

## **The Future of the American Two-Party System in the Twenty-First Century**

A. James Reichley

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American political parties are back. After several decades in which they were variously pronounced “weakened by years of neglect” (Broder 1972), “mere jousting grounds for embattled politicians” (Burns 1973), afflicted by “a massive loss of public confidence” (Burnham 1982), “in disarray—more so than at any time in the last century” (Keefe 1988), replaced by “the news and publicity media as primary organizers of citizen action and legitimizers of public decisions” (Polsby and Wildavsky 1988), and “in a late stage of a century-long decline” (Shafer 1988), parties are once more at the very heart of American politics, thriving, unified, well financed, and shaping voter decisions.

During the 1990s there were growing signs of party revival. Party unity on rollcall voting in Congress rose steadily throughout the decade (Pomper 2003). National party organizations raised and spent unprecedented campaign war chests (Corrado, Barclay, Gouvea 2003). Party loyalty in elections increased and ticket-splitting sharply declined (Ceaser and Busch 2001, Hetherington 2001). By the end of the decade L. Sandy Maisel found parties once more “the vital linking institution” in American government (1999).

As the new century began, some thoughtful political analysts, while welcoming the resurgence of party activity, continued to question the staying power of parties as effective forces in national politics. “The role of parties in elections,” Maisel warned, “remains in doubt.” John Kenneth White and Daniel Shea observed that parties still had failed “to reestablish their connection with the voters” (2000).

During the first term of President George W. Bush, however, both major national parties achieved increased organizational strength and appeared to tighten their grips on voter loyalties. In Congress both parties, particularly the dominant Republicans, were “cohesive and elaborately organized” (Sinclair 2002). In the House of Representatives committee leaders were “more accountable to their party colleagues,” and the Republican majority leadership exerted tighter procedural control than at any time since Speaker Joseph Cannon was stripped of some of his powers in 1910. In the Senate power remained more diffuse and the filibuster weapon restricted the majority’s freedom to act, but party unity on rollcall votes continued high.

In the 2004 presidential election, 93 percent of Republicans and 89 percent of Democrats voted for the candidates of their respective parties—both figures unprecedented highs since modern polling began measuring the electorate. In voting for the House of Representatives, 91 percent of Republicans and 88 percent of Democrats cast ballots for their party’s candidate—both figures also record highs in modern polling (White 2004). Only 14 percent of congressional districts elected House members from a different party than had carried it for president. About 25 percent of voters told pollsters on election day they regarded themselves as Independents, but many of these in recent elections have consistently supported one party or the other. The 2004 National Election Study found that only five percent of those who actually voted were “pure independents,” down from seven percent in 2000. National turnout rose to 61 percent—the highest level since 1968.

Contrary to predictions by many analysts (including me) enactment of the 2002 McCain-Feingold campaign finance reform act did little to undermine the fund-raising

capacities of national parties. While prohibited from receiving unlimited corporate, union, or individual contributions, so-called soft money, both national parties in 2004 broke previous records in fund-raising. The Democratic National Committee for the first time in recent history actually raised slightly more than the Republican National Committee, although overall the campaign of Bush and his Republican supporters slightly outspent Senator John Kerry and the Democrats—\$1.14 billion to \$1.08 billion (Federal Election Commission RECORD 2005, Malbin 2005).

Modern national parties are of course far different from the parties of fifty years ago—more centralized, less based on patronage and more on ideology, more linked to high-priced political consultants and professional fund-raisers. Halfway through the first decade of the new century, the cry of most reformers, media critics, and much of the public is not that parties are too weak, but that they have become too strong, splitting the nation into bitterly polarized ideological camps, blocking compromise and cooperation in Congress, and favoring ideological extremes at the expense of the neglected middle.

Nevertheless, contemporary American parties appear to come close, at least structurally, to the model proposed by the famous 1950 American Political Science Association report urging a “More Responsible Two Party System.” As called for by the report, parties in the early years of the new century offer voters a genuine choice, more focused on policy alternatives than on ancient prejudices; and the majority party through congressional enactment or executive order is able to implement a large part of its program. If the political outcome so far is not exactly what many of the reformers had in mind, the party system may simply be giving expression to underlying currents in American democracy.

### **An Enduring Two-Party System**

Strengthened parties have continued to function within the traditional two-party system that goes back at least to the years immediately after the Civil War, and in my view is rooted in party differences that emerged during George Washington's first term. The uprising of third parties in the 1990s that brought Ross Perot 19 percent of the popular vote in the 1992 presidential election (though no electoral votes) has for now largely subsided. Third party candidates for president, including Ralph Nader, received less than one percent of the popular vote in 2004. The Congress elected in 2004 included only one non-major party member in the House (Socialist Bernard Sanders of Vermont) and one in the Senate (Independent James Jeffords also of Vermont), both of whom received committee assignments from their body's Democratic caucus.

Why has the two-party system, which in its rigor is almost unique in modern developed democracies, persisted so long in the United States? Maurice Duverger pointed out many years ago (in his formulation known as Duverger's Law) that polities maintaining single-member, first-past-the-post systems of election, principally the United States and Britain and some of its dominions, tend to promote the development of two major parties whose candidates have a real chance of winning elections (Duverger 1954).

Even polities such as Britain, Canada, and Australia, however, which like the United States use the first-past-the-post system, have generally had at least one significant minor party represented in parliament alongside the two major ones. Why have enduring minor parties with substantial impacts been so rare in the United States?

