis added)?¹ The *New York Times/CBS News* polls are conducted often enough during a year to permit quarterly, but not monthly, aggregation. These polls are thus well suited to construct a valid measure of traditional party identification and to probe the dynamic properties of the partisan realignment. In short, this is the best available measure. Its advantages compared to the Gallup version have not escaped the attention of scholars (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 1998), although none have probed for realignment effects.

Our efforts to identify the onset of the realignment focus on annual shifts in macropartisanship during Reagan’s presidency, beginning with the 1980 election. It would be tedious to search for this type of needle in a quarterly haystack; as a practical shortcut, we limit the search to annual aggregates. Table 2 presents the estimates for each of those years. Consider 1982: The estimate (-1.35) indicates that at the end of that year,

¹ In contrast, the Gallup Poll measure (“In politics, as of today, do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, or an Independent?”) probes a more short-term form of partisanship. The use of this measure by MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson (1989) has sparked heated controversy (Abramson and Ostrom 1991, 1992, 1994; Bishop, Tuchfarber, and Smith 1994; MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1992). Considerable wording confusion reigns in the literature on (macro)partisanship. MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson (1989) did not report the wording of the Gallup question in their original article and later (1992) provided an incomplete version of the *New York Times/CBS News* question, omitting the “usually” qualifier. Such slippage, however, has an honored precedent. *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960, 122) itself left out “usually,” although *The Voter Decides* (Campbell, Gurin, and Miller 1954, 90, 217) got it right.

macropartisanship fell by 1.35 percentage points (becoming less Democratic). Note that this is a partial estimate that controls for the effects of all the other annual shifts included in the table. Although it points in the right direction (change of macropartisanship toward the Republican side), the estimate for 1982 falls short of significance, as do many of the others in the table.

Only two entries in Table 2 clearly pass the test: the two presidential years. The 1980 election estimate packs by far the largest wallop, cutting the Democratic edge in macropartisanship by 6.7 percentage points. If there was a realignment during Reagan’s presidency, it began right after the election. Yet, although less impressive, the significant effect for 1984 suggests a second shock. Is the one-shock realignment model too simple? Did both Reagan elections shape the realignment, each perhaps with a rationale and dynamic of its own? In the next section, we test the rival realignment specifications, but first we note the fundamentals of economics and politics introduced by the theory of macropartisanship. Those fundamentals pose serious competition for any realignment account of partisan change.

THE DYNAMICS OF MACROPARTISANSHIP

Although many scholars concede that a partisan realignment of some form may have taken place in the 1980s, it is argued that this only proves the sensitivity of partisanship to prevailing political and economic conditions. Contrary to the classical theory of party identification, which leaves little, if any, room for systematic short-term variation in party identification itself (as opposed to short-term forces affecting the vote choice at any given election), the work of MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson (1989), in particular, documents fluctuations in partisanship that are neither random nor negligible. These variations appear to go hand in hand with political and economic circumstances (also Fiorina 1991; Weisberg and Kimball 1995).

Without a doubt the incumbent in the White House is the most conspicuous standard-bearer of his party. His standing with the mass public, among all possible conditions, should be able to translate into support for the party he represents. Few issues can match the potential of the economy to affect partisan choices, as a vast domain of research documents (e.g., Norpoth, Lewis-Beck, and Lafay 1991). This is not the place to sort out some of the numerous disputes over the ways in which the economy affects politics, but the specifics of the claims about macropartisanship merit close attention. A critical replication of those claims shows that without numerous control variables to represent the effects of presidential administrations and political events macropartisanship moves far less strongly with the economic and political winds (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 1998). Apparently, those factors exert considerable influence, even though their role is not explicated in the theory of macropartisanship.

In response to that challenge, Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (1998) reformulated their theory. The new

TABLE 3. Models of Macropartisanship

Independent Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
1980				
Initial effect	-1.00*** (0.15)	-1.03*** (0.15)	-1.04*** (0.17)	-1.05*** (0.15)
Dynamic rate	0.91*** (0.01)	0.91*** (0.01)	0.90*** (0.02)	0.91*** (0.01)
1984				
Initial effect	—	—	-1.78 (1.86)	—
Dynamic rate	—	—	-0.76 (0.53)	—
Presidential Approval_{t-1}				
Initial effect	0.11*** (0.02)	0.06*** (0.02)	0.06*** (0.02)	0.06*** (0.02)
Dynamic rate	—	0.61*** (0.12)	0.62*** (0.12)	0.65*** (0.12)
(Presidential Approval × Reagan)_{t-1}				
Initial effect	—	—	—	(0.12) (0.08)
Dynamic rate	—	—	—	-0.90*** (0.11)
Consumer Sentiment_{t-1}				
Initial effect	-.02 (0.02)	—	—	—
Dynamic rate	—	—	—	—
Constant	65.38*** (0.49)	65.60*** (0.46)	65.60*** (0.47)	65.60*** (0.46)
Adj. R ²	0.82	0.84	0.84	0.84
Standard error of estimate	2.17	2.05	2.06	2.03
LBQ ₍₂₀₎	15	16	14	18
N	92	92	92	92

