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The Impact of Declining Union Membership on
Voter Participation Among Democrats

by

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The Impact of Declining Union Membership on Voter

Participation Among Democrats

Abstract

Much has been written on realigning elections and whether or not the general model has any contemporary relevance. Discussions of the last great realignment -- the New Deal realignment of the 1930s -- often emphasize the broad coalition of interests which brought it about. Although organized labor was an important interest, there is very little in the current literature on the influence of organized labor institutions on both party identification and voting behavior. Using data from the National Election Studies, this paper examines the voting behavior of working individuals who are specifically union members over a forty year period. What the data shows is that as union members are more likely to vote than non-union members, the decline in unionism has effectively resulted in a disfranchisement among many who traditionally would have voted for the Democratic party.

The literature on electoral realignment can be divided into two broad schools of thought. One school of thought maintains that realignments occur every thirty years or so either as a function of some monumental event or as a series of secular shifts. This school would appear to be most in keeping with the model first posited and later refined by V.O. Key (Key, 1955; 1959). Although many doubt the utility of the realignment model (Ladd, 1991; 1995; Silby, 1991)), it nonetheless continues to have its champions and is still viewed as crucial to explaining voting behavior (Burnham, 1970; 1991; 1996). But what is distinctive about this school is the notion that shifts in party identification are driven by great polarizing events either along ideological or socio-economic class lines. The other school of thought holds that with declining voter participation and the growth of political independence, what we have seen in recent years is not realignment, but dealignment. That is, the realignment model only makes sense in an era of strong party identification. Since parties are no longer strong, it makes no sense to conceive of the political universe in these terms (Aldrich, 1995).

As the dealignment thesis makes clear, it is very difficult to apply the realignment model because of poor voter turnout. But at the same time, when elections occur in which sweeping changes are made, particularly in the composition of electoral institutions, the concept of realignment cannot be dismissed completely. It would seem that to focus on one model or the other, as the literature appears to, is to miss a very subtle but critical dimension of the problem -- the whole question of disfranchisement. Could voter disfranchisement create the appearance of a realignment because the focus of analysis has shifted from the "party-in-the-electorate" to "party-

realignment because the focus of analysis has shifted from the “party-in-the-electorate” to “party-in-the-government?” The decline of the party-in-the-electorate as evidence of decreasing party loyalty and increasing political independence is too simple. How people identify themselves tells us very little about how they vote.

Discussions of the last great realignment -- the New Deal realignment of the 1930s -- emphasized the broad coalition of interests, of which organized labor was very prominent. But what is often missed in the current literature on party identification and voting behavior is the influence of organized labor institutions. Although it has been understood that education level and income do affect voting behavior, how does union membership affect voting behavior? If for instance, there is a relationship between labor organizations and party identification, and then between labor organizations and voting behavior, how is this relationship affected by the changing state of labor organizations? In this paper I look at the voting behavior of working individuals who are specifically union members over a forty year period. Through an analysis of data from the National Election Studies (NES), I conclude that the changes pointing in the direction of an ideological realignment in the institutions of government have little to do with ideology. On the contrary, they have much to do with the changing economic structure of the country, particularly the declining influence of labor unions. The data generally supports the conclusion that on an individual basis members of unions are more likely to vote than non-members of unions. Stated differently, unions have served the function of getting their members to vote in national elections, and all the more so in presidential elections. Union membership since the 1950s has declined sharply and so too has voter participation. Therefore, what I intend to show is that with the declining influence of unions, voters who traditionally would have voted for the Democratic party

have effectively disfranchised themselves from the political system. The result has been a victory for the Republican party, which ultimately has nothing to do with ideology and much to do with declining voting participation. The great electoral transformations, is short, are by default.

Economic Transformation and Realignment

The traditional realignment model assumes that realignments are triggered by issues so divisive as to polarize the political community. To this extent, they are triggered by crises. Although a crisis could be any issue that cuts across the existing line of political cleavage, it could also be a general trend of which there are several phases in its progression. Consequently, the realignment would not have to be a function of a groundswell of emotion finding expression at the ballot box, but could be the product of a general process of transformation over a protracted period of time. Therefore, the notion that the nation is perhaps in a continuous state of economic transformation, insofar as the market is generally fluid, could also serve as a strong foundation underpinning the realignment model. Key, for instance, defined a “critical” election where the electoral realignment was both sharp and durable. For it to be sharp, voter participation would have to be relatively high “ in which the decisive results of the voting reveal a sharp alteration of the pre-existing cleavage within the electorate.” It would also have to occur at all levels of government (Key, 1955, pp. 3-4). And for it to be durable, the new electoral composition would have to persist over time. This meant that in order to measure the sharpness of the shift, it would be essential to locate an issue or a set of them that would cause voters to make such a monumental change. But because it would have to be durable, it would also be extremely difficult to examine a single election isolated from its larger political context. Among those crises that had

indeed triggered critical elections in the past were recessions and depressions. According to general realignment theory, the inability of the majority party in government to adequately address an economic crisis could suffice to trigger an electoral realignment.