The first-past-the-post election system pushes us toward a two-party political system. But the constitutional factor that really has kept the system locked in place has been the institution of the Electoral College for choosing presidents.

Quite contrary to the intentions of the founders, almost all of whom hated parties, the Electoral College, as long as most states retain the at-large system for choosing electors, heavily favors the presidential nominees of the two major parties that can pile up large blocs of electoral votes in heavily populated states. The system even makes it improbable that a minor party could hold the balance of power between the two major parties, as has sometimes occurred in Britain and Canada.

Constitutional change to eliminate the Electoral College would entail a political effort that is not likely to be forthcoming. The less populated states benefit from being constitutionally over-represented in the College (each state receives the combined total of its members in the Senate and the House); while the more populous states gain political clout from the at-large system of choosing electors. Together these interests maintain a formidable barrier against change.

The high visibility of the presidential election shapes the structure of our entire political system. As long as the Electoral College confines the real presidential competition to the candidates of the two major parties, the United States will probably continue to have a two-party system in most congressional and state elections.

Reinforcing the effects of the Electoral College and first-past-the-post elections, representatives of the two major parties have taken pains to enact state election laws that strongly advantage major party candidates. In Pennsylvania, for example, major party candidates for the state senate need only 2,000 signatures on petitions to get their names

on the ballot, whereas independent or minor party candidates require 29,000 (reduced from 56,000 by court order).

A major national calamity or conflict might lead to the creation of a new major party, as the struggle over slavery gave birth to the Republicans in the 1850s. Barring such a catastrophe, it is probable not only that we will continue to have a two-party system, but also that the Republicans and the Democrats will be the main contestants. After all, even the Great Depression of the 1930s failed to put enduring cracks in the two traditional major parties' shared monopoly of political power.

Why have the Democrats and the Republicans endured for so long as main beneficiaries of constitutional and statutory factors favoring a two-party system? There may be something to W.S. Gilbert's observation in *Iolanthe*:

That every boy and every gal  
That's born into this world alive,  
Is either a little liberal,  
Or else a little conserva-tive.

Democrats and Republicans, if this formulation is correct, may represent an inherent division of humankind between natural liberals and natural conservatives.

More specifically to American experience, I have elsewhere argued that Republicans and Democrats embody traditions of values and interests that have competed for national political power since the very beginning of American history. The one, which I call the *republican tradition*, coming down along a line from the Federalists and the Whigs to the modern Republicans, has emphasized social order, economic growth through market capitalism, and religion-based morality. The other, which I call the

*liberal tradition*, proceeding from the Jeffersonian Republicans to the modern Democrats, has emphasized social equality, economic sharing, and strict separation between church and state. Both traditions—distinguishing them from feudal and socialist traditions in Europe—have championed personal freedom, the republican tradition accentuating economic freedom and the liberal tradition stressing freedom of expression. In foreign policy, both traditions have had nationalist and internationalist wings (Reichley 2000).

### **Throwing the Rascals Out**

At earlier conferences in this series I have theorized that alternations in national control by parties representing the rival ideological traditions have roughly followed two patterns of political cycles. I will here briefly summarize how these cycles have operated before discussing what clues they may give on possible developments in national politics as the twenty-first century unfolds.

The first pattern is a series of short cycles which is relatively simple and rises pretty clearly from the empirical data. These are what may be called “throw the rascals out” cycles. After a party has held the presidency at the national level or the governorship at the state level (increasingly even in what used to be thought of as one-party states) for two or three terms (eight to twelve years), voters tend to grow dissatisfied or bored with the party in power and are receptive to pleas by the opposition that it is “time for a change.” All other things being equal, this tendency produces pressures that lead to the incumbent party being voted out of office, often by a large majority, and the former opposition installed.

Since the early 1950s the Republicans and the Democrats have fairly regularly alternated in control of the White House, with four two-term periods (not counting the

current Republican run of at least two terms), one three-term (the Reagan-Bush I years), and one that was confined to a single term (Carter). Going further back in history, since the Republicans and the Democrats became the major parties competing for national power in the 1860s, the average duration of party control of the White House has been eleven years. The only markedly longer periods of party dominance were the twenty-four year tenure of the Republicans during and after the Civil War, and the twenty-year period of Democratic supremacy during and after the Depression. Both of these exceptions may reflect the effects of the system of long-term cycles that I will discuss below.

Similar short term cycles have operated for governorships in states with competitive two-party systems. In the seven most populous states with historically competitive systems, the average period of party control of the governorship from 1950 to 2004 was a little more than eight years. In Pennsylvania and New Jersey the two parties exchanged control of the governor's office every eight years with almost rhythmic regularity. In New York, Ohio, and Michigan parties tended to hold gubernatorial dominance for slightly longer periods but alternation nevertheless occurred. In Illinois there was regular alternation until 1976 when the Republicans began a 26 year tenure, finally giving way under clouds of scandal to Democratic Governor Rod Blagojevich in 2002. In California the two parties exchanged control of the governorship every eight years until the Republicans won four straight terms in the 1980s and 1990s, followed by two Democratic victories, the last cut short by Governor Gray Davis's replacement through recall by Republican Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger in 2003. Cyclical party turnover now seems to be developing in some of the Southern states where Democrats used to enjoy one-party dominance, such as Texas, Virginia, and Florida.



