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Understanding the 1994 Election:  
Still No Realignment

by

Oren M. Levin-Waldman\*

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\*The Jerome Levy Economics Institute of Bard College

In November of 1994, Republicans for the first time in forty years took control of the House of Representatives, as well as the Senate which they hadn't controlled since 1987. For conservatives in the Republican party, the election was seen as a triumph of conservatism over the perceived abuses of liberalism as they had found expression during forty years of corrupt Democratic rule. Even if these claims appear to be overly inflated, the election of 1994 certainly did bring about a profound change in the composition of the U.S. Congress, which at a minimum has represented a rejection of the incumbency. Less clear, however, is whether the rejection of incumbency was a function of the perceived corruption of the incumbency, or whether it truly signified a desire to elect the other party out of a sincere belief that it best reflects the views and attitudes of the public.

Anecdotally what we know about this election is that there was a serious change with profound policy implications. Republicans gained 53 House seats and nine Senate seats. Not a single GOP incumbent lost, and the only gains made by Democrats in the House at all were in four open GOP seats. And for the first time in forty years there is a Republican speaker of the House. Moreover, this all occurred during a midterm election, which is quite atypical of the pattern. As Ornstein and Schenkenberg have noted, Congressional sweeps usually occur either during the midterm of a second-term president or following a sweeping across-the-board presidential party victories, neither of which occurred in 1994.<sup>1</sup> That it did occur during the first term of the Clinton

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<sup>1</sup> Norman J. Ornstein and Amy L. Schenkenberg, "The 1995 Congress: The First Hundred Days and Beyond," *Political Science Quarterly* 110,2 (1995), p. 184

Presidency might suggest that the sweep was in reality a negative vote against Clinton. And yet, this fact isn't definitively borne out by the polls. What the polls do suggest is that there was growing discontent with Congress which actually preceded this election. As Ornstein and Schenkenberg observe: "Voters had been discontented with Congress throughout 1994 and approached the election with a disapproval rating of Congress of 73 percent, one of the highest ever. Cynical towards Washington and unhappy with their own lies, they rejected not only the status quo, but specifically the Democrats." This is essentially the argument that Congress failed to deliver the change they expected when they elected a Democratic president and 110 freshmen to the House. The election of 1994, then, was a continuation of the election of 1992 where the electorate again voted for change. That the electorate ousted first-termers just as quickly as it had elected them only confirms that they failed to deliver on their promises.<sup>2</sup> If this is true, the election may not be a realignment, but simply a deviation from the norm.

Rejection of incumbency could be said to represent a traditional model for understanding what happened, and in the absence of truly conclusive polling data it may well be the only model that makes any real sense. But there is a second school of thought which holds the election to perhaps be another episode in a pattern towards an electoral realignment. That it was a rejection of incumbency is patently clear. That it represents a major shift in party loyalty on the part of the electorate is less clear. And yet, were it to be the case that it was indeed a realignment or part of one, the implications would be far greater than those drawn from a traditional model.

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<sup>2</sup> Ornstein and Schenkenberg, "The 1995 Congress," p. 185

## The Realignment Model

The concept of electoral realignment has been dominant in the political science literature for over forty years since V.O. Key's seminal *Journal of Politics* article in 1955. In it, Key advanced the concept of a "critical" election characterized by an electoral realignment which would be both sharp and durable. To have a critical election, electoral involvement 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." More importantly, however, the realignment would have to persist over a long period of time.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the realignment would have to occur at all levels of government. Since that time, political scientists have relied heavily on that concept as a critical index of the nature of American politics. Walter Dean Burnham, a key figure in the further development of realignment theory, is just one who believes that realignment theory tells us quite a bit about the shape of the American political universe. The reason why the realignment model has been attractive has been in part because it appears to divide much of American political history into clearly demarcated "party-system eras." Work on this model hasn't only identified the Civil War and New Deal eras, but the 1890s as well. They tell us quite a bit about deep political and cultural cleavages in society. As Burnham explains:

