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# UNDER WAY AND HERE TO STAY PARTY REALIGNMENT IN THE 1980s?

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HELMUT NORPOTH

**Abstract** In recent years, the Republican party has sharply narrowed the Democratic edge in overall party identification. Using *New York Times*/CBS News surveys (1980–1986) and earlier NES/CPS surveys, this analysis probes several explanations for that partisan change: generational replacement, conversion, and mobilization. The findings rule out conversion, give some support to mobilization, but emphasize the historically unique surge toward the GOP among the young since 1980. This break with the parental partisan legacy signals the prospect of a party realignment through generational replacement.

Ever since Eisenhower's presidential campaign conquered the White House, the emergence of a Republican majority in the American electorate has been the object of much speculation. Some observers have eagerly prophesied that prospect, but others have shrugged it off as wishful thinking. Each new Republican conquest or successful defense of the White House revives the speculation, while electoral analysts sort out the evidence pro and con. That a party realignment is overdue, many would agree, but that one is actually under way, and that whatever is under way is here to stay, many would dispute.

There is no denying that over the last three decades Republicans have done exceedingly well in winning presidential elections. Although, for the most part, they faced a Congress controlled by the other party, they could often rely on enough conservative members of Congress to govern effectively. In that sense, a party realignment may have long been consummated, but that it is not the same as saying that the Republican party has displaced the Democrats as the favorite of the American electorate.

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Our interest focuses on the basic partisan loyalties of American voters, commonly known as their “party identifications” (Campbell et al., 1960). While no immutable biological trait, this identification is no fickle opinion swaying with the prevailing wind. To be sure, a good portion of voters will not be guided by their identifications in casting their votes in any given election, but in most cases their party identifications have survived such acts of infidelity. Though aided by defections of Democratic voters, Eisenhower’s and Nixon’s victories failed to upend the basic partisan division and instead turned out to be “deviating elections.” Given the nature of party identification, a shift of basic loyalties massive enough to produce a realignment is bound to be a rare event.

Historically, party realignments have occurred in cyclical fashion: in the 1830s, 1860s, 1890s, and 1930s. The 1970s hence were due for another; and indeed there was no lack of symptoms. The majority party suffered from a sharp division over policy issues and along broad ideological lines. A seemingly hopeless combination of high inflation, unemployment, and no growth befell the national economy, undermining the historic reputation of the Democrats as the party of prosperity. Meanwhile in 1980, the Republican presidential candidate promised both a radical departure from the traditional New Deal policies and a resolution of the national condition diagnosed as “malaise” by the incumbent. Carter then became the first (elected) president to be voted out since 1932, when Hoover’s defeat ushered in the New Deal realignment.

## **Notions of Party Realignment**

Like few other notions, “party realignment” intrigues politicians as much as it does journalistic and scholarly observers of politics (see Key, 1955; Campbell et al., 1960; Phillips, 1969; Burnham, 1970; Broder, 1972; Sundquist, 1973; Petrocik, 1981). The most common notion of realignment is one where the overall balance of party support in the electorate shifts from one party to another. This may happen abruptly in a “realigning election” (Campbell et al., 1960: ch. 19) or, as Key (1955) called it, a “critical election.” But it may also happen more gradually in a realigning era, by means of a “secular realignment.”

Another notion of realignment focuses on the composition of a party’s electoral support rather than on the aggregate balance of the total electorate (Petrocik, 1981). Here the key aspect concerns the social groups that comprise a party’s electoral coalition. A realignment occurs in the sense that one or more core groups of party A move to align themselves with party B, like blacks moving toward the Demo-

cratic party, white southerners toward the Republican party. So long as the flows across party lines roughly match one another the overall balance in the electorate may not shift to any significant degree. Nevertheless, this sorting out of party clienteles most likely results in a changed policy outlook of the parties so as to accord with the demands of the newly dominant groups within the respective party coalition.