From 1954 to 1994, regular shifts in party control did not occur in Congress. Between the Civil War and the Eisenhower administration, changes in control of Congress usually accompanied, or slightly preceded, the presidential cycle (Norpoth, Rusk 2005). In only four two-year periods did the president's party not control at least one house of Congress (under Hayes, 1879-1880; Cleveland, 1895-1896; Wilson, 1919-1920; and Truman, 1947-1948). From 1954 to 1994, however, the Democrats controlled the House of Representatives without interruption and the Senate for all but six years. As a result, Republican presidents during this forty-year span regularly confronted Congresses dominated by their political opposition. After the 1994 election, the shoe was on the other foot, with a Democratic president for six years facing a Republican Congress. Whether the 1994 turnover will lead to more normal short cycle alternations in party control of Congress, or whether 1994 will turn out to have been the harbinger of a new long cycle giving the Republicans extended dominance in Congress, as the Democrats enjoyed after 1932, remains to be seen.

### **The Long Cycle**

Probably the best known of the theories that a long-term cycle has operated in American national politics is that of the historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. (1986), carrying on work begun by his father. Schlesinger's theory is more closely related to political ideology than to parties, but it also has party manifestations. According to Schlesinger, there have been throughout American history regular alternations between spans of political liberalism and conservatism, each lasting about sixteen years, or four presidential terms. The most recent spans were the liberal one launched by John Kennedy in 1960, and its conservative successor which began in the late 1970s. Right on

time, Schlesinger claimed after the 1992 election, Bill Clinton had initiated a new liberal era.

Like most cyclical theories, Schlesinger's theory seems to work better in retrospect than as a predictive tool—though even in retrospect it requires some rather odd combinations, such as bunching Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford into a common liberal phase that began in 1960. The Republican landslide in the 1994 midterm elections, followed by George W. Bush's arrival in the White House in 2001, seemed to bring a premature end to the new liberal era introduced by Clinton.

Among political scientists, who generally have been more open to cyclical theories than historians, most theories of long cycles are linked to the concept of “critical” or “realigning” elections introduced by V.O. Key (1955). Critical elections, Key claimed, have periodically purged American politics and government of accumulated debris and opened the way for new departures. Key's work has been carried on, by among others, Walter Dean Burnham (1970), Gerald Pomper (1970), and James Sundquist (1982). In most versions of this theory, realigning elections, ending the dominance of one political party and establishing normal political control by its major rival, have occurred every twenty-eight to thirty-six years.

There is some dispute over which were the actual realigning elections, but general agreement places realignments at or just before the elections of Thomas Jefferson in 1800, Andrew Jackson in 1828, Abraham Lincoln in 1860, William McKinley in 1896, and Franklin Roosevelt in 1932. (Some scholars drop the elections of Jefferson and Jackson on the ground that the two-party system did not achieve full development until the 1830s.)

A puzzle for believers in the traditional theory of realigning elections is the apparent failure of one to occur on schedule in the 1960s. Burnham argues that a realignment *did* occur with the election of Nixon as president in 1968 and the creation of a new Republican majority in presidential politics. Certainly the shift of the South away from the Democrats at the presidential level after 1968 was a major change in national politics. But if this was a realignment, why did it not produce a change in control of Congress or most of the major states, as had occurred with previous realignments?

The theory of realignments that I have proposed at earlier conferences in this series deals with this problem—and some of those that rise from Schlesinger’s rival formulation—by proposing that long cycles in their fullness have actually covered not sixteen years (Schlesinger), or twenty-eight to thirty-six years (Key and his successors), but *sixty to seventy years* (Reichley 2000). Truly realigning elections in my view have occurred—at least prior to the major realignment that may now be underway—only three times in American history: 1800 (Jefferson), 1860 (Lincoln), and 1930 (FDR).

The elections of Jackson in 1828 and McKinley in 1896 were important political events. But they were in fact restorations and climaxes of eras that had begun about thirty years before, rather than true realignments, or in the broader sense enduring changes in national political direction.

Jackson won in 1828 after a period of about ten years in which national politics had been in flux and the old hegemony of Jefferson’s party appeared shaken. But Jackson was clearly in the line of Jefferson, as was generally recognized at the time, including before his death in 1826 by Jefferson himself (Meyers 1957). Martin Van Buren, one of Jackson’s principal lieutenants and his successor as president, wrote: “The

two great parties of this country, with occasional changes in name only, have, for the principal part of a century, occupied antagonistic positions upon all the important political questions. They have maintained an unbroken succession” (Van Buren 1967). Jackson carried every state Jefferson carried in 1800 and lost every state Jefferson lost. Jefferson’s narrow victory over John Adams in 1800 was converted into Jackson’s landslide triumph over John Quincy Adams in 1828 by the addition of seven new Western states in which the Democrats were strong. So the 1828 election and Jackson’s subsequent triumph over forces in Congress led by Henry Clay *restored* the dominance of the (renamed) Democrats instead of bringing in a new majority party.

Similarly, McKinley’s victory in 1896 followed a period of about 20 years during which there had been no clear majority party. The 1896 election represented a rallying of the forces, temporarily in eclipse, that had made the Republicans the majority party from 1860 to 1876. McKinley won through renewal of the coalition of Northeastern and Midwestern states on which the Republican party had been founded. William Jennings Bryan, his Democratic opponent, swept the South, the Democrats’ principal stronghold since the end of reconstruction. Bryan also tapped the farmers’ revolt and the silver issue in the West to win some of the Western states, normally Republican, that had been admitted to the Union since the Civil War. But within a few years most of these were back in the Republican column where they normally remained until the Great Depression of the 1930s. The 1896 election, therefore, did not displace the former majority party but renewed and strengthened the party that had become dominant after the last major realignment.