Critical realignments are moments of intense, comprehensive, and periodically recurring systemic change in American politics. These moments will be more or less protracted depending on the level of development in institutional structure which exists at the time of their occurrence. Periodically recurring, critical realignments are phenomena unique to the American political system, though they have nonrecurrent cognates elsewhere, including their "first cousins," revolutions. They have existed in one form or another throughout

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<sup>3</sup> V.O. Key, Jr., "A Theory of Critical Elections," *The Journal of Politics* 17 (1955), pp. 3-4

American political history from the American Revolution to the present.<sup>4</sup>

Critical elections essentially occur when politically decisive minorities of politically relevant populations at any given time stop doing what they have traditionally been doing. And they are exceptionally important and enduring consequences for the organization of the political system. They are essentially the way in which the political system is articulated. They can be said to represent the identity and articulation of dominant national elites and the identities of prime extragovernmental beneficiaries of their politics. Critical realignments reflect the shape and content of dominant sets of public policy agendas and outputs, and dominant sets of political ideas justifying and integrating them. And ultimately, they say something about the identity, size, scope, and effective constitutional role of each branch of the federal government.<sup>5</sup>

Still, this begs the question of just what such a realignment is, how it is defined, and what it looks like. Realignment theory may indeed say something about the nature of American politics, but the model has been ambiguous. In part, the ambiguity stems from Key's own later modification of the theory when he broadened the concept of "critical" elections to include secular shifts, whereby a gradual realignment might occur over a period of time, as opposed to occurring in a sudden shift. An election might then be one of many reflecting a secular realignment in which long-term declines in group solidarity most likely reflect a variety of underlying factors.<sup>6</sup> By

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Dean Burnham, "Critical Realignment: Dead or Alive?" in Byron E. Shafer ed., *The End of Realignment? Interpreting American Electoral Eras* (Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p. 115

<sup>5</sup> Burnham, "Critical Realignment," p. 116

<sup>6</sup> V.O. Key, Jr., "Secular Realignment and the Party System," *The Journal of Politics* 21 (1959):198-210

broadening the concept to include secular realignments, the idea of “critical election” effectively becomes a larger umbrella that could conceivably include any number of different scenarios, including, for instance, the 1994 election. But it may also create a false set of expectations, as it effectively creates a benchmark for every election which may or may not be realistic. By becoming focused on whether each election is the “one” we may well be overlooking the obvious, or perhaps what is more subtle.

Earlier Burnham suggested that any working definition of the concept of “critical realignment” must eliminate both deviating electoral situations, whereby the election in question may represent a one-time reaction to short-term forces, and the gradual realignment. “The critical realignment is characteristically associated with short-lived but very intense disruptions of traditional patterns of voting behavior. Majority parties become minorities; politics which was once competitive become noncompetitive...” The critical election is characterized by abnormally high intensity with the prime characteristic being that there has been a basic and measurable transformation in the shape of the voting universe.<sup>7</sup> But the shift need not all occur at once. And once it does occur or it is completed, it effectively defines the shape of the voting universe for years to come. During the 1960s, for instance, it was believed that the shape of the American voting universe then was by and large a product of the 1928-36 realignment.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to stress that a distinguishing feature of realignment is durability. A voter who simply crosses the line to vote against his party isn't considered a realigning voter unless s/he

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<sup>7</sup> Walter Dean Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainspring of American Politics* (New York, W.W. Norton & Co., 1970), pp. 6 & 12

<sup>8</sup> Walter Dean Burnham, “The Changing Shape of the American Political Universe,” *American Political Science Review*, 59,1 (March 1965), p. 23

makes a lasting shift of party loyalty and attachment. A temporary shift is merely a deviating election. But when enough voters deviate, the election might be classified as a deviation from the political norm. "It is when the political norm itself changes that realignment occurs. The concept applies, then, not to voting behavior as such, but to what underlies voting behavior -- to the basic party attachments of the voting citizens." Other distinguishing criteria of realignment are magnitude and periodicity.<sup>9</sup> Magnitude speaks to the sharpness of the political cleavages that may have produced the realignment. But periodicity is also critical, for the basic model assumes that elections occur in cycles of every thirty years or so. Periodicity is borne out by the fact that the realignment of the 1930s was only thirty six years after the realignment of the 1890s which was only thirty years after the Civil war realignment. And based on periodicity, it was expected that a new realignment would occur in the 1960s. In line with these expectations, political commentator Kevin Phillips argued that the election of 1968 was to be just 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.<sup>10</sup>

