

*Review Essay: Whither Realignment?**

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Critical Elections and Congressional Policy Making. By David W. Brady. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988. 212 pages, \$27.50.

Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics. By Edward G. Carmines and James A. Stimson. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989. 217 pages, \$27.50.

Politics By Other Means: The Declining Importance of Elections in America. By Benjamin Ginsberg and Martin Shefter. New York: Basic Books, 1990. 226 pages, \$19.95.

The Limits of Judicial Power: The Supreme Court in American Politics. By William Lasser. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988. 354 pages, \$32.95 cloth, \$10.95 paper.

The “realignment era” in American political science began thirty-five years ago, when Key (1955) proposed “A Theory of Critical Elections.” In his wake, realignment scholarship has proliferated far and wide (Bass 1991).

The concept of realignment pervades contemporary scholarship on American political parties. The “textbook” treatment of the history of party competition in the United States posits periodic realigning elections that substantially alter group bases of party coalitions and establish enduring party systems. The initial analytical focus of the party in the electorate now extends to the party in government, linking elections with public policy. Since political parties constitute central integrating institutions in the political process, realignment has become a key conceptual lens for viewing and interpreting the whole of American political life. Indeed, it has escaped the bounds of scholarship and entered into popular discourse. Further, as subjects of realignment studies, the United States and its component political units now compete with numerous non-American systems.

More recently, however, the concept of realignment has come under critical assault from both historians and political scientists (McCormick 1982; Lichtman 1982; Shafer 1991). This essay will review four recent books that raise realignment issues. In the process, it will attempt to identify more generally contemporary applications of the concept as well as abiding concerns of critics.

*This review essay incorporates elements of two recent essays by the author: (Bass 1990, 1991).

Brady and Lasser find realignment perspectives essential in analyzing institutional behavior over time, for the U.S House of Representatives and the U.S. Supreme Court, respectively. In the stream of realignment scholarship, their efforts are a step removed from the initial focus on electoral behavior. They are part of the movement focusing on realignment to link elections with public policy outputs by governmental institutions.

Brady's book weaves together strands of a general argument he has been developing in separate articles and books, some co-authored, over almost two decades (Brady 1972 1973, 1985; Brady and Lynn 1973; Brady, Cooper, and Hurley 1979; Brady and Stewart 1982). It confirms his preeminence among those applying realignment perspectives to Congress and linking realignment to policy outputs.

Brady presents his arguments and evidence in straight-forward fashion. He is firmly grounded in theory and literature, and he is methodologically imaginative in marshalling, generating, and analyzing data. He begins by detailing the familiar barriers--constitutional, electoral, cultural, and organizational--to both policy change and party government under normal conditions. However, he notes that under exceptional past circumstances, these barriers were overcome, specifically in the context of realignments via critical elections in the Civil War era, the 1890s, and the New Deal era. He thus seeks to "show how realignments create the conditions for majority party government in the House" (18).

Brady recognizes that each realignment has distinctive structural characteristics. Indeed, the differences are so marked that some realignment critics question the propriety of lumping them together under a common rubric. Nevertheless, he contends that critical periods feature the following common foundations for party government and policy change: (1) nationally-based elections, (2) changing partisan constituent bases, (3) sharp and inclusive turnover on committees, (4) rapidly increasing party voting, and (5) a determining role for party on issues associated with realignment (19).

Brady devotes a chapter to each of the realignments under consideration. His approach facilitates comparison, considering the realignments under common headings: partisan differences, electoral change, electoral summary, votes-to-seats ratios, constituency bases of the congressional parties, congressional turnover, voting patterns, and the changing shape of voting on issues throughout each era.

Next, he focuses attention on the policy making role of House committees, specifically the Appropriations Committee from 1895 to

1950 and the Agriculture Committee during the New Deal era. He emphasizes the contrast between the normal pattern of policy incrementalism and the dramatic policy changes occurring in critical eras due to electoral and structural factors.

Then he turns to an elaboration of the crucial votes-to-seats ratio factor introduced earlier. At issue here is the competitiveness of House districts, which Brady measures as constituency party distributions (CPDs). For a given Congress, he plots the percent of total House seats on the vertical axis against the percent of votes for a given party in each district on the horizontal axis. Thus, for each party in each Congress in the critical eras under consideration, he obtains frequency distributions for the seats, ranging from out-of-reach, through marginal or competitive, to safe.

The magnitude of a shift in voter behavior to produce congressional realignment depends on the shape of the CPDs. A "normal," bell-shaped CPD facilitates realignment, while a U-shaped CPD hinders it. In a "normal" structure, a small shift in votes can move a substantial number of seats from marginal to safe. In contrast, when a U-shaped structure prevails, much more comprehensive shifts are required to generate realignment.