The inability of the majority party to adequately address an economic crisis might not be apparent at once, but only become clear over a period of time. Key also noted that an electoral realignment could be the product of a secular shift, with an election representing a phase in a long-term process of declining group solidarity (Key, 1959). The critical election, then, might be said to represent the culmination of a process, if not the beginning of one. A protracted period of economic transformation could, then, have the effect of producing an electoral realignment over a period of time without necessarily displaying the visible signs of a crisis.

For some, the state of the economy has provided fertile ground for voter discontent. In attempting to understand the sharp shifts characteristic of the 1990s, Phillips argued that the voters have reached a “boiling point” that could be said to reflect the culmination of frustration over declining middle class living standards (Phillips, 1993). In her ethnographic study of a middle class suburban community in New Jersey, Newman suggested that the declining fortunes of the middle class — as represented by the fact that the baby boom generation does not enjoy the same living standards as their parents — could have serious political repercussions (Newman, 1993). When all this is placed within the larger context of increasing income inequality (Danziger & Gottschalk, 1995; Wolff, 1994; Hungerford, 1993; Levy, 1988), the notion of the economic transformation as a basis for electoral discontent certainly becomes more powerful. And in an attempt to understand the earthquake of 1994 where the Republicans took control of the House of Representatives for the first time in forty years, Burnham echoed Philips’s concept of “boiling

point” as the crisis sufficient to trigger a massive electoral shift (Burnham, 1996).

As a theoretical construct, it would make sense to apply it to recent electoral trends, mainly the tendency to identify more with the Republican party than with the Democratic party — that change is justified on the grounds that the party in power has failed to deliver. But it does not explain why a large segment of the population would necessarily vote against its economic interests. That is, why would Democrats opt to vote for the Republican party whose policies are contrary to their own interests? A counter argument to the notion of economic crisis as a realignment trigger, but very much part of the general economic transformation thesis is the Ladd post-industrial realignment thesis. According to this thesis, the New Deal coalition, which was instrumental in creating the realignment of 1936, has been in decline. The collapse of this coalition is the result of a general economic transformation from industrial manufacturing to post-industrial service. Therefore, while the 1994 election might have been a monumental event vis a vis the composition of the government, it represents to Ladd just another episode in a process begun following the collapse of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal coalition in the 1940s. The process is essentially the post-industrial transformation.

For Ladd, the New Deal party system which marked the 1932 realignment was a creature of an industrial era which no longer exists. During this industrial era the dominant impulses of industrialization were centralization and enhancing government power. But in the postindustrial era, we have seen the opposite occur. What has occurred in the economic and technological spheres has been dispersion and decentralization. In light of this it is only an anathema to continue centralizing political power in national government bureaucracies. Therefore, a key characteristic of elections since 1932 has been a partisan argument over just what the role of government in

society should be. What has occurred over the years is that Americans, while not necessarily turning against government, have become more skeptical about its efficacy (Ladd, 1995). As much as the Ladd thesis places the concept of a realignment within the context of economic transformation, it does not easily answer the questions of what has happened to the remnants of this coalition. Moreover, it does not adequately answer the question of why traditional Democrats, who have voted for their party presumably because of class interests, would all of a sudden be swept away by the rhetoric of the Republican party whose record has been pro-business.

There have been two conventional approaches to this problem, neither of which are mutually exclusive. The first approach has centered on the model and its basic inadequacies. By showing that the realignment model has faults, it can be discarded and its relevance called into question. Moreover, since it loses its explanatory value, those who focus their efforts on the model are effectively absolved of the responsibility of attempting to explain phenomena which otherwise might be considered incomprehensible. The second approach has been to examine the party as an institution, particularly on how it has passed most voters by. This approach looks at the apparent leftward ideological movement of the party over the last thirty years and concludes that it no longer reflects the values of the voters. To some extent, the second approach actually picks up where the first is unable to provide an adequate answer. On the one hand, the out of touch party argument could account for the voters' tendency to disfranchise themselves from the political process, but it would not account for the growth of the Republican party. On the other hand, it might well explain why the ranks of Independents have grown. Still, it would not tell us what the relationship between Independent identification and voting is.