### **Partisan Change in the 1980s**

The Reagan victories have produced their share of tantalizing hints of realignment in one form or another. The March 1981 *New York Times*/CBS News survey found the Democratic lead in party identification cut in half, down to 8 points from 16 a year earlier, with Republicans forging ahead of Democrats among self-identified conservatives (Clymer, 1981). Overall, conservatives outnumbered liberals by a 2-to-1 margin, but that had been true throughout the 1970s; so it seemed now as if partisan ties were realigning to fit voters' ideological identifications more appropriately.

During the 1984 campaign, the partisan division showed the Democratic lead narrowed to only five points (late October *Times*/CBS survey), while days after the election, in fact, the Republican share was found to be equal to the Democratic share, 32 to 32 (Clymer, 1984). Never before during the last 35 years had the GOP managed to make such strides in ousting the Democrats as the electorate's most preferred party. To be sure, a year and a half later, some of the Republican gains in party identification have evaporated. Parity with the Democrats days after the election has given way to a steady six-point gap (*Times*/CBS surveys pooled July 1985–Feb. 1986). Is this going to be a replay of what happened in the wake of Eisenhower's and Nixon's victories in 1956, 1968, and 1972, when gains reported for the GOP soon vanished (Converse, 1976:124)?

Thus far, the post-1984 gains have at least shown partial staying power. They have greatly narrowed the Democratic lead and not given way to the familiar 17-point lead enjoyed by the Democrats throughout the 1972–1980 period in NES/CPS surveys. Is this then the harbinger of a slow but ultimately full-fledged realignment? What in particular is fueling the shift toward the GOP? And where does it leave the New Deal Democratic coalition?

### **Collapse of the Democratic Coalition?**

Studies of presidential voting for quite some time have read like obituaries for the Democratic coalition forged in the New Deal era. No

**Table 1.** The Democratic Coalition 1985–1986

	Percent Democratic of Identifiers	Group Size
Blacks	90%	13
Big city resident	71%	12
Poor (<\$12,500)	66%	16
Union household	66%	21
Catholic	59%	28
Southerner	56%	33
Electorate	55%	—

SOURCE: Five *New York Times*/CBS News surveys conducted between July 1985 and February 1986; 8,187 respondents combined.

doubt, Democratic candidates for the presidency have not fared well among several mainline groups composing the “Democratic coalition.” But, according to *Times*/CBS surveys taken between July 1985 and February 1986, not a single one of the six groups commonly counted as the components of the Democratic coalition has moved into the Republican fold. Blacks, big city residents, the poor, and union households continue to favor the Democratic party by lopsided margins, as can be gathered from Table 1. Most southerners and Catholics also still prefer the Democratic party to the GOP.

To be sure, the southern share is now close to the national norm. Southerners have fallen in line with nonsoutherners. This did not happen overnight, but through a slow process of “convergence” that has been under way for over half a century. If one extrapolates trend lines derived by Converse (1966:221) for partisan loyalties in the South and outside during the 1950s, one would have predicted 1983 as the year of convergence. Had it not been for southern blacks turning increasingly Democratic, convergence would have come earlier. Among southern whites, the once virtually unanimous support for the Democratic party has been steadily declining, from an 80-to-20 edge in 1952 to a 56-to-44 split in 1984 (NES/CPS survey, reported by Weisberg, 1985). By early 1986, the GOP had reached statistical parity with the Democratic party in this group (*Times*/CBS surveys July 1985–Feb. 1986). The Republican party, one might say, has neutralized this large Democratic support group, but so far not succeeded in drawing it into its own orbit.

## Mechanisms of Partisan Change

In reflecting on how something like the party balance in the electorate shifts, one instinctively reaches for “conversion.” A rise of the proportion of Republicans logically would seem to stem from individuals abandoning their Democratic identification in favor of one with the GOP. A *New Yorker* cartoon on 24 December 1984 deftly captured this process with the caption: “My God! I went to sleep a Democrat and I’ve awakened a Republican.” Either because they are profoundly dissatisfied with the performance of Democrats in office or cannot accept key policies these Democrats “convert” to Republicanism. Such conversion, though in the opposite partisan direction, is stressed by several accounts of the 1930s realignment (Sundquist, 1973:3; Ladd and Hadley, 1978:66; Erikson and Tedin, 1981:962).