This spatial insight (Gudgin and Taylor 1979) is an important contribution to our understanding of realignment. Reference to these CPDs explains how the realignments could occur in both the Civil War era and the 1890s without dramatic changes in voter behavior. In both cases, relatively small voter shifts in favor of the Republicans in the Midwest and the Northeast transformed these previously competitive regions into Republican bailiwicks. In contrast, for the New Deal era realignment, fewer competitive seats necessitated massive electoral changes.

Brady's concluding chapter opens with a summary statement of his revised view of realignments as depending not only on cross-cutting issues but also on the shape of the CPDs. He then discusses retrospective voting (Fiorina 1981), suggesting the compatibility of voter behavior in the critical periods with the theory that "voters' retrospective judgments about presidential performance and economic performance affect both current party identification and future expectations" (166).

Finally, he pessimistically considers the implications of his findings for contemporary politics. He calls attention to the current U-shaped CPDs as impediments to both realignment and responsible parties. The large number of safe seats for each party means that even substantial advances by the opposition will still leave it short of a majority of votes in a given district.

Further, he associates declining levels of electoral competition with both vanishing presidential coattails and increasing incumbency advantage. In the current electoral setting, divided government has become the norm, with Republican presidents confronting the Democratic House of Representatives. Cross-cutting issues notwithstanding, contemporary CPDs stand in the way of a congressional realignment producing a Republican House. Moreover, he contends that even if a Democrat should win the presidency, fellow partisans in the House likely would not perceive electoral debts to president or party, nor incentives for responsible party-type collaboration in the framing of coherent public policies.

Lasser's assessment of the Supreme Court's role in American politics relies on realignment perspectives. He follows along a well-trod path, distantly in the wake of Mr. Dooley's penetrating insight, "the Supreme Court follows the election returns." Robert Dahl (1957) initiated recent scholarly debate on the linkage between elections and judicial policy outputs in a landmark article. David Adamany (1973) brought realignment perspectives explicitly into the debate. Since then, additional contributions have come from Funston (1975, 1976a, 1976b), Casper (1976), Beck (1976), Canon and Ulmer (1976), Adamany (1980), and Lasser (1985). This current work, while adding nothing new to the debate, nevertheless reinforces the application of realignment perspectives to judicial policy making studies, despite the difficulty presented by the Court's non-partisan organization.

Lasser's objective is to explore the limits of judicial power. His take-off point is the controversial activism of the modern Court, seemingly ill-advised in the face of perceptions of vulnerability to reprisal. He chooses to assess these prospects by examining crises during which the Court's legitimacy came under severe assault. His concerns are twofold: "what do the crises of the past tell us about the Court's strengths and weaknesses as an institution," and "what does such a study of the Court's history tell us about the modern era" (5).

He passes over the first Court crisis, the conflict between the Jeffersonians and the Marshall Court, on the grounds that while it established the authority of the Court and provided a foundation for future growth, it does not shed much light on the development of the Court's modern role. Moving on, he identifies three crisis eras: the 1850s, highlighted by the *Dred Scott* controversy, Reconstruction, and the New Deal, before turning to the modern era, beginning with *Brown v. Board of Education*.

After subjecting all four to detailed case studies, he concludes that orthodox assessments of the Court as weak and vulnerable miss the mark.

Rather, he pictures the Court as “largely invulnerable to political assault” (262). Further challenging conventional wisdom, he contends, “judicial restraint is necessary not because the Court is weak but because it is strong” (272).

His reasoning relies on realignment perspectives. The Court’s ultimate power, judicial review, relies on the core value of rule of law, which in turn abides in tension with another core value, popular sovereignty. Typically, the conflict simmers; only rarely does it boil. He observes that “the major crises for the U.S. Supreme Court coincide with the great crises of the political system as a whole” (252). These crises bring the conflict to a boiling point, to the probable detriment of the Court. Lasser claims that these exceptions prove the rule; *viz.*, “just how powerful the Court has been throughout the rest of its history” (255), once realignments have restored the simmering equilibrium. In turn, the absence of a modern realignment helps account for the modern Court’s aberrant pattern of aggressive policy activism amid “crisis as usual.”

Lasser applies rather than advances theoretical perspectives on realignment. He examines intensively the behavior of the Court in critical eras and convincingly links judicial behavior and policy outcomes to realignments. However, his uncritical employment of the concept does not further understanding of the phenomenon itself. He treats realignment as an independent variable. It is not to be explained; rather, it explains policy outputs and provides a framework for analysis of the limits of judicial power.