Source: *New York Times/CBS News* polls, quarterly aggregates, 1976:01–1998:04 (N = 92).

Note: Cell entries are transfer function estimates (standard errors are in parentheses) for *New York Times/CBS News* macropartisanship. The variables “1980” and “1984” are binary time variables scored 0 from 1976:01 to 1980:04 and 1984:04, respectively, and 1 afterward through the fourth quarter of 1998. Given the Democratic direction of the macropartisanship measure, the observations for presidential approval and consumer sentiment were inverted around their overall means for periods of Republican control of the presidency. ***p ≤ .001.

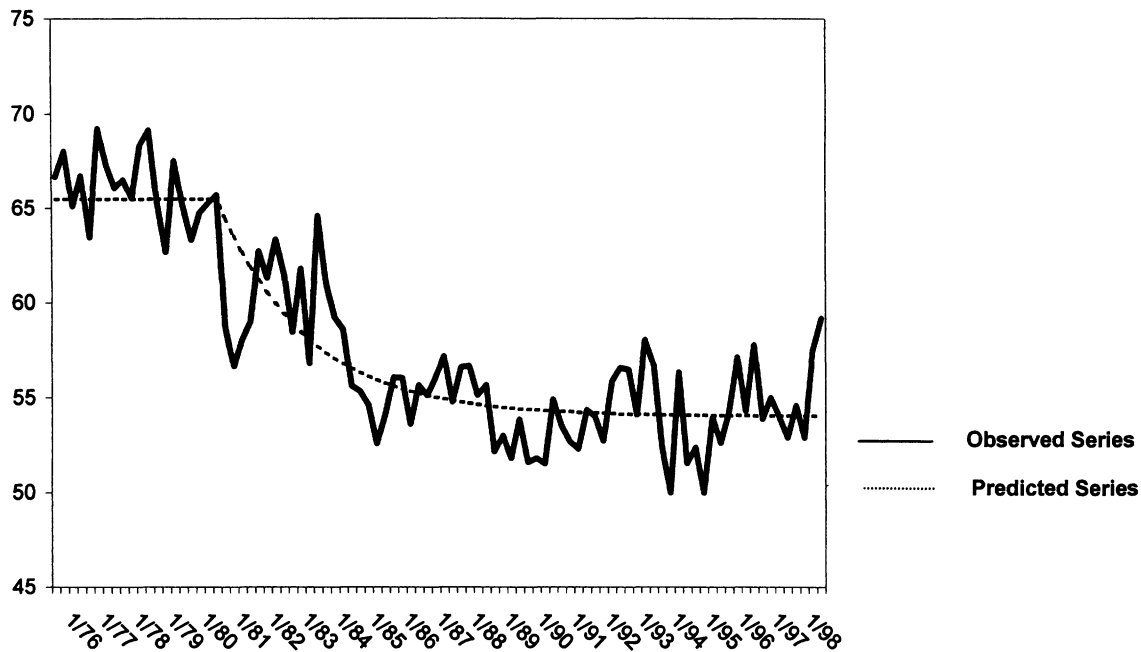
version argues that macropartisanship is a moving equilibrium, subject to the accumulation of past political and economic shocks. The key factors are still the familiar variables of presidential approval ratings and consumer sentiment, but the revised hypothesis states that changes in approval and sentiment, however slight in the short run, cumulate to generate substantial shifts in aggregate partisanship. At the same time, other possible influences are dismissed: “Changes in macropartisanship from other sources that do not register in the approval and sentiment series (such as election campaigns and their aftermath) are mostly transient and of little long-term consequence” (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 1998, 901). Seen from this point of view, any realignment in the 1980s must have been the work of an unusually popular president and good economic times. Did short-term elements somehow fuse into a long-term compound?