On the issue of the model, there are essentially four problems with the general model. The first, as Joel Silby has observed, is that the precision it once offered in identifying periods of profound shifts in American politics no longer exists. "The theory has not been able to account for what has happened over the past generation of American politics, despite the often frustrating search by scholars to locate the electoral realignment that was due in 1964, 1968, or thereabout." Rather there has been increasing electoral fragmentation since the 1960s due to a decline of party loyalty (Silby, 1991). Ladd too has suggested that political scientists' preoccupation with the concept over the past thirty five years has been unfortunate. In part, the problem stems from a desire to make sense out of ticket splitting. For realignment perception holds split outcomes -- ticket splitting -- to be "unnatural" because periodic realignments are supposed to culminate in a majority party becoming ascendent across several levels and institutions of American government. And yet "split results are a perfectly natural response within a polity whose defining feature is the elaborate separation of political institutions and authority (Ladd, 1991, pp, 27 & 30)." Also as Fiorina notes, the country has settled into a pattern of divided government. Though discussions of divided government have invariably tended to focus on the major elective institutions at the national level, there has also been a dramatic rise in divided control in the states as well. All this, of course, suggests an increase in ticket-splitting, which between the 1950s and 1970s almost doubled from 15 percent of the electorate to 25 percent or more. And while this clearly defies the assumptions of a realignment model, it is in full accord with the American constitutional tradition of separation of powers. In the end, the concept of realignment is not nearly as important as an understanding of the behavior of the American electorate in all elections and at all levels of government (Fiorina, 1992).

The second problem with realignment, as Salisbury and MacKuen note, is that the familiar assertion that a realignment is the culmination of a process whereby societal grievances may have reached their boiling point rests on the conversion of voters from one party to another.

Measurement of conversion has been dependent upon changes in the percentage of the vote received by one party or the other. Such percentages only have meaning if the electoral base remains stable. But if the base is expanding, the percentages are less likely to tell us anything meaningful about what's happening. Therefore, an analysis of party realignment needs to look at more than changes in the division of the two-party vote. More importantly, analysis must clearly differentiate between conversion, mobilization and incorporation (Salisbury & MacKuen, 1981).

Nardulli too, has observed that "The notion of a critical realignment is an aggregate level concept that refers to an abrupt, large, and enduring form of change in prevailing electoral patterns, one that is initiated by a critical election and results in a significantly different partisan balance in the electorate." In as much as this is clear, what is less clear is that in order to understand the role critical elections play in restructuring electoral patterns, issues of time and space must also be considered. Those who study realignment need to look carefully at long time frames and be sensitive to the fact that enduring critical change can assume a variety of forms. Therefore, it may not be terribly realistic to expect that the entire electorate will "respond simultaneously and uniformly to the type of stimuli that will generate a critical realignment in electoral patterns (Nardulli, 1995, p. 11)."

A third problem with the realignment model is that it may simply be inadequate in an era when general voter participation is in decline. Though voter turnout grew between 1948 and 1960 in which 63 percent of the adult population voted for president, it declined steadily after that. By

1980, only 53 percent of the adult population voted for president. And turnout in mid-term congressional elections has been even worse. Again, turnout grew steadily through 1962 reaching its peak of 45 percent in both 1962 and 1966. But afterwards it too declined, reaching only 35 percent in the 1978 mid-term elections. As Abramson and Aldrich argue, this decline in electoral participation is principally the result of two basic attitudinal trends: 1) weakening of party loyalty among the electorate and 2) declining beliefs about government responsiveness. And as they discovered when it came to presidential elections, the combined effect of decline in partisan strength alongside the decline in beliefs about government responsiveness accounts for between 2/3 and 7/10 of declining presidential turnout (Abramson & Aldrich, 1982).

And finally the fourth problem with realignment is that in an era of general party decline, the concept may not be terribly useful. Traditional realignment theory assumes there to be a “party-in-the-electorate” in which there is a strong sense of party identification. That if voters alter their long standing party affiliation in a critical election they are making a strong statement as much about the party as the specific individual they are voting for, if not more so. Aldrich has suggested that it is perhaps time to rethink some of these concepts. The “party-in-the electorate” concept as developed by Key may no longer be terribly useful. Rather the concept should more properly be referred to as “party-in-elections.” According to Aldrich, this term can “encompass the electorate’s views of, and identification with, parties and the organizational arrangements parties design to affect the views, identifications, and most of all, voting behavior of the public in elections (Aldrich, 1995, pp. 165, 260).” To some extent, the traditional realignment model assumes that the mass party model developed in the mid-nineteenth century and prevalent until about 1960 still exists; it no longer does. Instead more and more people see themselves as

independents, with the parties as irrelevant to their decisionmaking (Aldrich, 1995).

It is often at this point that the issue of the Democratic party passing them by picks up on the failure of the general realignment model. On this issue, the focus often begins with an examination of the events of the 1960s generally, and specifically those events surrounding the 1968 Democratic national convention. This story usually includes two components. One is structural and the other is ideological, but the ideological has tended to be facilitated by the structural. Following the 1968 election, there was a call for party reform. The call to reform the nominating process was in response to the fact that Hubert Humphrey, the Democratic Presidential candidate had secured the nomination the traditional route through back door negotiations with state party leaders. He had not entered a single primary and those who had supported Robert Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy -- both of whom had gone through the primary election process -- had by the time of the Convention come to believe that Humphrey illegitimately obtained the party nomination. This coupled with the spectacle of a convention amidst protest and violence on the streets outside the convention center on National television for everybody to see may have ultimately been the source of Nixon's victory. Reforms then began in the Democratic party out of the belief that a more open nominating process would lead to a more inclusive political party, which would enable it to regain the White House in 1972. The Republican party, then, followed suit (Polsby 1983). To obtain these reforms, election laws effectively had to be changed on a state by state basis. But once implemented, the end result was that anybody who was not necessarily closely involved with the traditional party organization but who had an effective organization, raised enough money, and was able to mobilize enough support might obtain the party's nomination. In the end party organizations lost control of their