Both Brady and Lasser call our attention to the absence of a critical realignment in recent years like those they find so earthshaking in the past. The imputed determinism of realignment suggests we are now overdue. For the past quarter-century, every presidential election has elicited assessments of its realigning potential. The quest for a contemporary critical realignment has become akin to that for the Holy Grail.

However, many critics, friendly and otherwise, deprecate this ongoing search by stressing the unlikely prospects for such an event. They point out that realignment perspectives presume durable partisan loyalties that are now on the wane in the electorate. Accordingly, realignment is said to have given way to dealignment (Beck 1977; Ladd 1981; Carmines, McIver, and Stimson 1987). Related to the decline of party identification is the rise of ticket-splitting (DeVries and Tarrance 1972), promoting the unprecedented norm of divided government addressed above by Brady, a phenomenon that does not fit into conventional realignment scenarios (Sundquist 1988-89).

Carmines and Stimson treat realignment in a decidedly negative fashion. Seeking to explain change in politics, they present the concept of issue evolution. Journal readers already will have already encountered preliminary and summary statements of their argument (see, for example, Carmines & Stimson 1981, 1986). Their specific focus is the transforming effect of the race issue on American politics. Positioning issues at the center of politics, they employ the term "evolution" advisedly, borrowing heavily from the biological model of natural selection. Issue evolutions are "those issues capable of altering the political environment within which they originated and evolved" (11).

They suggest three possible models of issue evolution linked to partisan change, each with a clear "biological" referent. The first is critical election realignment, or cataclysmic adaptation. The second is secular realignment, the parallel of Darwinian pure gradualism. Finally, there is dynamic growth, the equivalent of punctuated equilibrium, combining aspects of the first two. Here, they confront the confusion that has arisen since Key (1955, 1959) from the common use of realignment to address two distinct varieties of change: revolutionary "critical" realignment and evolutionary "secular" realignment.

The data they marshal discredit the simplistic critical realignment explanation in favor of the more sophisticated dynamic growth concept. They employ varied data sources, including the census, voter registration, party platforms, congressional roll calls, and National Election Study surveys. Like Brady's, their analysis is methodologically sophisticated, but they likewise take care to make it comprehensible to the untrained reader.

They organize and develop their inquiry as follows. First, they look at strategic politicians, who, they presume, "instinctively understand which issues benefit them and their party and which do not," and seek "to politicize the former and depoliticize the latter" (6). In tracing the history of racial desegregation policy, they highlight presidential leadership and party stances embodied in platform statements. Led by Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson, over two decades the Democratic party gradually abandoned its traditionally equivocal stance on race and by 1964 embraced racial liberalism. In the late 1970s, Carter confirmed the new reality. In turn, the 1964 Goldwater nomination shifted the Republican party away from its longstanding racial progressivism toward racial conservatism.

Next, Carmines and Stimson delve deeply into Congress' treatment of the racial issue. They encounter a dynamic phenomenon not clearly associated with critical elections. Issue evolution definitely occurred. Democrats in both chambers became more progressive on racial issues,

while their Republican counterparts became less so. This polarization eroded the bipartisan coalition that produced the landmark civil rights legislation. However, while the changes in the House were set in motion by the 1964 election, the same cannot be said for the Senate. Generally, they find critical elections insufficient by themselves to account for the congressional policy changes over time.

Turning from public officials to political activists, they treat the role of the latter as crucial in racial issue evolution. Activists connect ordinary, apathetic citizens with policy makers, and they appear more responsive to change than either. Carmines and Stimson identify an almost perfect fit between policy images voters see and those projected by activists. Second, restating the venerable notion of a two step flow of communication, they suggest that citizens form their perceptions of what the parties stand for by observing the behavior of activists, to the profit or peril of party nominees.

The final link in the chain is the citizenry. The authors first address the role of race in belief structuring and then turn to its ensuing effect on citizen party identifications. They find that through the early 1960s, racial issues were not part of the lingering New Deal ideological framework and thus were not defined in partisan terms. However, as racial issues emerged in the forefront of the 1964 and 1968 presidential campaigns, they became increasingly salient factors in ideological and partisan identification. Indeed, long after race receded as a presidential campaign issue in the 1970s, it has continued to define and polarize the parties ideologically.

Carmines and Stimson extend the concept of issue evolution beyond partisan transformation to provide a distinctive model of American political processes. In contrast to the conventional view that has institutional actors responding to electoral forces, they portray elites leading by providing cues about issue definition and the electorate, with activists in the vanguard, responding almost at random to some. Representation thus becomes systemic rather than individual, a consequence of movement within the electorate toward established elite stances.