This interpretation of the 1930s realignment squares with the “revisionist” view that treats an individual’s party identification as subject to revision by vote decisions, retrospective judgments, and issue orientations that challenge one’s partisanship (Jackson, 1975; Fiorina, 1981; Page and Jones, 1979; Franklin and Jackson, 1983). Critical realignments simply occur on occasions when short-term forces run so massively against the majority party as to convert a large segment of the electorate to the minority party.

A rival account of partisan change, on the other hand, does not involve individuals changing their minds about anything. Instead it focuses on change in the composition of the electorate. Through births and deaths the population changes constantly. Only a small proportion of the 1930s electorate, for example, is still part of the electorate today. In fact, given the rate of “generational replacement,” it is surprising how little many things in the aggregate change.

The “generational” school of thought has a well-established tradition in the treatment of partisanship (Abramson, 1975; Beck, 1974; Campbell et al., 1960; Jennings and Niemi, 1974, 1981). According to this view, the partisan balance shifts when young voters enter the electorate with an imprint that distinguishes them from the rest of society. So long as this new generation maintains that imprint as it ages and manages to impress it on its own offspring, the whole society gradually takes on the outlook of that generation. Party realignment thus proceeds gradually, with the overall balance shifting as the new generation grows up and the older cohorts die out.

Why young voters should be the vanguard of partisan change is less obvious than it might seem. Contrary to a common stereotype, the young as a whole are little concerned with politics; they do not go to the polls in large numbers and the big ideological issues do not touch them any more than the rest of society. It is not intense politicization,

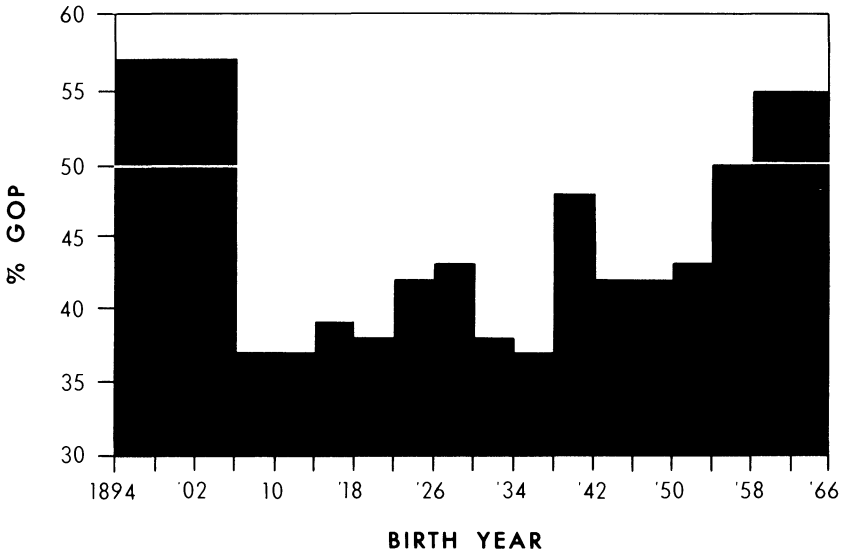
but the lack of it, as Campbell et al. (1960:156) argue, especially the lack of firm party attachments, that makes it likely for the young to be swayed by the prevailing tides; those tides clearly favored the Democrats in the 1930s. Once the party tie is knotted time will tighten it and protect it against slippage, which is why older voters steeped in Republican loyalties were unlikely recruits for the Democratic party in the 1930s.

A third account of partisan change also does not require conversion of partisans, but focuses on that portion of the electorate which is not aligned with any party. Andersen (1979) points to the “mobilization” of heretofore nonpartisan members of the electorate into the ranks of partisanship as the key to the 1930s realignment. It was the success of the Democratic party in capturing the big bulk of “non-immunized voters—whether immigrants, new voters, or those who for some reason have abstained from voting” (Andersen, 1979:18). In our time, the heavily documented dealignment of the late 1960s and early 1970s (Nie, Verba, and Petrocik, 1976; Norpoth and Rusk, 1982; Wattenberg, 1984; Beck, 1984) creates a window of opportunity for realignment by mobilizing the unaligned.