The mystery of why no true overall realignment occurred in the 1960s is thus explained: it was not due. What actually happened in the 1960s was the renewal and climax of the cycle dominated by liberalism and the Democratic party that began in the 1930s. In 1964 Lyndon Johnson decisively defeated Barry Goldwater, representing a radical version of the laissez-faire economic ideology that had prevailed during the preceding cycle. The movement of the South away from the Democrats at the end of the 1960s was an early sign of the breakup of the New Deal cycle—similar to the move of the Northeast away from the Democrats in the 1840s, and the swing of major Northern cities away from the Republicans after 1912.

Briefly stated, each of the sixty- to seventy-year cycles moved through roughly similar phases: (1) a breakthrough election in which the innovating party gained power under an inspiring leader (Jefferson, Lincoln, FDR), followed by an extended period during which the new majority changed the direction of national life and enacted much of its program; (2) a period of pause during which the dominant party lost some of its dynamism and forces reflecting the ethos of the preceding cycle staged a minor comeback (John Quincy Adams, Cleveland, Eisenhower); (3) a climactic victory by the majority party over a more radical expression of the ideology of the preceding cycle (Jackson over Clay, McKinley over Bryan, Johnson over Goldwater), followed by enactment of remaining items in the majority party's program; and, finally, (4) the gradual decline and ultimate collapse of the old order, opening the way for a new realignment and a new majority.

The phases of the sixty- to seventy-year cycles correspond roughly to some of Schlesinger's sixteen-year spans. The long cycle theory, however, explains why the

Jefersonians after 1800, the Republicans after 1860, and the Democrats after 1932 held onto power for longer than Schlesinger's theory would predict. These were all periods covered by the initial phase of the long cycle, during which the majority is fresh and holds the support of the public through an extended period of elections. The separate cycles posited in the twenty-eight to thirty-six-year theory correspond neatly to the rise and decline segments of the long cycle.

Political cycles are probably rooted, at least partly, in generational change. Schlesinger argues that his sixteen-year spans reflect the succession of political generations. Members of the political generation of John Kennedy, for example, were putting into effect values and attitudes acquired during their youths in the liberal environment of the 1930s. The Reaganites of the 1980s were applying values they had developed during the relatively conservative 1950s (though many Reaganites regarded themselves as revolting *against* Eisenhower's moderate Republicanism). Members of the generation of the 1990s, in this theory, should have been eager to reintroduce the liberal values with which Kennedy inspired them during their college years in the 1960s.

Schlesinger's analysis, like his larger cyclical theory, captures part of the truth. Genuinely major changes in political direction, however, seem to occur only after persons holding political values and party loyalties formed by the last major realignment have largely passed from the political scene. So long as generations whose party allegiances were shaped by the Civil War and its aftermath remained politically active, the normal Republican majority in national elections was hard to shake. Similarly, party loyalties formed by the Depression and the New Deal have been remarkably durable. But the generations most deeply marked by the New Deal era, roughly those born from 1905 to

1930, now make up a sharply declining share of the potential voter population—less than eight percent by the 2000 census.

The last two major realignments, in the 1860s and the 1930s, came at times of massive traumas within the larger social system—the Civil War and the Great Depression. The first realignment, in the 1800s, coincided with huge territorial growth and population migration. Probably a major realignment requires *both* an electorate in which loyalties formed by the last great political divide have grown weak *and* powerful sources of new division.

The first condition now clearly exists for much of the voting public. Do social and political forces currently at work in national life provide the second?

### **Republican Realignment**

After both of Ronald Reagan's presidential election landslide victories in the 1980s many Republican political activists, some conservative journalists, and a few political scientists argued that realignment favoring the Republicans was in fact underway (Peterson and Chubb 1985). When Reagan left the political scene in 1989, however, the Republicans remained the minority party in public opinion polls, Democratic majorities in the House of Representatives appeared secure, and talk of Republican realignment had subsided (Shafer 2003).

In 1992 Bill Clinton restored the Democrats to control of the White House, though with less than a majority of the total vote. The amazing 19 percent of the popular vote won by Ross Perot's independent candidacy gave clear evidence that ties to the existing major parties, formed by the last great realignment, had grown weak.

The huge Republican victory in the midterm congressional elections of 1994, producing Republican majorities in both houses of Congress for the first time in forty years, coupled with big Republican wins in gubernatorial elections in most of the major states, once more aroused hope or dread, depending on subjective preference, that Republican realignment at last was in motion. Two years later voters maintained Republicans in control of Congress by reduced majorities, but kept Clinton in the White House with a plurality of the popular vote.

In 2000 the presidential election seemed to show an almost exactly evenly divided electorate. George W. Bush eked out the narrowest of Electoral College victories, awarded by a one vote majority on the Supreme Court five weeks after the election, but in the popular vote ran more than 300,000 behind Vice President Al Gore.

Some early interpretations of the 2004 election suggested that not much had changed since 2000. While Bush this time indisputably won in both the electoral and popular vote, commentators were quick to point out that his electoral vote margin was the smallest for an incumbent president winning reelection since Woodrow Wilson in 1916. Exit polls conducted for a consortium of major news media reported that Bush had been supported by only 45 percent of young voters (18 to 29 years of age) and 45 percent of self-identified moderates—hardly evidence, it was said, of ongoing realignment (White 2004).