The significance of this work within the context of realignment scholarship rests with its repudiation of the concept. The authors ably summarize the problems they and many others encountered in its employment, especially to explain contemporary electoral developments. Notable among realignment's demonstrated shortcomings are oversimplification, imprecision, and inconsistent and contradictory findings. Their litany is familiar to most who toil in the realignment vineyard and who generally share their concerns.

The abiding question is whether issue evolution, or some other concept, provides a credible alternative to realignment in addressing partisan change. It is that absence, to date, that helps account for the persistence of the concept, warts and all (Kleppner 1987). Carmines and Stimson persuasively argue for issue evolution in this particular case. What remains to be seen is whether scholars will climb on their bandwagon and test its wider applicability. To apply their Darwinian analogy, issue evolution must compete with realignment, as well as other proposed alternatives to realignment, in a contest of the survival of the fittest.

In the meantime, defenders of the concept continue to employ modified realignment perspectives to the contemporary scene. They stress that the concept is relatively new and still in the process of refinement. Rather than throwing the baby out with the bath water, they propose corrections that accommodate many of the challenges presented and fortify the framework. For example, two recent analyses (Wattenberg 1987; Beck 1989) make references to incomplete or hollow realignments, seeking to bring the concept into line with reality. Carmines and Stimson maintain that this approach is ultimately futile.

The utility of the quest to explain electoral change is at issue in the final volume to be reviewed, Ginsberg and Shefter's *Politics By Other Means*. Its instructive subtitle, "the declining importance of elections in America," takes issue with realignment perspectives by implying their irrelevance.

The concept of realignment is rooted in electoral behavior. We have seen how scholars like Brady and Lasser have fruitfully employed it to link elections with public policy. Carmines and Stimson, while rejecting conventional understanding of that link, do not challenge the significance of the electoral connection. Ginsberg and Shefter reluctantly contend that, at the close of the twentieth century, America is entering a postelectoral era.

To document the declining significance of elections, they refer initially to two familiar contemporary phenomena: low voter turnout and noncompetitive elections. They link the decline of elections to party decay and electoral deadlock. They mention without elaboration the established indications of party decomposition and turn to the parties' unsuccessful attempts to assemble a new, dominant coalition to succeed the New Deal Democrats whose preeminence waned in the tumultuous 1960s. On the right, they picture Ronald Reagan leading an effort to reconstitute the Republican coalition, embracing business, social conservatives, and middle-income taxpayers, through themes emphasizing the

private sector and national security concerns. The post-New Deal Democrats alternatively appeal to organized labor, blacks, public employees, and middle-class political activists, promoting and relying on the resources and powers of the welfare state to provide the cement.

The competition has resulted in deadlock. Neither party can dominate the political landscape. However, each has secured enduring control over one of the rival governmental institutions: the presidency for the GOP and Congress for the Democrats. In this new environment, the parties are hedging their electoral bets by seeking to strengthen the institutions they dominate and to undermine the opposition institutions. This coinciding partisan cleavage serves to intensify the constitutional conflict between president and Congress. Relatively secure in their hold on the presidency, the Republicans speak in behalf of enhanced executive power to advance their agenda; while the Democrats uphold congressional prerogatives as they pursue their program from Capitol Hill.

In turn, conflict within the political system is finding new, non-electoral outlets, through the politicization of the bureaucracy, the criminal justice system, the courts, the national security apparatus, and the mass media. Ginsberg and Shefter identify a major new technique of political conflict: revelation, investigation, and prosecution (RIP). They suggest that this postelectoral perspective enhances our understanding of contemporary conflicts over budget and trade deficits, foreign and defense policy, and judicial power.

The authors interpret Reagan's fiscal policies as deliberately designed to weaken both Democratic constituencies and the distributive and extractive capacities of Congress. Congressional Democrats responded to institutional and constituency concerns by demanding deficit reduction measures and embracing protectionism.

In foreign and defense policymaking, traditional bipartisanship has given way to coinciding partisan and institutional conflict, with each side committed to advancing at the expense of the other. For example, the authors characterize the Reagan military build-up as an attempt to establish a governing apparatus through "military Keynesianism." Resistance by congressional Democrats emphasized arms control, while publicizing and attacking waste and fraud in military procurement.