### Birth Year and Partisanship

The generational hypothesis, which requires a distinctive behavior among the young, receives considerable support. *Times/CBS News* surveys in 1984 showed the under-30 cohort to favor the GOP over the Democratic party (Clymer, 1984). “To Republicans dreaming of a historic ‘realignment’ in their favor, this was the best news of all in the 1984 election” (Plissner, 1985). Yet, striking a contrary note, Miller (1986) argued that it was the oldest citizens who were responsible for the overall GOP gain.

To examine more closely the prospect of generational change, Figure 1 depicts the partisanship of the American electorate grouped in 4-year birth cohorts. Approximately 8,000 cases were combined from the five *Times/CBS* surveys in late 1985 and 1986. Note that the percentage Republican among party identifiers is charted, those percentages being based on an average of 300 cases of party identifiers per cohort. This figure draws the profile of an electorate in which the Democratic party dominates all but four cohorts. Cohorts of voters born after 1906 and before 1955 consistently favor that party. The age midsection of the electorate includes the New Deal generation and much of its offspring. The heavy Republicanism of the oldest cohort (1895–1906) signals, we think, the legacy of the pre–New Deal era, in which the Republican party dominated the party system. It is astounding that the dominant



**Figure 1.** Percent Republican among Party Identifiers by Birth Year (July 1985–February 1986, New York Times/CBS News Surveys).

partisan flavor of this group can still be detected, more than sixty years after partisan ties must have been formed. Our finding confirms the generational fault line separating those born before 1905 and after 1910, which was discovered by *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960:154).

Other than the very old, it is only the young that favor the Republican party. Those born since 1955, who were at most 30 years old in late 1985, either prefer the GOP to the Democratic party or are evenly split. On the whole, Republican support among the 30-and-under cohorts comes to 54% compared to only 42% in the rest of the electorate. *Times/CBS* surveys conducted between November 1984 and June 1985 closely replicate the “bathtub” pattern of Figure 1 (see Norpoth, 1985; Clymer, 1985); and so do results of Gallup polls charted by Ladd for 1985 (Ladd, 1986; also *Public Opinion*, 1985). Younger cohorts are rallying to the Republican party while the rest of the electorate, except for the pre–New Deal cohorts, continues to back the Democratic party.

Now perhaps this Republican surge of the young is quite typical for times when the party’s candidate does well in presidential elections, the young being most easily swayed by the prevailing tides and lacking firm attachments. This suspicion can be easily dispelled. As Table 2 bears out, the under-30 group has kept its distance from the GOP in



**Table 2.** Percent Republican of Party Identifiers among Young Adults (Under 30 Years of Age)

Year	Republican	(N)
1952	29%	(214)
1956	34%	(184)
1960	35%	(74)
1964	29%	(194)
1968	35%	(139)
1972	32%	(353)
1976	31%	(316)
1980	35%	(624)
1984	49%	(1948)

SOURCE: 1952–1976, University of Michigan CPS/NES surveys (preelection); 1980, *New York Times*/CBS surveys, Aug. and Sept.; 1984, *New York Times*/CBS surveys, Aug.–Oct.

previous Republican victories. Neither 1952 and 1956 nor 1968 and 1972 showed the young with pronounced Republican leanings. The youthful surge to the GOP noticeable in 1984 stands out as a novelty.

### Who Are the New Republicans?

Much has been made of the “Yuppie” generation as a group receptive to the GOP appeal and a core group of the new Republican coalition. Age-wise, this group of now-grown-up baby boomers would be concentrated among the cohorts born between 1947 and 1958 in Figure 1. Yet, as Figure 1 shows, only the very youngest of them, those born between 1955 and 1958, show any drift toward the GOP. But, of course, “Yuppie” does not just mean young, but also affluent. Indeed, among those born between 1946 and 1960 with incomes over \$35,000, the Republicans do outnumber Democrats 57% to 43% in the surveys examined here. The more affluent baby boomers clearly have a soft spot for the Republican party. But then, that is true for affluent voters born before 1946 as well; among them, Republicans lead Democrats 54% to 46%. Yuppie Republicanism, it seems, has more to do with affluence than with youth. For the most part, the youthful surge toward the GOP is a post-Yuppie phenomenon.