most precious resource -- the ability to control nominations and elections. And the prime beneficiaries were unknown candidates who otherwise might never have been catapulted into the national arena, like George McGovern in 1972, Jimmy Carter in 1976, and even Ronald Reagan in 1980. At the same time, these reforms also made it easier for incumbent presidents like Gerald Ford in 1976, Jimmy Carter in 1980 and George Bush in 1992 to face a challenge from within their own parties.

Radosh, in particular, places the blame on activist groups supporting McGovern. It was they who led the party away from mainstream views, and thus alienated those who had legitimate concerns but were otherwise conservative when it came to social policy (Radosh, 1996). The two policy areas that perhaps most signify this move have been the party's position on welfare and affirmative action. On the issue of welfare, policy has often been viewed as being out of touch with mainstream American values of work (Levin-Waldman, 1996). What began as a set of initiatives predicated on offering greater opportunity to those who lacked it ended up as set of entitlements that reflected the assumptions of the welfare policy elites, but lacked any connection to either the needs of the community intended to be served or the preferences of the general public (Davies, 1996; Teles, 1996). And on the issue of affirmative action, the concept of equal opportunity that arose out of the Civil Rights movement was seen as giving way to group preferences in defiance of a long standing tradition of individual merit and achievement. Over time, then, the perception grew that the party reflected the views of the activists, but not the traditional Democrats who comprised the great 1930s coalition. Thus the spectacle of the party in the hands of the left-wing activists was sufficient to convince traditional Democrats -- who otherwise were conservative on other social policy -- that the party was no longer their's.

On one level, this notion of the Democratic party passing them by would be sufficient explanation for why they might be inclined to realign themselves as Republicans. And in Southern states, many if fact did because of the Civil Rights legislation (Sundquist, 1983). But it does not really explain why people would support a party contrary to their interests as opposed to either 1) forming a new party or 2) simply not participating in the political process. The leftward movement of the Democratic party does not explain why labor -- though it may be uncomfortable in the Democratic party -- would now be more comfortable in the Republican party. It seems as though it would be more plausible to infer that those no longer comfortable in the party might be more comfortable simply not being aligned. At the same time, the flaws in the model do not negate the fact that in some elections, most notably the 1994 mid-term election, there have been some monumental shifts which need to be made sense of.

Declining Influence of Unions

The number of workers associated with a labor union has generally declined since the 1950s. It exceeded 30 percent in the 1950s, but it fell to below 19 percent in the 1990s (Goldfield, 1987). The impact of this decline is not entirely clear. For some, the decline of organized labor coupled with a set of deliberate government policies aimed at rewarding entrepreneurial activity at the expense of labor has resulted in a wage squeeze and growing income inequality (Gordon, 1996). Freeman too, has noted that the declining influence of unions has had an effect on the distribution of income, insofar as it has worked to widen the inequality of income (Freeman, 1993). But its impact on the shape of the political universe has been speculative at best. In the opening of his classic study of American labor, J. David Greenstone noted that the decline in

industrial employment coupled with the emergence of more liberal Republican candidates might someday reduce labor's partisan activity on behalf of the Democrats (Greenstone, 1969).

Although others have speculated about the impact of the declining middle class on the future shape of the political universe (Newman, 1993; Phillips, 1993), it is still an open question as to how declining union membership affects electoral outcomes at the national level.

In his classic work on the emergence of a Republican party majority, Kevin Phillips held the election of 1968 to be the beginning in the emergence of the Republican party as the majority party, which ultimately would supplant the New Deal coalition which had reigned supreme since the 1930s. In particular, the election of Nixon was significant because it represented regional party shifts, or the beginning stages of shifts, particularly in the American heartland and the South. But the emerging Republican majority was also taking place in top growth states like California, Arizona, Texas, and Florida, as well as suburban communities (Phillips, 1970). To a large extent, the trends he observed very much parallel those observed by Ladd and predicted by Greenstone.

The literature on voting behavior generally maintains that those with a higher socio-economic status (SES) are more likely to vote than those with a lower one (Verba and Nie, 1972). Voter participation among members of unions has generally tended to be stronger than among those with similar SES who were not members of unions. That is, among the various functions labor unions have performed, getting their members to vote has been among them (Greenstone, 1969; Freeman and Medoff, 1984). In the remainder of the paper, I explore the relationship between union membership and voting behavior. Observations are drawn from the National Election Studies (NES) cumulative 1952 to 1992 file. Because my principal concern is with the impact of unionization I have only selected from among those who are employed.