Examination of swings among other crucial voter groups, however, presents a somewhat different picture. Bush's popular vote majority, while relatively small, was solid—the first actual popular vote majority won by a presidential victor since his father in 1988. He made significant gains among groups vital to recent Democratic coalitions:



up 12 percentage points among Hispanics (some analysts challenged the size of Bush's gain among Hispanics but conceded he probably won about 40 percent—the Republicans' pre-election target) (Leal, Barreto, Lee, de la Garza 2005); up five points among women, shrinking the Democrats' lead among women to only three percentage points compared to 11 points in 2000; up seven points among voters over 60; up five points among Catholics to a majority of 52 percent; up six percent among Jews.

The 2004 National Election Study found that among actual voters those identifying themselves as Republicans actually outnumbered Democrats by 36 percent to 32 percent compared to an eight point Democratic lead in 2000. If leaners, those identifying themselves as Independents but expressing a preference for one party or the other, are thrown into the mix, Democrats held a minuscule lead of 47.6 percent to 47.1 percent (Weisberg and Christenson 2005).

Republican realignment among working-class and lower-middle-class whites, once predominantly Democratic constituencies, grew stronger in 2004. White voters from families with incomes between \$30,000 and \$50,000 supported Bush over Kerry by 58 to 41 percent. Even white voters with incomes between \$15,000 and \$30,000 went for Bush by 51 to 48 percent (Pew 2005a). Republican strength among white lower-middle-class and working-class voters produced large gains for Bush in old steel-producing and coal-mining counties in southwestern Pennsylvania around Pittsburgh and blue-collar suburban areas in southeastern Michigan around Detroit (offset in both states by swings to Kerry in upscale suburban counties which I will discuss below.) When the Democratic candidate for president loses coal-mining West Virginia by 13 percentage points, it can fairly be said that the Democratic party is in trouble.

A post-election analysis by a centrist Democratic study group called Third Way found that the “economic tipping point—the income level above which white voters were more likely to vote Republican than Democrat—was \$23,700.” The survey found that middle-class blacks continued to vote heavily for the Democrats, but Hispanics rising into the middle class trended toward the Republicans. Among the white middle class, the study concluded, “Democrats were not competitive at all” (Balz 2005).

Beside holding the presidency, Republicans also made gains in the Senate and the House of Representatives. Among voters for Bush, 91 percent cast ballots for Republican candidates for the House of Representatives, up from 86 percent in 2000.

Shifts to Bush and the Republicans among critical voter groups appear to have been largely due to two main factors: the influence of the war against terrorism; and consolidation of major traditional religious groups in support of the Republican party (Stanley and Niemi 2005, Weisberg and Christenson 2005, Shanks, Strand, Carmines, and Brady 2005, Verba and Schlozman 2005).

Preference for Bush as a wartime leader, coupled with the Republicans’ longstanding advantage on defense-related issues, had significant impact in the voting booth. Exit polls reported that 58 percent of voters said they trusted Bush “to handle terrorism,” while only 40 percent trusted Kerry. Among the 54 percent who answered that the United States was safer from terrorism than it had been in 2000, 79 percent voted for Bush. Based on the findings of the 2004 National Election Study, Herbert Weisberg and Dino Christenson concluded: “September 11, 2001, gave George Bush the opportunity that November 7, 2000, had not given him, and his campaign did not let that

opportunity slip through their hands” (Abramowitz 2004, Weisberg and Christenson 2005).

The other crucial factor building the Republican majority was mobilization of highly observant members of major religious groups. Exit polls found that among the 41 percent of voters who reported attending church at least once a week, 61 percent voted for Bush and only 39 percent for Kerry—more than three times the gender gap. A more detailed post-election survey by the Survey Research Center at the University of Akron found that 88 percent of “traditionalist” evangelical Protestants (regular church attenders, holders of traditional Christian beliefs), 68 percent of traditionalist mainline Protestants, and 72 percent of traditionalist non-Latino Catholics voted for Bush. (On the other hand, the Akron survey reported that only half of at least nominal mainline Protestants overall voted Republican for president, which I will discuss below.) (Guth, Kellstedt, Smidt, and Green 2005).

For the first time in American history the more highly observant members of all numerically major religious groups except African-American Protestants have come together in support of the same political party. How durable this faith-based political coalition will be remains to be seen, but its effects on current politics have been substantial. A recent Pew Research Center survey found that church attendance now ranks only behind race as a predictor of party affiliation, ahead of gender, income level, union membership, and level of education (Pew 2005b).

Referenda on the same day as the 2004 election in thirteen states on constitutional amendments prohibiting same-sex marriage, all of which passed overwhelmingly, had particularly strong effects in mobilizing voters motivated by moral values derived from

religion. “Two-fifths of survey respondents,” according to one study, “said that same-sex marriage was an important issue in the presidential race.” Ohio’s referendum on the issue may well have helped bring out and unite religiously conservative voters who gave Bush the state and the election (Lewis 2005).

Many political analysts identify issues like public prayer and same-sex marriage as “wedge” issues, suggesting that only economic issues and those embraced by liberal ideology should be “real” issues. But for millions of Americans concerns such as the future of the traditional two-parent family, the place of religion in public life, and protection of the unborn hold pre-emptive political importance.