Not surprisingly, the majority of voters under 30 cast their votes for Reagan in 1984. While no higher, according to the *Times*/CBS exit poll,

**Table 3.** Reagan Job Rating, Ideology, and Political Trust:  
The Young (18–30) vs. the Rest of the Electorate

	Young	Rest of Electorate
<b>Reagan Job Rating</b>		
Approve	70%	61%
Disapprove	22%	27%
(N)	(1,934)	(4,152)
<b>Ideology (Self-placement)</b>		
Liberal	25%	19%
Moderate	39%	40%
Conservative	32%	35%
(N)	(1,945)	(4,141)
<b>Trust in Government</b>		
Always/most	52%	43%
Some/never	47%	54%
(N)	(1,009)	(2,231)

SOURCE: *New York Times*/CBS News surveys, July 1985–Feb. 1986.

than among the rest of voters, such strong support for the Republican candidate is not common for the young. Only in one other election did the under-30 group vote strongly for the Republican candidate: in 1956. It is worth noting that not Eisenhower nor Nixon nor Reagan himself in their first elections would have won office had all voted the way the young did (Gallup, 1976).

Whether voting or not, people under 30 give Ronald Reagan high marks of approval for his performance as president: 70%, according to the July 1985–February 1986 *Times*/CBS surveys, as tabulated in Table 3. Among the rest of the electorate the rating is “only” 61%. On the other hand, and surprisingly in view of ideological interpretations of partisan change, the young are not any more conservative than the general electorate; if anything, slightly more of them call themselves liberals than is true for the more Democratic rest of the electorate. On specific issues like abortion, support for affirmative action, and U.S. involvement in war, Plissner (1985) also finds the young more liberal than the rest of society.

While it is true that young conservatives profess a high loyalty toward the GOP, that holds for older conservatives as well. It is among self-described moderates under 30, on the other hand, where the GOP

scores big gains compared to what it commands among older moderates. This too makes it difficult to interpret the youthful surge to the Republican party as an ideological crusade for conservatism. Reagan's appeal apparently has not fueled an ideological conversion.

On trust in government, the young come out more on the trusting side than do their elders. While greater trust has often been found among the young (Jennings and Niemi, 1974:142), political trust overall has been on the decline since the late 1960s, with signs of improvement coming late during the first Reagan term (*Times/CBS* surveys of June 1983). Among the young a revival of political trust, approval of Reagan's job performance, and Republican identification go hand in hand.

### Change of Party Identification, 1976–1986

As suggestive of generational change as the youthful surge toward the GOP in the early 1980s appears to be, the evidence so far involves only snapshots, albeit several ones, taken recently. To establish more conclusively how much generational replacement, by comparison with conversion and mobilization, accounts for partisan change, we must chart partisanship over a longer period. Ideally this would require a panel, which would begin at the time of an individual's partisan socialization. Unfortunately, no such data set is at hand, and in the absence we shall improvise by charting the partisanship of several birth cohorts from the point where they entered the electorate to the present. Given the recent history of "dealignment" we have also included independents (together with DK responses) in this tabulation. It is quite true, and nothing new, that while the young may favor one party over the other they also profess independence in large numbers.

The 1963–1966 cohort is the one that as a whole came of age, politically speaking, with the 1984 election. The oldest within that group we already catch in 1982, when they turned 18. While mostly independent, the partisans favor the Republican side, as can be seen in Table 4. Moreover, the Democratic share of this cohort falls way short of the party's share among established voters while the Republicans take a bigger share. As new 18-year-olds swell this young cohort in subsequent years, the GOP edge is confirmed. As a whole, the young adults of 1984 have the markings of a GOP generation right from the start, signaling a major break with the dominantly Democratic legacy of their parents.