An ideal analytical approach would have been to construct a two tier approach. The first tier would focus on the individual as the unit of analysis, with the emphasis on the probability of individual voting given a variety of influences. The second tier would focus on the year as the unit of analysis and look at how distributions have changed over time. Although regressions in the first tier produced statistically significant results, regressions in the second did not. Nevertheless, an analysis of individual level voting behavior alongside percentage distributions by year do provide some interesting insight into what has been happening over the past forty years. Moreover, the data also reveals the basic flaws contained in the literature on what is wrong with the realignment model. But what I also hope to illustrate is that when another variable is introduced, there is a context to electoral patterns, which unfortunately has been overlooked.

The first step in the analysis consisted of pulling out of the cumulative file percentages for each year on the following variables: party identification, union status, and voting. These can be seen below in Table I.

Table I

<i>Year</i>	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Independent</i>	<i>Republican</i>	<i>Union</i>	<i>Non-union</i>	<i>Voted</i>	<i>Didn't vote</i>
1952	59.0	6.5	31.6	32.1	67.6	69.9	20.3
1954							
1956	52.3	9.0	35.3	29.0	70.9	75.3	24.7
1958	57.6	6.6	32.0	27.8	71.7	67.2	32.0
1960	53.2	10.1	34.4	27.9	72.0	81.5	13.0
1962							
1964	62.3	8.1	27.8	27.3	72.6	74.1	18.8
1966							
1968	54.6	11.2	32.8	29.3	70.4	70.0	19.1
1970	54.5	11.9	32.5	26.8	72.2	62.3	36.8
1972	50.6	14.3	33.8	29.6	69.3	64.3	19.5
1974	52.8	13.8	31.6	30.4	67.8	62.1	37.5
1976	50.4	15.6	33.3	26.6	73.2	64.7	19.8
1978	54.3	14.9	28.5	30.1	69.6	54.8	45.0

1980	59.2	13.5	34.9	29.3	69.8	65.0	22.5
1982	51.5	12.0	33.9	24.2	74.8	61.3	38.1
1984	45.4	11.1	40.7	24.0	75.8	67.4	22.1
1986	48.0	11.5	37.6	23.9	75.8	52.4	47.6
1988	44.0	11.7	42.4	22.3	77.2	61.5	25.6
1990	49.7	11.1	37.4	19.5	80.1	46.5	53.5
1992	47.5	11.6	39.4	19.6	79.8	71.2	19.5

On the surface there appears to be a 11.5 percent decrease in Democratic party identification and 7.8 percent increase in Republican party identification. Were the case to be made that there has been a gradual realignment the increase in Republicans ought to be equal to the decrease in Democrats. On the other hand, the proportion of those identifying themselves as Independents has increased by 5.1 percent. Although these general trends may tend to support general arguments of realignment, they may not be fully indicative of what is going on. Realignment theory, after all, maintains that the new majority party is a function of the electorate abandoning one party and permanently realigning itself with the other party, with the effect being that a new majority party is formed (Sundquist, 1983). It is not clear from Table I, however, that this is what is happening. The real question is the probability of voting based on party identification. After all, if individuals simply shift their party identities, but fail to vote, it is not clear that any great urgency can be attached to an election that it would rise to the level of a critical one.

The other problem is that party identification is based on how respondents in the survey perceive their party identification. It is not necessarily based on formal registration, in which case it would be rather clear as to the party alignment. This means one could formally be a registered Democrat but claim identification with the Republican party because that is where his/her allegiance is at the moment. Traditional realignment theory, by contrast assumes that individuals formally registered with a particular party will formally change their party affiliation, and that this

change can be measured by how people are registered. Although the end result will be a change in the composition of the party-in-the-government, it begins with a noticeable change in the composition of the party-in-the-electorate. Otherwise, the election in question is merely a deviation from the norm; not a realignment and thus does not constitute a “critical” election.

The trends among union and non-union membership are fairly straightforward. Between 1952 and 1992, the proportion of union members has decreased by 12.5 percent and the proportion of non-union members has increased by 12.2 percent. These trends actually correspond to national trends. The trends among voters and non-voters, however, are perhaps more difficult to understand. Numbers in and of themselves do not really tell us much except for the fact that voting overall tends to be considerably less during presidential election years than during non-presidential election years. But the key question is just what are the trends among union members? Tables II and III show the trends among union members and non-union members respectively.

