Political Party Realignment and Dealignment

For the past several decades, the United States has been in a period of **party realignment** and **dealignment**. Party realignment occurs when the minority party becomes stronger than the majority party, usually as the result of a minority party candidate winning a **critical election**. Party dealignment occurs when no single political party is dominant. This situation might exist, for example, when neither Democrats nor Republicans hold a majority of the seats in Congress or the Supreme Court.

Political parties in the United States have existed in “eras,” or historical periods of dominance and strong performance. During these eras, the party in control tended to dominate not only the policy agenda but also the policy-making institutions. This dominance often had a huge political and historical impact.

The first era was the Federalist Era, which began with the formation of the Federalist Party. Its presidential candidate, John Adams, won the 1796 election. The Federalist Party was weakened by disorganization and began to crumble when Adams was not re-elected in 1800. Democratic-Republican Party candidate Thomas Jefferson was the victor in that election, marking the rise of his party. By the 1820 election, the Federalist Party was gone, and its era was over.

The period from 1828 to 1856 is called the Jacksonian Era. During this time, Democratic-Republican Andrew Jackson used a combination of face-to-face campaigning and patronage to build a strong coalition of supporters. His efforts won him the presidency in 1828, and his party—what is today’s Democratic Party—experienced significant growth.

The Jacksonian Era marked an important change in the process used to nominate presidential candidates—caucuses disappeared and party conventions emerged. Under the caucus system, members of Congress nominated the presidential candidates. This system made sense while the United States was relatively small, but as the population grew and more people were granted voting rights, the caucuses did not represent the people adequately. Party conventions were organized to give voters more control over the nominating process, and for several decades these conventions were powerful forces in the political arena.

The critical election of 1860 began a new era in American political history—the Republican Era. Abraham Lincoln won the election and led the United States through the Civil War. Following the war, the Republican Party had the support of businesses, industrialists, farmers, and former slaves. Such large groups of supporters enabled the Republican Party to dominate the Presidency and Congress for close to 60 years. Democrat Grover Cleveland was twice elected to the Presidency during the Republican Era—once in 1884 and again in 1892. Despite his election, the Republicans maintained control of political workings.

The Republican stronghold on politics ended with the critical election of 1932, when Democrat Franklin Roosevelt was elected President. Roosevelt’s predecessor, Republican Herbert Hoover, had become widely unpopular for his policies during the Great Depression. As the presidential hopeful, Roosevelt promised Americans a New Deal to pull the country out of the Depression.

Roosevelt’s election marked the beginning of the New Deal Era. He was such a popular president that he was re-elected in 1936, 1940, and 1944. Democratic dominance of the presidency was interrupted in 1952 and 1956 with the election of Republican Dwight Eisenhower but was re-established in 1960 with the election of John F. Kennedy. Although another Democrat, Lyndon Johnson, was elected in 1964, his unpopular handling of the Vietnam War contributed to the end of the New Deal Era of Democratic Party control.

Republican Richard Nixon was elected president in 1968, but neither the Republican nor Democratic Party has regained the same monopoly on politics as they had during previous eras. The United States is now in an era of **Divided Government**. Part of the reason why is because party loyalty is far less intense today than it was 50 years ago. Waning loyalty neutralizes the power of political parties and gives way to the rise of third parties. For example, several individuals, including George Wallace, Ross Perot, and Ralph Nader, have formed their own political parties in recent years.

While these and other third-party candidates have yet to win a presidential election, their chances could be improving as more and more voters claim to be Independents rather than Democrats or Republicans. The increase in Independent voters marks a shift toward party dealignment. This shift can be an indication of either a highly informed electorate that is issue-oriented or a hyperpluralist political environment unwilling to form coalitions.

Copyright 2006 The Regents of the University of California and Monterey Institute for Technology and Education