The next oldest cohort, comprising voters born between 1959 and 1963, came of age in the 1980 election. At that time, this cohort slightly favored the Democratic party, although nearly one-half preferred independence. The Democratic lead remains fairly constant for the next

**Table 4.** Party Identification by Birth Cohorts, 1976–1985

	1976	1980	1981	1982	1983		1984		1985	
					A	B	A	B	A	B
Cohort Born 1963–1966										
Rep.	—	—	—	28	31	30	30	30	34	33
Dem.	—	—	—	26	28	31	29	28	29	27
Ind./DK	—	—	—	45	40	42	42	42	37	40
(N)				225	268	382	532	1090	835	765
Cohort Born 1959–1962										
Rep.	—	25	26	26	24	20	26	30	31	34
Dem.	—	31	30	30	31	33	32	30	30	28
Ind./DK	—	43	45	45	44	47	41	41	39	38
(N)		616	606	616	420	455	671	1135	809	794
Cohort Born 1955–1958										
Rep.	16	19	26	23	24	21	25	26	29	31
Dem.	37	35	33	32	34	38	31	32	30	30
Ind./DK	47	46	40	46	42	42	43	42	41	39
(N)	203	754	537	647	433	474	735	1099	795	833
Cohorts Born Before 1955										
Rep.	24	23	25	23	24	23	25	26	29	28
Dem.	40	42	37	41	41	43	41	39	39	40
Ind./DK	37	35	37	36	35	34	34	34	33	31
(N)	2645	6066	4511	4613	3223	3262	4939	7525	5502	5311

SOURCES: For 1976, University of Michigan CPS/NES survey; for 1980–1985, 43 *New York Times*/CBS News surveys: 1983A: Jan–Jun 1983; 1983B: Jul–Dec 1983; 1984A: Jan–Jun 1984; 1984B: Aug–Oct 1984; 1985A: Dec 1984–Jun 1985; 1985B: Jul 1985–Feb 1986.

three years, but gives way in the second half of 1984. The Republican edge of this cohort is of most recent vintage (1985/86) and reflects the effect of current forces. At the same time, the starting configuration (1980) of this cohort indicates that the partisan legacy of the parental generation has not been effectively transmitted.

The next cohort (1955–1958), which came of age in 1976, begins with a partisan division that reflects the parental pattern more closely. Furthermore, its Democratic edge of 21 points approximates that found for high school seniors in 1965 by Jennings and Niemi (1974:39). Still, both parties appear to have lost ground, and equally so, among the young in

1976. In 1965, the then 18-year-olds divided 43 to 21 between the two parties, whereas by 1976 almost half of the then 18- to 21-year-olds chose independence—from parties and probably other strictures as well. During the next 10 years this cohort experiences a remarkable partisan odyssey. While setting out on a steady Democratic course, the group is diverted to the GOP in the wake of Reagan's victory over Jimmy Carter, but reverts back to Democratic bearings by late 1983 until it is swept into a virtual standoff between the two parties after the 1984 election. Admittedly, the partisan buffeting of this cohort exposes the vulnerability of partisanship among young adults.

The rest of the electorate, born before 1955, who had come of age by 1972 at the latest, meanwhile proceeds at a comparatively glacial pace through the last 10 years. The 40-to-24 Democratic edge of 1976 turns into a 40-to-28 one by 1985/86. No doubt the GOP has scored some gains, though in the aggregate exclusively at the expense of independents. There is no sign of Democratic bloodletting; no net conversion, in other words. To be sure, party identification is no immutable trait and the Reagan victories in 1980 and 1984 raise the Republican share a bit, but in the end the impression of partisanship among established voters is one of a continuing though lessening Democratic advantage. The lessening, it must be emphasized, arises entirely from Republican mobilization of independents.

## **Conclusions**

Unlike the 1950s and late 1960s, when prophecies of Republican realignments (Phillips, 1969) remained unfulfilled, the 1980s provide more compelling clues that such a realignment is now under way. What is new is that the younger cohorts profess a marked loyalty to the GOP. No such shift was noticeable at earlier "realignment opportunities."

The youthful surge toward the GOP definitely marks a major disruption of the normal pattern of parental socialization. Young adults coming of age since 1980 have largely abandoned the predominately Democratic identification of their parents. How and why Democratic parents were unsuccessful in imparting their partisanship to their offspring, whether it was a case of mistaken partisan identities, as Converse (1975) suggests for the 1930s realignment, or whether short-term forces outside the home erased the parental imprint, these are questions that future research must address.