Table II Union Membership

	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Republican</i>	<i>Independent</i>	<i>Voted</i>	<i>Didn't Vote</i>
1952	68.1	25.0	5.7	71.4	20.2
1954					
1956	61.1	27.5	9.5	78.0	22.0
1958	70.4	21.5	6.3	73.1	26.9
1960	60.4	24.6	12.8	81.3	14.4
1962					
1964	79.9	14.3	5.3	78.7	15.2
1966					
1968	64.4	24.5	10.0	70.5	19.2
1970	64.0	22.7	12.4	60.9	38.2
1972	56.9	26.4	16.0	65.0	17.4
1974	60.9	20.9	17.1	59.3	40.7
1976	63.5	20.7	14.9	65.6	18.0

1978	64.6	18.5	14.3	57.5	42.3
1980	57.4	23.6	17.6	66.2	20.4
1982	62.8	23.0	12.2	66.3	33.7
1984	57.2	30.9	10.1	72.8	18.0
1986	55.7	30.2	11.7	55.7	44.3
1988	55.9	32.6	10.1	67.4	19.1
1990	63.3	27.9	7.5	52.9	46.7
1992	61.6	28.8	8.6	79.1	11.3

Table III Non-Union Membership

	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Republican</i>	<i>Independent</i>	<i>Voted</i>	<i>Didn't Vote</i>
1952	54.9	34.5	6.9	69.1	20.5
1954					
1956	48.8	38.6	8.7	74.2	25.8
1958	52.6	36.1	6.8	64.8	34.0
1960	50.3	38.3	9.1	81.8	12.4
1964	55.7	32.9	9.1	72.4	20.2
1968	50.4	36.4	11.8	70.0	11.0
1970	50.9	36.2	11.7	62.8	36.2
1972	47.8	37.2	13.4	64.1	20.2
1974	49.6	36.2	12.3	63.7	36.2
1976	45.6	37.9	16.0	64.3	20.6
1978	50.0	32.9	14.9	53.9	45.9
1980	45.4	39.9	12.0	64.8	23.1
1982	48.3	37.4	11.7	60.0	39.5
1984	41.8	43.8	11.3	65.9	23.4
1986	45.6	40.2	11.4	51.4	48.6
1988	40.7	45.0	12.2	60.1	27.2
1990	46.3	39.9	11.8	45.1	54.9
1992	44.2	41.9	12.4	69.4	21.4

When comparing union members to non-union members, some clear differences do stand out. The decrease among those identified with the Democratic party and the increase among those identified with the Republican party was greater among non-union members than among union members. Among union members, identification with the Democratic party decreased by 6.5 percent and only increased by 3.8 percent and 2.9 percent for Republicans and Independents

respectively. But among non-union members, identification with the Democrats fell by 10.7 percent and identification with Republicans and Independents increased by 7.4 percent and 5.5 percent respectively. What is interesting among union members, is that for the exception of the 1970s and 1980s, the percentage of those voting during presidential elections at least hovers around the 1952 level, and in many cases exceeds it. But when comparing the two, the percentage of those voting overall is generally higher among union members than among non-union members. On the surface, at least, this would seem to suggest that union membership does constitute an important influence in both maintaining Democratic party identification and getting people to vote.

To test this relationship, I have constructed a least squares regression consisting of the following variables: VOTE, the dependent variable, represents those who have voted; IND represents those identified as independents; DEM represents those identified as Democrats; UNION represents union members; and PRES is a dummy variable to capture the effects of presidential elections. Because I wanted to look at a couple of different possibilities, mainly how unionized workers compare to non-unionized workers, I have substituted NOUNION for UNION in a couple of the equations. The results are displayed below in Table IV

Table IV Individual Level Regression Results

<i>Unionized Workers</i>				
Variable	B	SE B	T	Sig T
UNION	.046157	.007764	5.945	.0000
DEM	-.030301	.007372	-4.110	.0000
IND	-.205986	.011407	-18.058	.0000
(Constant)	.670328	.005756	116.463	.0000

UNION	.044954	.007708	5.832	.0000
DEM	-.028099	.007320	-3.838	.0001
IND	-.203427	.011326	-17.961	.0000
PRES	.118159	.006962	16.971	.0000
(Constant)	.594815	.007242	82.131	.0000

Non-Unionized Members

NOUNION	-.050617	.007238	-6.993	.0000
DEM	-.029860	.007343	-4.066	.0000
IND	-.206111	.011400	-18.080	.0000
(Constant)	.716140	.007698	93.023	.0000

NOUNION	-.037812	.007232	-5.228	.0000
DEM	-.026454	.007297	-3.625	.0003
IND	-.202833	.011325	-17.910	.0000
PRES	.114568	.007005	16.356	.0000
(Constant)	.633299	.009172	69.047	.0000

At the level of individual voting it becomes clear that the probability of voting among union members increases by 4.5 percent and decreases by 5 percent for non-union members. At the same time it becomes clear that the probability of voting during a presidential year increases by at least 11 percent, with no real difference between union members and non-union members. When Democrats are compared to Republicans, they are generally 2 percent less likely to vote than are republicans. Independents, however, are generally about 20 percent less likely to vote than Republicans. At the same time, the tendency among Democrats to vote less than Republicans decreases among those who are unionized. This would tend to reinforce the observation that based on the percentage distributions observed earlier, unions as an institution do serve to affect the voting behavior of their members. The difference between Independents and Republicans would appear to be critical because much of the literature on dealignment assumes that the growth in Independent association is a function of the decline in allegiance to either of the two

major political parties (Aldrich, 1995). But if these new Independents are even less likely to vote than those still traditionally aligned with the parties, the whole concept of a rational activist voter who calculates how to vote, not on the basis of political allegiance, but what best will serve his/her interests is called into question. On the contrary, it would tend to support the notion that what really makes a difference on whether people vote is the capacity of the parties to get them out, and that without parties they simply will not. Defections from the Democratic party are not leading to independent voting, but to non-voting.