Our first attempt to answer that question focuses on a realignment specification that chooses as onset the Reagan election in 1980. The variables *Presidential*

Approval and *Consumer Confidence* enter the macropartisanship equation with a lag of one quarter so as to avoid problems of simultaneous causation.² The results in the first column of Table 3 provide strong evidence for a dynamic model of realignment. Sparked by the 1980 election, the decline of (Democratic) macropartisanship proceeds at a rapid pace. The estimate for the initial effect (-1.0) may seem puny,³ but with a dynamic rate of 91%, the aftershocks are nearly as strong as the initial tremor. Quarter after quarter, they chip away the Democratic edge and boost the Republican

² Since the macropartisanship measure has a partisan direction (percentage Democrat), both presidential approval and consumer sentiment must be inverted when Republicans control the White House. To do so we centered each series around its mean and multiplied the observations for each of those variables by (-1) whenever a Republican was in the White House.

³ This estimate should not be confused with the one for the 1980 election in Table 2. That was an estimate of the difference in average macropartisanship before and after the election, without considering a dynamic parameter.

FIGURE 2. The Trajectory of Realignment

Source: *New York Times/CBS News* polls.

Note: The observed series represents quarterly aggregates of the macropartisanship index (1976:01–1998:04). The predicted series is derived from the parameters of the 1980 realignment (the initial effect and dynamic rate of the “1980” variable of model 2 in Table 3, with all other independent variables held constant).

side. It is reassuring to note that the prerealignment level of macropartisanship in the *New York Times/CBS News* series provides a constant (65.4%) that closely matches the long-run average of Democratic identifiers in NES surveys up to that time (63.7%). Given the virtually identical measurement instruments, that is how it should be. The baseline for testing the dynamic model of realignment with *New York Times/CBS News* surveys is not a deviant case that would produce an exaggerated shift in the subsequent period.

Aside from the 1980 realignment, presidential approval ratings, as the estimate in the first column of Table 3 indicates, also move macropartisanship in a highly significant fashion. Consumer confidence, however, does not appear to have a direct effect. When jointly considered with presidential approval, this economic measure loses out as a predictor of macropartisanship. Still, given the fairly strong correlation (.45) between those two predictors, the economy has an indirect effect on macropartisanship, mediated by presidential approval. Economic assessments, not surprisingly, drive presidential approval ratings and through that vehicle manage to affect partisanship. Such an indirect influence could be parceled out of the overall effect attributed to approval, but in the end that does not give us any better purchase on macropartisanship than does presidential approval alone. Therefore, the consumer confidence measure was dropped from subsequent specifications.

To expand the event horizon of the key short-term variable, we added a dynamic factor for presidential approval ratings. According to the results presented in

the second column of Table 3, the dynamic rate for approval proves strong and significant. In other words, the president’s party benefits from high ratings of his job performance, and the effect cumulates at an impressive rate. The question, however, is what that does to the realignment specification. The answer is that the 1980 realignment model continues to perform powerfully even in the presence of the economic and political fundamentals. Given the estimate for the initial effect (–1.03) and a dynamic rate of 91%, the cumulative effect reaches 11.4 percentage points. That is the long-term change in macropartisanship triggered by the Reagan victory in 1980. This shift in the electoral equilibrium occurred independently of the on-going fall-out from presidential performance as recorded in job approval ratings.

Before we accept the conclusion that the 1980 election triggered a realignment, let us consider the alternative of a second shock in 1984, associated with Reagan’s fourth year in office, that culminated in his reelection. The results in the third column of Table 3 fail to support the two-shock model. The initial effect for 1984 appears quite strong and has the right sign (–1.8), but it falls woefully short of significance, as does the dynamic rate. At the same time, the specification for the 1980 election survives unscathed. What took the wind out of the apparent effect for 1984?

We believe the 1980 election set in motion a shift in the partisan equilibrium that was well under way by 1984. Figure 2 maps the predicted trajectory of the shift, based on the parameter estimates for the 1980 election in Table 3 (second column). According to that

trajectory, most of the realignment effect was concentrated in Reagan's first term. The pace of change slows markedly in his second term and flattens out afterward.⁴ What obscures this long-term shift in the observed series of macropartisanship, however, are short-term setbacks for the Reagan administration, especially the 1981–82 recession, which dropped the president's approval ratings to a record low in 1982. We do not deny that presidential approval moves macropartisanship, but that is short-term change around a baseline. As Reagan's ratings tumbled in his first term, so did his party's standing, which led to an above-equilibrium rise (given the Democratic direction) in the macropartisanship index. When Reagan's popularity rebounded along with the economy in late 1983 and throughout 1984, macropartisanship inched back toward the equilibrium, even overshooting the mark.