The 2004 election occurred under relatively unfavorable conditions for an incumbent president or party. The Iraq war had turned out to be unexpectedly long and bloody, with no end in sight. Many voters felt the administration had been deceptive in justifying the war, and were disturbed by revelations of abuses of captured prisoners. The economy was recovering only gradually from the 2001 recession, with slow job growth, and the stock market slumped during most of the campaign. The large federal government surplus that greeted Bush when he took office had been transformed into a skyrocketing deficit. After a strong performance at the Republican convention, Bush lost badly in the first debate with Kerry and only partly recovered in two later encounters. Yet the slim majority supporting Bush and the Republicans seemed hardly to waver, giving evidence of a commitment that had become firm and might be enduring.

During the first year of Bush’s second term troubles continued. The Iraq war showed no sign of ending soon, and both American and Iraqi casualties mounted. Opposition to the war increased and became more vocal. Economic growth picked up,

but many people reported finding no improvement in their own pocketbooks. Gas prices exploded, causing outrage among motorists and threatening the general economy. Bush's efforts to build support among Democrats in Congress and in the public for reforms of Social Security had negative effects. The President's approval ratings sank and polls showed dissatisfaction with Republicans in Congress (Gallup 2005a).

Yet discontent with the Republicans did not seem to translate into support for the Democrats. A Pew survey in the summer of 2005 found Republicans leading Democrats in party identification by four percentage points among whites in the second lowest economic quintile, including families with incomes between approximately \$19,000 and \$30,000, and by increasingly larger margins in all higher quintiles. Polls showed almost identical majorities disapproving of both Democrats and Republicans in Congress. A Gallup poll in August, 2005, found Rudy Giuliani and John McCain, who ranked first and second in trial heats among Republicans for their party's 2008 presidential nomination, running five points ahead of Hillary Clinton, who topped the Democratic poll, and 13 points ahead of John Kerry. Focus groups conducted by Democratic researchers in swing and rural states in the summer of 2005 found Democrats favored on economic and most domestic policy issues but that "powerful as concern over these issues is, the introduction of cultural themes—specifically gay marriage, abortion, the importance of the traditional family unit, and the role of religion in public life—quickly renders them almost irrelevant in terms of electoral politics at the national level" (Pew 2005a, Gallup 2005b, Democracy Corps 2005).

All of these findings came before the devastation wrought on the Gulf Coast by Hurricane Katrina in the first days of September, 2005. In the early fall of 2005 some

Democrats clearly expected and some Republicans feared that effects of this disaster would send a transforming shock through the entire national political system. Long-term political consequences will depend on the results of inquiries into causes for the bungled responses by government at all levels to the chaos in New Orleans, the perceived effectiveness of Bush's leadership in relief and recovery, and the impact of storm losses on the larger economy.

The national security and moral values issues that played major roles in producing the Republican majority in 2004 seem likely to be important factors in American politics for many years to come. The war against militant Islamic terrorists, even after most American fighting units are finally withdrawn from Iraq, will probably stretch long into the future—perhaps at least as long as the forty years Cold War with the Soviet Union. This struggle will have its ups and downs, helping or damaging the parties of particular administrations in office. But the longstanding preference of a majority of the public for the Republicans on security issues may well in balance advantage Republicans, as it did during most of the Cold War. It should be remembered that the Cold War deeply divided the Democratic party, but helped keep the Republicans united and in control of the White House, except for Jimmy Carter's narrow victory in 1976 after Watergate, from 1968 to 1992. The public's trust in the current struggle will no doubt ultimately depend on whose leadership is deemed most effective.

The likely political effects of moral values concerns may be more mixed. As I will discuss in the next section, identification of the Republicans with traditional morality and a religious presence in public life has already produced gains for the Democrats among some constituencies. In a nation that remains predominantly religious, however,

the issue provides a powerful base of support for the Republicans. A Pew survey in August, 2009, found only 29 percent viewing the Democratic party as “generally friendly” to religion, down from 42 percent in 2003, while 55 percent regarded the Republican party as friendly to religion (Pew 2005b).

African Americans so far have overwhelmingly resisted being drawn into a Republican realignment. In 2004 Bush won only eleven percent of the African-American vote, up only three percent from 2000. Part of the reason for the loyalty of most blacks at all social and economic levels to the Democrats may be that realignment among African Americans, who from the 1860s to the 1930s were massively Republican, was not completed, particularly in the South, until 1964. As late as 1960 Richard Nixon won 32 percent of the black vote against John Kennedy for president. In 1964 Barry Goldwater, the Republican candidate for president, opposed passage of the Civil Rights Act and African Americans that year gave more than 90 percent of their vote to the Democrats. Black support for the Democrats has largely remained at that level ever since.

The social and moral conservatism of many African Americans, who have been more politically organized through their churches than any other group, has from time to time attracted the attention of Republican strategists. During Bush’s first term, the administration’s “faith-based initiative,” which would direct federal funds into religiously sponsored welfare programs, was warmly supported by many black churches. More recently, the same-sex marriage issue has caused some socially conservative black clergy to question the viability of continued alliance with Democratic liberalism. If African-American support for Republicans rose to only twenty percent, the Republican party

would gain a critical edge in crucial swing states like Pennsylvania, Michigan, Ohio, and Florida.