When these regression results are placed side by side with the descriptive percentages displayed in tables I-III, a clear pattern appears to emerge. That is, although there is a decrease in voting for everybody, including union members, over time, that decrease is less among union members than among non-union members. Or stated differently, it would appear that union members are more likely to hold their own in terms of continuing to vote. Although the proportion of Democrats opting not to vote increases over time, that increase is not nearly as great among unionized workers as it is among non-unionized workers. The union variable, then, would appear to have an effect in maintaining Democrats among those who continue to vote.

Implications

What, then, is the effect of declining unionism on the apparently declining influence of the Democratic party? Compared to Republicans, the data would appear to suggest that they are less likely to vote, but that there is a small decrease in this less likelihood among union members. And over time, it is considerably less the case. This would seem to suggest that as unionization has been declining, so too has identification with the Democratic party. It does not, however, follow

that these once Democrats have become Republicans. Some surely may have, but others have also become Independents. To a large extent, the finding of greatest significance appears to be that Independents were considerably less likely to vote than were Republicans, whereas the gap between Democrats and Republicans was much less. The declining percentage of unionized workers coupled with the decreased probability of non-union workers voting, even during presidential election years, would seem to imply a decreased probability of voting among those who traditionally would have voted for the Democratic party.

For those who have been arguing that recent national elections display many of the characteristics of traditional realignment, these findings would tend to greatly undermine their arguments. Consider, for a moment, Burnham's analysis with regards to the 1994 election. For Burnham, the sharp realignment in the composition of Congress reflects a basic and measurable transformation in the voting universe. Although cognizant that traditional crises of war and economic downturn were not there, he nonetheless maintains that when 1994 is placed within the context of the whole of the post-1990s cycle, a clear picture of voter discontent emerges that became most visible in the 1994 change in the party-in government (Burnham, 1996, p.380). Burnham actually builds on Phillips's argument that the electorate by the early 1990s had reached a "boiling point" and that the volatile situation was successfully directed by Republican strategists against the Democratic party as a whole in 1994. Among the unique features of the 1994 election was the effort by newly elected freshmen to the House to run a national campaign on the basis of a single platform called the "Contract with America." The effectiveness of this approach still remains an open question given that few in the electorate were aware of the contract. But for Republican leaders in Congress — especially the new Speaker Newt Gingrich — the contract not

only spoke to a new political agenda, but symbolized the bankruptcy of the old incumbent agenda.

Nevertheless, Burnham, refers to this contract to capture the sense of boilover and to suggest that what occurred in this election was a “shearing-off” effect. This would occur at the point at which socio-economic pressures have passed a critical political-electoral threshold that the existing political regime order’s strength has yielded (Burnham, 1996, p. 374). And it is primarily on the basis of this shearing-off effect that he maintains that the 1994 election displays many of the characteristics of an old style traditional realigning election. The election is thus characterized as a full-scale realignment syndrome because it contained the following elements:

- boilover leading to punctuated, shearing-off change at the level of the voting population.
- abnormal and still rising ideological salience impelled by escalating political temperature and pressure.
- dramatic change in the identity of at least some key political elites, including the abrupt elevation of an ideological extremist from the fringes of power in the House to its controlling spirit.
- significant procedural innovations starting with the Contract itself unique in the history of off-year congressional campaigns.
- unprecedented voting solidarity within the new majority party in Congress. (P. 384)

Even if Burnham’s point about “boilover” is conceded, it would nonetheless seem more plausible to infer from the trends in the NES data that those who got fed up simply chose to stay home.

Low voter turnout, particularly among Democrats, would suffice to give Republicans an electoral majority. It is even more plausible given that most people polled after the 1994 election had not even heard of the Republican contract with America. Hence, where is the realignment?

Realignment theory is greatly undermined by decreasing voter turnout, as there can be no real proof of a crisis sufficient to galvanize the voters to change their affiliation if they apparently were

not angry enough to register their protest at the ballot box. It is, of course, possible that they may have opted to express their anger by disfranchising themselves from the political system. But this would be dealignment, and would not adequately explain the trends in recent years. At the very least, we learn that there is a difference between party identification and actual voting. The other problem with the realignment thesis is that while there has been a considerable decrease in the percentage of voters identified as Democrats during this forty year period, the increase in the percentage of those identified as Republicans has not been nearly as great. It would seem more plausible to infer that the decrease in the percentage of workers unionized has led to a disenfranchisement of those workers, which in turn has only worked to create the appearance of a realignment when none in fact exists. If a realignment can be said to exist at all it is only by default, and by no means a function of a growing conservative political ideology -- as evidenced by the fact that few were aware of the Contract with America, which was being used as the manifesto of the conservative political ideology..