What, then, would be the cause of such an electoral shift? According to Burnham, a

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<sup>9</sup> James L. Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System: Alignment and Realignment of Political Parties in the United States* (Washington, The Brookings Institution, 1983), pp. 4,5 & 6

<sup>10</sup> Kevin Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (Garden City, Anchor Books, 1970)



critical realignment arises out of increasingly social maladjustments. They are the products of dynamic transformations in separately developing socioeconomic systems.<sup>11</sup> Realignments occur when an issue or set of issues polarize the political landscape that great concentrations of voters are motivated to change their party affiliation. According to Sundquist, there are five variables which determine the form and scale that a realignment takes. The first is the breadth and depth of the underlying grievance. The second is the capacity of the proposed remedy to provoke resistance. The third is the motivation and capacity of the party's leadership. Fourth is the division of polar forces between parties. And fifth is the strength of the ties that bind voters to existing parties.

Realignments essentially follow a pattern. They have their origins in the rise of new political issues or clusters of related issues which have the potential to divide and polarize the electorate along ideological lines. For a realignment to occur, the new issue must cut across the existing line of political cleavage and for it to be a major realignment it must be powerful enough to dominate the political debate and polarize the community as did slavery in the 1850s, the response government should have towards the hardships faced by farmers and inequalities in wealth and income distribution among regions and classes in the 1890s, and the response government should take towards the Great Depression during the 1930s. But if there is to be a realignment, major political groups must take distinct and opposing positions that are easily dramatized and understood. The community must be so polarized by the issue that the only apparent solution would be to overwhelmingly replace the majority party with the minority party,

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<sup>11</sup> Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainspring of American Politics*, p. 135

especially if the new party is predisposed towards the new issue.<sup>12</sup> The minority party would then become the majority party and remain so for a long period of time, thereby ushering in a new period of political stability.

E.E. Schattschneider once referred to such forces as the mobilization of bias. Describing the political system in terms of political conflicts involving two sets of actors -- activists and spectators -- Schattschneider argued that those actively involved in a conflict, especially if it had reached the point of stalemate, would seek to draw the spectators into it by mobilizing bias. This would occur on both sides of the conflict. The side able to mobilize the most support for its position might conceivably achieve political victory as the conflict would effectively be resolved through peaceful means, i.e. the political process.<sup>13</sup> This resolution, of course, could assume two different forms. One form would be for political factions to influence the political debate as it takes place in Congress with the end result being a vote in their favor. The other would be to influence the debate by bringing about a massive change in the composition of Congress, with the end result again being a vote in their favor. In either case, the issue doesn't simply crop up overnight; rather it builds over a period of time climaxing in what Sundquist calls a realignment crisis. A realignment crisis is precipitated when moderate centrists in one or both of the parties lose control of party nominations and policy to one or the other of the polar forces, and it is when these polar forces gain control that a realignment crisis is precipitated. A realignment then reaches its climax in one or more critical elections that center on the issue. But the realigning process may

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<sup>12</sup> Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System*, pp. 41, 298-311

<sup>13</sup> E.E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of America* (New York, Holt, Rhinehart, 1960)

actually extend over a considerable period of time both before and after the critical election. It is after the critical election -- or the election in which voters make a clear choice -- on an issue which has polarized the country that polarization gives way to conciliation. As this happens, the political parties move from poles towards the center and the distance between them is again narrowed. Then as new issues arise in the future which coincide with the existing line of political cleavage, party cohesion is strengthened and the distance between the parties is increased, thereby reinforcing the existing alignment.<sup>14</sup>

Still, none of this dismisses much of the controversy surrounding the concept. As Joel Selby has observed, critical realignment theory has been troubled for some time now. Though at one time it provided precise markers signifying profound shifts in American politics, this precision 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.<sup>15</sup> And 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

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<sup>14</sup> Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System*, pp. 313-321