In light of the 2004 election, the Republicans seem to have more room to grow than the Democrats. States carried by Bush were predominantly in the South and the mountain West where population continues to rise. A survey by the *Los Angeles Times* found that Bush carried 97 of the nation's fastest growing counties. Some of these counties are relatively small but many are located in exurban regions where population increase is now greatest. Kerry won with less than 55 percent of the vote in 14 states with 189 electoral votes, while Bush won by less than 55 percent in only 10 states with 113 electoral votes.

A significant factor in growing Republican strength in recent elections may be that Republican operatives have simply been better at running political campaigns. While the Republicans have actually lost some of their longstanding dominance in fundraising, by common consent among political professionals, journalists, and political scientists they have been more effective at conducting campaign "ground wars"—canvassing door-to-door, registering voters, putting out yard signs, writing letters to the editor, operating phonebanks, getting out the vote on election day. In 2004 Democrats relied largely on auxiliary organizations, the so-called 527 groups, to manage grassroots efforts by often imported workers, while the Republican campaign built up a vast army of local volunteers. Republican volunteers were specifically assigned to contact persons within their communities who shared their religious, social, or recreational interests. A study by Sidney Milkis and Jesse Rhodes found that for the first time in history the Republicans created "a national party machine, composed of more than a million



campaign volunteers across the country,” with potential effects on future elections (2005).

In the years immediately ahead, the short-term “throw the rascals out” cycle and a long-term Republican major realignment cycle that may be emerging will be pulling in opposite directions. In 2006 the Republican congressional majority produced by the 1994 election will be twelve years old. In 2008 the Republicans will have held the White House for two consecutive terms. Democratic congressional gains in the 2006 midterm elections, particularly in the House, appear likely. The Republican candidate for president in 2008 will have to deal with eight years of accumulated voter frustration and discontent of a kind which, with only one exception since 1952, has helped limit the incumbent party to no more than two terms in control of the White House. If Republican losses in Congress are relatively small and if a Republican once more wins the presidency in 2008, we will have pretty clear evidence that the nation has entered a major new cycle in political history.

### **Democratic Counter-Realignment**

Realignments do not work all in one direction. While some groups come together in a new majority party others may coalesce to give enduring support to a vigorous alternative majority. The Civil War and its aftermath, which helped establish the Republicans as the normal national majority party for most of the next seventy years, also firmly anchored the South to the Democrats for almost a century. As James Sundquist has pointed out, major realignments usually come when the two major parties are clearly distinguishable on highly contentious issues (Sundquist 1983).

In 2002 John Judis and Ruy Teixeira published a best-selling book called *The Emerging Democratic Majority* in which they argued that existing trends pointed to development of an enduring Democratic majority in national politics (Judis and Teixeira 2002). Among the factors they cited were continued strong support for the Democrats among women, blacks, Hispanics, and Jews; growing Democratic strength in once heavily Republican middle-class suburbs; and weakening of traditional religion. The Republicans proceeded to win the next two elections, but some of the trends that Judis and Teixeira identified have continued to operate.

Among the bright spots for John Kerry and the Democrats on election night 2004 were victories in former Republican suburban strongholds outside New York City, Philadelphia, Detroit, and Chicago, which were crucial to Democratic majorities in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Illinois. Some of these suburbs remain normally Republican in local and state elections, but the gradual swing to the Democrats even at these levels is evident, something like the earlier move in the South from the Democrats to the Republicans.

Growing Democratic strength in upscale suburbs reflects a Democratic trend among parts of the upper-middle-class. In 2004 voters with post-graduate education supported Kerry by 55 to 44 percent, in contrast to a narrow Republican lead in 1988 among holders of post-graduate degrees. Among college graduates Bush led by only 52 to 46 percent, down sharply from a Republican advantage of 62 to 37 percent in 1988. Disaffections from the Republicans among professionals and some corporate managers and their spouses spring in part from cultural discomfort with the religious right. But causes probably go deeper and may be long-lasting.

One source of the swing may be long-term effects of advanced education. A study of attitudes among college faculties released in the spring of 2005 found 72 percent of faculty members identifying themselves as liberals and only 15 percent as conservatives. Democrats outnumbered Republicans by 50 percent to 11 percent. The more elite the school, the greater the preponderance of liberals and Democrats. Liberal dominance was greatest in English literature, philosophy, political science, and religious studies departments, where at least 80 percent identified themselves as liberals and no more than 5 percent were conservatives (Kurtz 2005).

For many years American college faculties have been predominantly liberal, with little apparent lasting effect on partisan preferences among most college graduates. But political and cultural attitudes acquired in colleges and graduate schools may now increasingly be finding their way into voting booths. In addition, overwhelming support on university faculties provides the Democrats with valuable resources of economic, administrative, and foreign and domestic policy expertise.

A downside for the Democrats from their close identification with dominant intellectual elites, and with allied opinion moulders in the media and the entertainment industries, is that the Democratic party risks becoming the target for populist resentments of a kind that historically have been focused on big business and inherited wealth. In 2004 John Kerry proved particularly vulnerable as a symbol of this identification.

Changes in attitudes toward religion among a fairly large part of the public, particularly in the middle class, have also worked in the Democrats' favor within some constituencies. The University of Akron survey of religious alignments cited earlier found that among "modernist" mainline Protestants (those low in church participation

and holding non-traditional religious beliefs) Kerry won by a majority of 78 percent to 22 percent for Bush. Among modernist white Catholics Kerry won by 69 percent to 31 percent. Even among “centrists” (the large group placed between traditionalists and modernists by John Green and his colleagues analyzing the Akron data) Kerry was supported by 42 percent of mainline Protestants and 45 percent of white Catholics. Kerry’s overwhelming lead among modernist mainline Protestants enabled him to break almost exactly even among mainline Protestants overall, formerly a reliable Republican constituency since the Civil War. Among white Catholics overall, an equally reliable Democratic constituency during most of American history, Bush won narrowly by 53 percent (Green, Smidt, Guth, and Kellstedt).