By no means a trivial factor for partisanship, presidential approval ratings nevertheless do not possess the leverage, even considering their cumulative effect, to generate realignment-size shifts in macropartisanship. Given the parameter estimates for model 2 in Table 3 (an initial effect of .06 and a dynamic rate of .61), a one-point change in presidential approval produces a cumulative shift of just 0.15% in macropartisanship. To engineer the realignment of the 1980s—a long-term shift of 11 points in macropartisanship—would require a boost of nearly 70 points in approval ratings above the average level, which is a statistical impossibility. In other words, the realignment of the 1980s was not the work of exceptional prosperity of a hugely popular president, at least not in the way those conditions, according to our estimates, normally affect partisanship.

But realignment periods are not ordinary times. They are moments of qualitative not just quantitative change. The upheaval surrounding an electoral realignment may very well be associated with mutations in the way factors such as presidential popularity and the economy affect partisanship. Structural change in model parameters cannot be ruled out (Maddala and Kim 1998, chaps. 13 and 15). In view of the realignment that unfolded during Reagan's tenure, one could suppose that his approval rating had a structurally different grip on partisanship than was true under his predecessors and successors. The same could be said for economic sentiment, but the failure of this variable to prove significance in the presence of approval precludes its further use.

A model that allows parameters to vary for the

⁴ This analysis relies on the *New York Times/CBS News* measure for frequent soundings of partisanship, but it should be noted that the Gallup measure also registers an enduring shift in the wake of the 1980 election. An analysis of the Gallup series going back to 1953 and leading up to 1998 confirms a realignment effect that is similar in nature to the one based on the *New York Times/CBS News* data for 1976–98. The magnitude of the immediate effect is smaller (–.49) in the Gallup series, but the dynamic parameter (.94) is very similar, and the cumulative shift still reaches –8.3 percentage points. At the same time, the strong autocorrelation remaining in the Gallup series testifies to the keener sensitivity of that survey item to short-term disturbances.

Reagan years, during which most of the realigning shift accumulated, leads to the estimates shown in the fourth column of Table 3. To be sure, the initial effect estimate for Reagan's approval (.12) is impressive, double the normal effect (.06). The dynamic rate looks formidable as well, but the negative sign hints at a puzzling trajectory of the cumulative effect. There is no point in pondering this puzzle, however, since the initial shock lacks significance. It also can be noted that the overall fit of the model including the Reagan interaction is no better than the model without. Which ever way one looks at it, the results are disappointing for the structural-change hypothesis. Presidential approval ratings did not move macropartisanship any more during the Reagan years than at other times between 1976 and 1998. The realignment in the 1980s was not the work of especially strong presidential approval. Of course, it did not hurt the GOP that, by 1984, economic times were good and Reagan's ratings were high, but those conditions only added a wiggle around a shifting baseline. The partisan equilibrium in the American electorate had begun moving before either prosperity or popularity took hold.

THE NATURE OF PARTISAN EQUILIBRIUM

The identification of a realignment may go a long way toward resolving a knotty puzzle about macropartisanship. On the one hand, it is undeniable that aggregate partisanship has not stood still during the half-century span of observation. It has moved, and not just back and forth around a stable baseline. On the other hand, the macropartisanship index has stayed within a narrow range of barely 20 percentage points. The latter points to the existence of equilibrium, but the former raises doubts about it. What kind of equilibrium, if any, does macropartisanship exhibit?

The pioneers in this field make a strong case for the notion of a moving equilibrium (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 1998; MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1989). The thrust of their argument is that there is no unique equilibrium to which partisanship will necessarily return after some departure due to external forces. Instead, the equilibrium is whatever is produced by the accumulation of political and economic conditions. In a sense, politics and economics constantly move macropartisanship to a new equilibrium.

In contrast, Green, Palmquist, and Schickler (1998) see great merit in the notion of a constant equilibrium. They make a compelling argument by asking hypothetically whether the fluctuations in macropartisanship would stay within such narrow boundaries without the gravitational pull of a stable force, which they believe is very doubtful. Indeed, the bounded nature of the macropartisanship movement is hard to reconcile with the notion of an ever-changing equilibrium. We agree that the familiar political and economic variables lack sufficient leverage to shift equilibrium, even with cumulative effects taken into account.