<sup>15</sup> Joel H. Selby, "Beyond Realignment and Realignment Theory" *American Political Eras, 1789-1989*, in Shafer ed., *The End of Realignment?*

perfectly natural response within a polity whose defining feature is the elaborate separation of political institutions and authority."<sup>16</sup> As Nardulli has observed, "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."<sup>17</sup>

To expect as much is to assume a certain degree of homogeneity in a society with vast geopolitical diversity. Nardulli thus suggests that a subnational approach to understanding critical realignments may be more useful. The argument for this is the fact that there has never been a truly national realignment, with the possible exception of 1932.<sup>18</sup> And on this point most scholars would seem to agree. For Sundquist, the election of 1936 was when President Franklin Roosevelt achieved his most stunning victory, thus marking the climax of the 1932 realignment -- the New

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<sup>16</sup> Everett Carl Ladd, "Like Waiting for Godot: The Uselessness of Realignment" for Understanding Change in Contemporary American Politics." in Shafer ed., *The End of Realignment*, pp. 27 and 30

<sup>17</sup> Peter F. Nardulli, "The Concept of a Critical Realignment, Electoral Behavior, and Political Change," *American Political Science Review* 89,1 (March 1995), p. 11

<sup>18</sup> Nardulli, "The Concept of a Critical Realignment, Electoral Behavior, and Political Change, p. 13

Deal realignment. Everything that has happened since can then be understood as a later phase of that critical election.<sup>19</sup> Or at the very least it is what happened in 1932 which has set the tone for what has followed.

### **Issues in 1994 Election**

Where, then, would the 1994 election fit into realignment model? The characteristics would have to conform to the following criteria: First of all, it would have to be clear that there was such an issue or set of issues which so polarized the political community that the only solution was to sweep the Democrats out and replace them with Republicans. And if such an issue could be said to exist, it is one which would have to have been simmering for some time. Second, it would have to be clear that electoral results are the product of a sizeable majority of the political community coming out to cast votes. In other words, for the 1994 election to have been a realigning election, voter turnout would have to have been considerable. And thirdly, it would have to be clear that the change in composition of the party in the electorate is durable. That is, is the Republican victory simply a function of a majority of the electorate voting Republican, or that they changed their party affiliation and became Republican and then proceeded to vote for their new party's candidates and platform? The two are by no means the same. If only the former, we at most have a deviation from the political norm. If the latter, however, we might well have a realigning election, but only if it is clear that the new party affiliation will be sustained over time. And this is something that cannot necessarily be known until years into the future. But even if traces of realignment can be identified, we are left to address the question of just where the

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<sup>19</sup> Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System*, pp. 214 & 240

realignment may have been. Was it a national realignment, or was it a subnational one? And in this vein, we might see that there are some apparent elements of a realignment, which don't completely encompass the entire electorate.

For Burnham, the 1994 earthquake, as he refers to it, does have many of the characteristics of "an old-style partisan critical realignment. Chief among these characteristics of realignment are the durability and comprehensiveness of the proposed new order of things." And while the future cannot be known for sure, there are nonetheless reasons to believe that the 1994 election does constitute a rare election. The first thing to note is that the election involved Republican surges at all levels of government; that they occurred in the states as well as the national government. There were many more vacancies among Democrats than Republican gubernatorial positions. Moreover, the Republicans lost no incumbents and only one open governorship.<sup>20</sup>

According to a recent study by Tuchfarber et al., the GOP victory raises four key questions about the significance of the 1994 election: 1) Did the outcome turn primarily on the failure to vote by key blocs of the Democratic party's constituency? 2) Does the election reflect only a short-term rebellion against the Democratic party in general and Bill Clinton in particular? 3) Were the results due to enduring structural shifts in the parties' electoral coalition? And 4) Was the 1994 election a "critical election" that realignment has occurred? As they found, the more people indicated that they disapproved of the job done by Congress, the more likely they were to