The “modernist” category employed by Green and his colleagues mixes together two tendencies in contemporary American religion which, while related, are distinct: religious liberalization and secularization. Religious liberalism, in the sense of major reinterpretation of many traditional Christian beliefs and doctrines in response to the findings of modern science and scholarship, coupled with advocacy of liberal political and social action, has been a significant force among mainline Protestants, and to a lesser extent Roman Catholics, for more than fifty years. Many modernists in this sense are highly active in their churches and motivated by religious convictions in their political action.

During the pontificate of Pope John Paul II the American Catholic hierarchy became increasingly conservative on personal moral and cultural issues, though not on economic or peace issues. The Vatican and many American bishops have sought actively to restrain social liberalism among priests and laity. Since the 1960s, however, religious

liberals have been dominant in the national leaderships of most mainline Protestant denominations. Until very recently the liberalism of mainline leaders seemed to have little effect on the behavior of their laities, who remained predominantly conservative-to-moderate in their social attitudes and Republican in their politics. The Democratic trend among some mainline Protestants in 2004 may indicate that the liberal attitudes of denominational leaders, whose views now are shared by many local clergy, are influencing a growing share of laity.

Accompanying religious liberalization, and sometimes rising from it, has been the even stronger force of secularization—disassociation from any kind of organized religion. By 2004 the percentage of Americans telling pollsters they identified with no religious faith had risen to just over 15 percent—up from five percent in 1984. In 2004 72 percent of declared seculars voted for Kerry. To these may be added the sizable number whom sociologists categorize as “behavioral seculars”—those who identify themselves to pollsters as Methodists or Catholics or Jews or some other denomination, but who almost never attend religious services or regard traditional religion as an important factor in their lives. It seems reasonable to conclude that most of the 35 percent of modernist mainline Protestants and 30 percent of modernist Catholics who responded to the Akron survey that they “rarely” attend religious services (defined as “seldom or never”) are in fact behavioral seculars, with no meaningful attachment to any religious faith.

If avowed seculars, behavioral seculars, and liberal white Protestants and Catholics are added (with some overlap) to the still heavily Democratic bodies of African Americans, Hispanics, Jews, union members, people living in poverty, and single

women, the Democrats still have close to a majority within the national electorate—as reflected by the 2000 and 2004 elections. If the trend toward secularism continues—if the United States is destined to become increasingly like Western Europe in which organized religion now plays little part in the lives of most people—the Democrats can fairly expect, given normal public reaction against incumbent Republicans, soon to regain control of national government. If that happens, it may then be the Democrats who emerge, as Judis and Teixeira predicted, as the normal majority party in a new realignment, giving shape and direction to public life well into the twenty-first century.

A problem for the Democrats is that many of the liberal interest groups at the core of their current coalition seem unwilling to allow them to deviate from a strict ideological line on contentious social and moral issues such as abortion, same sex marriage, affirmative action, and federal judicial appointments. This has already lost them majority support among white Catholics, and may open them to further erosion among social conservatives in some of their traditional constituencies such as African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and working-class whites.

### **An End to Long-term Realignment?**

Some political scientists and historians have always doubted the existence of longterm political cycles (Shafer 1991, Ladd 1991). A recent influential book by David Mayhew challenges the thirty year cycle theory proposed by Burnham and others (2002). Mayhew particularly, but not exclusively, argues that the 1896 election, which is essential for the thirty year theory, does not meet criteria for a realigning event—a conclusion which I share. My own view, as stated earlier, is that major realignments,

introducing a new cycle in national political life, have in the past come, not at approximately thirty year intervals, but every sixty to seventy years, when generational change has weakened traditional party loyalties and in response to profound national traumas or transformations.

It may be, however, that conditions early in the twenty-first century simply do not permit development of the kind of bonding political commitments that came out of earlier realignments. The clamor of competing media, the distractions of consumer society, the nihilistic pressures of modern culture, may atomize contemporary life to a degree that enduring political cohesion is unlikely to take root. Or it may be that current national and international problems—the collision between promised government benefits and acceptable levels of taxation or borrowing, the economic and cultural perils of globalization, the threat of nuclear proliferation, and the continuing struggle against terrorism, among others—are so complex and intractable that solutions offered by any one party or one group of political leaders will not be supported for long by the voting public. Recent political experience in Europe suggests this may be the case.

Yet the generations that went through the Civil War and the Great Depression faced enormous and what seemed at the time almost insurmountable challenges. In both of those earlier periods a new majority party emerged, implementing proposed solutions, never wholly successful or universally popular, but able to move the nation forward, and commanding widespread political support for an extended period. My bet is that it will happen again, with the Republicans still advantaged to play the role of normal majority party.

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### **BIO**

A. James Reichley has written many books and articles on politics including *The Life of the Parties* (2000), *The Values Connection* (2001), and *Faith in Politics* (2002).

He has been Political Editor of *Fortune*, Domestic Policy Assistant to President Gerald Ford, Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution, and Senior Fellow in the Graduate Public Policy Institute at Georgetown University.