To be sure, it is not easy to identify a constant level for macropartisanship over a half century even though its movement appears to be bounded. This suggests an

intermediate type of equilibrium where shocks do not dissipate quickly, yet they do not remain at full strength forever (Box-Steffensmeier and Smith 1996, 1998). Such a dynamic fits uneasily into a zone between autoregressive adjustment and random drift. If macropartisanship possesses equilibrium, then it must be one that can tolerate prolonged departures or is of the moving variety.

We take the position that macropartisanship exhibits a realignment-induced equilibrium. At any point there may be movement, but the level of macropartisanship is fairly stable until disrupted by conditions powerful enough to warrant the label “realignment.” Then the baseline changes, and for a long time. The adjustment is gradual, which should not be confused with a moving equilibrium. The point of distinction is that in our model an equilibrium shift is rare, not a daily possibility depending on the flow of everyday politics. If the 1980 realignment is seen as a “structural break” (Maddala and Kim 1998), we can demonstrate beyond a reasonable doubt that macropartisanship behaves as a stationary process. Every version of the structural-break test, by a wide margin, supports that conclusion.⁵ At the same time, these test results cast doubt on the latest technology employed by Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (1998) in defense of their macropartisanship theory. The presence of a structural break, if not taken into account, will lead to erroneous evidence for a cointegrating relationship (Maddala and Kim 1998). Ultimately, it is a backhanded confirmation of the 1980 realignment that it makes such a powerful difference: Ignore this intervention, and macropartisanship is a bundle of contradictions; take it into account, and we have a well-behaved specimen of equilibrium. Coming to grips with a realignment effect solves a major puzzle regarding the nature of aggregate partisanship.

CONCLUSION

Much of the movement in aggregate party identification (macropartisanship) in the American electorate during the last half century can be traced to a major realignment. Our analysis, based on both the NES and the *New York Times/CBS News* surveys, demonstrates a substantial and lasting shift of the partisan balance. The 1980 election sparked a growth in Republican identification that shrank the overwhelming Democratic lead dating from the New Deal realignment. Although the GOP did not achieve outright majority status, the new balance meant that the two major parties would compete on nearly equal terms in na-

⁵ We examined three versions of a modified unit-root test with the *New York Times/CBS News* macropartisanship series, assuming a structural break in 1980. Version A (crash), which allows for a one-time change of intercept, produces a test statistic of -5.26 (with a critical value of -3.77). Version B (changing growth), which allows for a change of slope, produces a test statistic of -5.81 (with a critical value of -3.80). Version C (both intercept and slope changes) has a test statistic of -5.23 (with a critical value of -3.99). Thus, the unit-root hypothesis is firmly rejected in all three instances. In comparison, the standard unit-root test without the specification of a structural break is a close call: a Dickey-Fuller test statistic of -2.79 , with a critical value of -2.89 .

tional politics, which paved the way for the Republican victory in the 1994 congressional elections. The success of the Democrats in the presidential contests of 1992 and 1996 failed to reverse the Republican gains in partisanship, let alone restore the pre-1980 Democratic lead.

The 1980 realignment fits the pattern of a dynamic model with a gradual-permanent set of parameters. A critical moment interrupts the partisan equilibrium and sets in motion an evolutionary change that eventually settles at a new steady state. This is no overnight phenomenon. The process triggered by the 1980 election took most of Reagan's first term before yielding noticeable gains in Republican partisanship. However much this suggests that the realignment was performance driven, our analysis shows otherwise. The key factors—presidential approval ratings and consumer sentiment—may generate wiggles around the partisan baseline, but they are not capable of triggering an avalanche. Reagan's popularity did not generate the 1980s realignment. If popularity were the key to such shifts, the opportunities were far better under Eisenhower and even Nixon (before his disgrace). What is more, given the relationship between approval ratings and partisanship, it would require impossible, not just improbable, surges in popularity to account for partisan realignments.

The key to the 1980 realignment lies in the ideological reorientation of national policy during the Reagan years. Swept into office by an economic crisis of uncommon severity, Reagan pursued a version of conservatism (Reaganomics) that departed sharply from New Deal liberalism. His party was able to exploit an ideological division in the electorate, in which conservatives outnumbered liberals. As in previous realignments, the agenda of the federal government underwent a change that to a large extent endured under control by the opposition party. It would be foolish, of course, to claim that the 1980 shift would have taken hold even if the economy had not recovered, just as the New Deal realignment might have been doomed had the Depression continued. Exactly how the Reagan agenda may have helped bring about the 1980 realignment is a question for future research.

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