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<sup>20</sup> Walter Dean Burnham, "Realignment Lives: The 1994 Earthquake and Its Implications" in Colin Campbell and Bert A. Rockman, ed., *The Clinton Presidency: First Appraisals* (Chatham, NJ; Chatham House Publishers, 1996), pp. 363, 365

vote for GOP candidates in 1994.<sup>21</sup> And yet, if it is true that the public was primarily displeased about the performance of Congress, it doesn't at all follow that this was a realignment consistent with the model. For one feature of realignment theory is its cyclical nature, whereby each realignment represents a "critical election" with a new party system occurring every thirty years or so. But as Tuchfarber et al. note, the data on party identification doesn't clearly confirm the shift to a Republican majority in the electorate, though there has been some movement in that direction. Still, they believe that even if the election cannot be said to easily fit into the model of realignment, it was probably phase one of a "critical election" period, and that it will take the next few elections to determine whether the country is indeed in a new period of Republican dominance or if it is still in a period of electoral dealignment.<sup>22</sup>

Ladd too has offered a somewhat ambiguous answer to the question of whether the 1994 election was a realignment, While acknowledging that the results were clear and unequivocal -- that the Republicans made serious gains -- its place in the longer-term evolution of American partisan competition isn't nearly as clear. Despite all their gains, Republicans are only at parity with Democrats in terms of party identification. Republicans hold only a minority of state legislative seats, and they have won a majority in the House of Representatives only three times in 64 years. Moreover, they do not have the same majority status that the Democrats had during the New Deal era. "What's more, given the relative weakness of voter ties to political parties and the continuing growth of independent voting, it's by no means certain that the United States will ever

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<sup>21</sup> Alfred J. Tuchfarber, Stephen E. Bennett, Andrew E. Smith and Eric W. Rademacher, "The Republican Tidal Wave of 1994: Testing Hypotheses About Realignment, Restructuring, and Rebellion," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 28,4 (December 1995), pp. 689-690

<sup>22</sup> Tuchfarber et al., "The Republican Tidal Wave of 1994," p. 694

again have a majority party in the complete sense that the Republicans were a majority from the 1890s through the 1920s and the Democrats from the 1930s through the early 1960s.”<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps the election of 1994 is less of a realignment and more a continuation of a process of dealignment whereby voters, increasingly more independent, pay less and less attention to party affiliation and loyalty. 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.<sup>24</sup> In truth, for the Republican claim that this election marked the beginning of a “revolution” to be credible it would have to follow that voters were specifically voting on the basis of party ideology as it was presented in the “Contract with America.” And yet surveys show that most Americans were simply unfamiliar with the “Contract” and its specific provisions. By the end of November 1994, only 34 percent of Americans had heard of the “Contract.” But of those who had heard of it -- the attentive group -- 56 percent said they favored it; 23 percent said

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<sup>23</sup> Everett Carl Ladd, “The 1994 Congressional Elections: the Postindustrial Realignment Continues,” *Political Science Quarterly* 110,1(1995), p. 3

<sup>24</sup> Ladd, “The 1994 Congressional Elections,” pp. 4-9



they were opposed; seven percent said they had mixed feelings; and 14 percent simply had no opinion.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, it is possible that the “Contract” symbolizes a desire to limit government, and one that the public identifies with even if it doesn’t necessarily understand what limiting government would mean.

According to Ladd, survey data does show that there was strong public support for virtually all “Contract” ideas pertaining to limiting government. Americans haven’t resolved their ambivalence about the modern state. On the contrary, the election of 1994 displays important continuity with the past. For one thing, the South continued its long-term move from the Democratic camp even though blacks all over were for the most part Democrats. Also Catholics along with Southern white Protestants continued from 1992 their long drift from decisive Democratic loyalties. Again there was a gender gap, as more women were Democrats and more men were Republican. And Democrats again did best among those with little formal education and among those with the most years in school. The South in 1994 continued its long-term move towards the GOP. A majority of House members elected from the South were Republicans. By contrast, in 1952 only 8% of Republican House members were from the old confederacy. By 1968, the number was up to 19%, and after 1994, Southern Republicans comprise 33% of the party’s House seats. And yet, the South has still a long way to go in its gradual realignment, for Democrats still hold 62% of the region’s state legislative seats. And yet, this isn’t to say that no realignment is occurring, for Ladd does conclude that the U.S. “Is somewhere in the middle stages of a major political realignment, one perceptible in large part by the shifts from an industrial