What, then, would all this mean? At the very least, it would seem to suggest that declining unionism has affected considerably more than the distribution of income and economic power. Rather it would suggest that it has also affected the distribution of political power and that this new distribution of power has had a great impact on the nation's public policy. It might suggest that a Republican majority in Congress has been pursuing a set of pro-business policies, not because it reflects the new will of the new majority, but because it reflect the will of the majority that continues to vote. Of course, this creates a vicious circle, as those disaffected will only experience even greater anomie as they witness a political system even less responsive to its needs. Although it is true that voters who have disfranchised themselves from the system may

have nobody to blame but themselves, as they in fact chose to do so, it nonetheless overlooks the role of institutions in the political process.

The New Deal coalition that is spoken about the most was forged out of a coalition of working groups represented by organized labor unions. Stated another way, insofar as labor unions served to get their members to vote, they effectively gave their members representation and voice in the political process. To the degree that this is true, the decline in such a vital labor market institution has effectively stripped them of their representation and voice. A more cynical argument, although not entirely implausible, would suggest that deliberate efforts of Republican administrations during the 1980s, most notably the Reagan administration, to weaken labor unions and to cut the nation's social wage were also framed with the hope of further weakening the Democratic party. There are already those who believe that the assault on both labor unions and the minimum wage, for instance, was a matter of deliberate government policy aimed at creating a low-wage economy (Piore, 1995; Gordon, 1996; Prasch, 1996).

In terms of labor unions, the 1980s proved to be a watershed period. It was then that President Ronald Reagan fired the PATCO air traffic controllers. Piore reminds us that Reagan's action against PATCO "galvanized anti-union managerial factions in a whole variety of industries and occupations where union organization had previously been unassailable. And it set the stage for a prolonged period of union give backs and concession bargaining." 1981 was also the last time that the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) would be amended until 1989. The minimum wage was essentially allowed to fall relative to average wages, from 47 percent to 35 percent. And this was the longest and most sustained decline since its introduction in the 1930s (Piore, 1995, pp. 10 & 14). But as Keeran and Tarpinian also suggest, more important than Reagan's

decertification of PATCO and the firing of its striking members was his anti-union appointments to the NLRB. As a result, those companies operating during a strike in the 1980s found a strong ally in the law (Keeran & Tarpinian, 1989-90). Without the support of those who traditionally fought on behalf of social policy, it would, of course, be more difficult to pursue a policy contrary to a conservative political ideology. As to which factor played a more important role it is not entirely clear, but the totality of it all would suggest that with the decline of unions within the Democratic party, there would be no effective representation of those interests that would be most in need of social policy. Whether or not this argument can be made is not entirely clear, but it certainly does warrant further study.

A considerable literature has blossomed in the popular press in recent years about how Congress is increasingly beholden to special interests, and that it really does not matter what party they are from. Lind, for instance, has suggested that what governs Washington is what he calls an “overclass.” This is a group of individuals who have grown up in affluent families, gone to elite colleges and universities, and have moved into prominent positions of power both in the economy and government (Lind, 1996; 1995). Others have argued that this sale of the government to monied interests has effectively resulted in abandonment of American democratic principles (Greider, 1992). Although labor unions may be included among the myriad of special interests, one obvious consequence of the decline of unions is that there is no effective counterweight to the monied corporate interests.

One obvious solution would be to strengthen traditional labor market institutions like unions, not only because it might effect a more equitable distribution of wealth and income, but because it might result in a more equitable distribution of power. Freeman and Medoff have noted

the efficiency gains to be derived from the existence of labor unions, insofar as they lead to greater productivity (Freeman and Medoff, 1984). Gordon too has suggested that strengthened labor organizations along with other social policies would serve to narrow the income inequality and perhaps the wage squeeze of recent years (Gordon, 1996). Strengthening the unions might in the end revitalize the Democratic party, thus creating a viable opposition to the type of “overclass” now in charge of public policy generally, and economic policy specifically. For without a significant institution to give the general mass of workers representation and voice, it seems likely that economic policies will continue to be framed, not in terms of the larger public interest, but for the benefit of narrow corporate interests that might stand to lose the most from genuine public interest legislation. As to whether government, through the tools of public policy, ought to encourage unionism is an open question, but a review of existing labor law which affects workers’ ability to organize certainly ought to be considered. The question is not whether we as a society ought to return to the type of unions of the past. Rather the question is what kind of institutions can we as a society structure to give workers effective voice both in the workplace and the political arena to achieve a more equitable distribution of income and political power, as well as greater efficiency in the operations of American political economy.

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