One thing is certain, and contrary to some common expectations: there is no evidence that conservatism fuels the youthful surge toward the GOP. Also, the Yuppie phenomenon apparently has little to do with it. Compared with older voters, the young, if anything, prove more

liberal than their elders. And among the young the GOP shows the greater strength in the post-Yuppie cohorts. The surge is remarkably broad among the young, felt also somewhat among women and blacks.

There is also no evidence that the Republican party has managed to convert Democrats to any significant degree. Among voters over 30, the Democratic party has protected its share remarkably well over the past ten years. Our findings give no hope to Republican strategists, or reason for alarm among their Democratic counterparts, that Democratic conversion/defection will turn the GOP into the nation's majority party.

Where the GOP has succeeded, however, is in making inroads among the "growth" group of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the independents. This mobilization has helped narrow the partisan gap in the overall electorate, but has so far failed to reverse it. To some extent, independent mobilization may be considered commonplace and not a harbinger of realignment. Some partisan sorting out among independents typically takes place through the life cycle. If it did not, the shares of both parties would slowly erode since new entrants into the electorate generally show up with lower partisan commitments than their elders (Jennings and Niemi, 1974:39). On the other hand, the mobilization of independents might not appear so commonplace anymore. It certainly failed to materialize in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This failure in fact sharply depressed the overall level of partisanship and contributed to dealignment (Norpoth and Rusk, 1982). At a minimum, the changes of the 1980s point to the end of this contribution. Perhaps what we are seeing now is that partisans who deserted the parties then are returning to them now, though not quite evenhandedly so.

There can be no denying that the Republican surge goes hand in hand with Ronald Reagan's popularity—his initials, curiously enough, spell Republican Realignment. Among the young, where the GOP is now dominant, President Reagan enjoys peak ratings. Skeptics of the realignment scenario, of course, will pounce on this correlation as evidence of no lasting impact meriting the label "realignment." Isn't it true, after all, that the last two years in which Republicanism has flourished so much are also the years in which Reagan's job ratings have done so, staying above the 60-point mark consistently? By contrast, didn't the GOP's post-1980 gains fizzle as soon as Reagan's appeal dimmed? And does not the partisan odyssey of the 1955–1958 cohort, who came of age in 1976, bear out how fickle the young really are in their basic political attitudes?

Granted, much of the partisan change we are witnessing is inspired by Ronald Reagan's performance in office as judged by the public, perhaps in comparison to that of his Democratic predecessor. But that

seems insufficient reason to dismiss changes in party identification as insignificant. Most historical realignments required a measure of performance by the leader of the newly dominant party after the nation had faced a crisis of traumatic dimensions; or at least a measure of public faith in such performance. For all we know from sketchy opinion polls of the early and mid-1930s, FDR received exceedingly high approval ratings in those years. Almost certainly, opinion surveys of that time would have shown high FDR approval rating going hand in hand with Democratic identification among the young—a partisanship that largely endured.

For Ronald Reagan to have a similar impact on the young and their Republican inclinations depends in large part on whether his performance ratings stay high long enough. The newly formed ties to the GOP among the young require reinforcement during the early adult years. But from a certain point on they acquire enough staying power to weather disappointments and survive in the absence of the conditions that inspired them. Assuming that Ronald Reagan maintains a respectable job rating for the remainder of his term that point may not be far off.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Recent events seem to negate this assumption. In the wake of the Iran–Contra revelations, Ronald Reagan’s approval ratings fell from 67% to 46%, according to the November 1986 *New York Times*/CBS News survey. Some will conclude that this drop spells the obituary for any GOP realignment. Almost certainly, a collapse of the Reagan presidency would prove them right. But short of such an event, a diminished approval rating by itself need not doom the realignment prospect. It must be remembered that Reagan’s ratings in the two years following his landslide reelection reached heights unusual for a second-term president. An approval rating in the mid-50% range would still be considered “respectable” in the sense meant above.

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