Ginsberg and Shefter view the federal judiciary as "not only an object of institutional struggles; it also has become a major participant in them" (149). Recall Lasser's contention that the absence of realignment in recent years helps account for the modern Supreme Court's abnormally aggressive policy activism. Ginsberg and Shefter portray an emerging

alliance between the courts and liberals after the New Deal. The conservative response took two forms: generally ineffectual efforts to restrict the courts' power and more successful presidential nominations of conservative jurists. The latter approach appears to be making allies of the courts and the presidency while reducing conservative concerns about the legitimacy of judicial power.

They identify three deleterious consequences producing governmental disarray in this postelectoral political order. First is the transformation of the constitutional separation of powers into a system of dual sovereignty, with the separated institutions unwilling to share powers. Second is the absence of political closure, as deadlock prolongs conflicts and the policy making process subordinates collective national purposes to domestic political struggles. Third is the undermining of the administrative capabilities of the state, through the politicization of the bureaucracy and the consequential dependence on non-governmental institutions and actors in the process of governing.

In making this last point, they tellingly compare the status quo with early modern Europe, where, absent the apparatus of the modern state, rulers similarly depended the resources of nongovernmental institutions to achieve their policy objectives. Foreign creditors emerge as the modern counterparts of sixteenth and seventeenth century tax farmers and bankers in providing the state with operating revenues. In analyzing the Iran-Contra affair, they observe that the Reagan administration's contracting out diplomatic, military, and financial assignments to foreign governments and private individuals parallels the Renaissance princes' reliance on mercenaries.

Having painted this exceedingly bleak picture, they then address alternative approaches to reform: demobilization or mobilization. The former involves restrictions on political participation and insulation of policy making from electoral interference. The latter entails breaking the electoral deadlock by bringing new voters into the electoral arena and converting some opposition supporters. An abiding controversy in the realignment literature is whether conversion of disenchanting partisans or mobilization of new voters better accounts for realignments (Anderson 1976; Erickson and Tedin 1981; Campbell 1985; Wanat and Burke 1982).

In the past, each approach has been employed: mobilization by both Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt, and demobilization by the Progressives. Ginsberg and Shefter fault the demobilization approach for being undemocratic and ultimately weakening government. In turn, they embrace mobilization normatively, but consider its prospects unlikely.

They perceive it requiring strong party organizations to reach the hard-core non-voters who tend to occupy the bottom rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. Not only do legal and technological barriers stand in the way, but contemporary elites in both parties also have vested interests in maintaining the status quo, despite its shortcomings. Thus, while Ginsberg and Shefter yearn for realignment via mobilization, their assessment of contemporary American politics makes them profoundly pessimistic about the prospects.

Readers of Schumpeter (1943) may disagree in large with the thrust of Ginsberg and Shefter's ponderings about mobilization and demobilization, respectively. Revisionist democrats would counter that it is mobilization, not demobilization, that weakens government, specifically by impeding its responsiveness or "viability." They also would point out that strong party organizations are inconsistent with the classical democracy that Ginsberg and Shefter prefer, and would remind the authors of Schattschneider's (1942) stern warning that democracy is to be found between the political parties, not inside of the political parties.

Nevertheless, Ginsberg and Shefter do share with Brady and many other party scholars an appreciation for responsible political parties as vehicles that enable the governed to influence policy outcomes. Bemoaning the obstacles that prevent the realization of the responsible parties model, its enthusiasts have a vested interest in realignment as a means to that end. As hope springs eternal, so we note another reason for the persistence of realignment perspectives, cogent arguments for their abandonment notwithstanding.

The books herein reviewed reflect some diverse scholarly stances toward realignment present in contemporary political science. Brady and Lasser find the concept invaluable in accounting for changes in policy outputs over time for Congress and the Supreme Court, respectively. Carmines and Stimson are highly critical, renouncing realignment as an explanation for contemporary partisan transformation and proposing issue evolution as an alternative. Ginsberg and Shefter's depiction of postelectoral politics renders realignment anachronistic. Like Brady, they are critical of the contemporary conduct of politics and government in the absence of electoral realignment. All four books challenge the reader with their penetrating insights.

Whither realignment? The conceptual lenses it provides focus most clearly on perceived critical eras of the past, beginning with the 1850s. Some say its utility therein abides, while others dispute particulars of the specific cases. As we approach the present and anticipate the future, the

picture begins to blur, raising the question of whether realignment is encountered only in retrospect, with the benefit of twenty-twenty hindsight. Certainly, one doubts those experiencing the perceived critical eras were fully aware of their historic significance. Enthusiastic advocates of the concept have without doubt overstated its general applicability. Perhaps its value is restricted to a particular time-frame in history where certain specified conditions were present. If this is the case, the scholarly challenge is to incorporate realignment perspectives into a broader chronological panorama of partisan change.

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