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<sup>25</sup> David W. Moore, Lydia Saad, Leslie McAneny and Frank Newport, “Contract with America,” *The Gallup Poll Monthly* (November 1994), p. 19

to a postindustrial setting.”<sup>26</sup> What we might be left with is that some characteristics of the election fit into the model, while others clearly do not. As much as there may have been stronger sentiment against the Democrats, it isn’t clear that such cleavages rise to the level of divisiveness characteristic of the political cleavages during the previous realignment periods.

Perhaps the real story is what is happening at the subnational level, particularly in the South. And if the South is where the real story is, 1994 does not represent a critical election; rather it represents another episode in a process which has been underway since 1948. Many of the shifts over the years have been gradual ones. But in the South, the drift away from the 1930s coalition began in 1948 when the national Democratic party changed course on the issue of civil rights.<sup>27</sup> Or as Sundquist has noted, the party system in the South was plunged into its realignment crisis when in 1948 President Truman sent his civil rights proposals to Congress. All at once the Democratic party was polarized and mostly on regional lines. At one end of the party spectrum was a civil rights polar force and their liberal allies; at the other end was a polar force of Southern white resistance, determined to bolt the party when and if ardent civil rights advocates in the north attained clear control. Then there were the moderate centrists in the middle who sought to find areas of compromise that would maintain the party’s unity.<sup>28</sup>

Of course, all this may be true. Trends which began in the 1940 and were evident in 1968 may well have continued in 1994. But it isn’t clear from the data that this election was a critical

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<sup>26</sup> Ladd, “The 1994 Congressional Elections,” pp. 10-21, 24

<sup>27</sup> See Everett Carll Ladd, “The 1992 Vote for President Clinton: Another Brittle Mandate?” *Political Science Quarterly* 108,1 (1993), p. 3

<sup>28</sup> Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System*, pp. 353-354; also see Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority*

election as defined by the realignment model, or that it necessarily continues the trend begun in 1968. What occurred in 1994 was a significant change in the composition of Congress. The leadership of the Republican party would like the public to believe that because the victory was so sweeping that it essentially amounted to a Revolution. Moreover, because not a single Republican incumbent lost and most who did lose were those liberal Democrats who supported Clinton and may have even voted for his tax increase in 1993, the election was in essence a repudiation of liberalism in general and Clinton in particular. The other possibility is that the election simply represented a continuation of dealignment, the process whereby more and more people have been defecting from the political parties. The other question which really has not been addressed is that of voter turnout, for were there to be a realignment turnout would have to be high. But turnout over the years has tended to decline and turnout during midterm elections has always been less.

The issue of voter turnout, however, isn't merely a matter of looking at how the electorate as a whole voted. Rather it requires breaking down the electorate into its component parts and examining how each subgroup within the electorate voted. On the basis of data from the National Election Studies (NES) for a twenty eight year period from 1952-1980, for example, Warren Miller discovered a significant realignment in the South among white male voters. Traditionally known for single-party dominance, the beginning of the end of that dominance among Southern white male voters started shortly after Kennedy's election in 1960. Only twenty years later, the 80-20 division between northern and southern states in favor of the Democratic party had been replaced by near parity for the Republicans. At least among white males, there would appear to have been a classic realignment in the South. And yet, this was more than offset by the influx of black voters into the Democratic party between 1960 and 1968. So in an attempt to understand

what might have contributed to the evidence suggestive of a party realignment during the Reagan years, Miller concludes that it was black *nonvoters*; not black voters.<sup>29</sup> In other words, what might appear to be a realignment really isn't because a sizeable subgroup in the population chose not to participate. The classic realignment model requires that voter turnout be sizeable. Moreover, it would appear to underscore the need to be clear about just what the voting patterns were in any election that becomes the subject of a realignment analysis.

### **Ambiguity in Data**

The only way to know whether the election fits into the model or elements of it is to examine how the public felt about the issues. We can gauge this to some extent by looking at the survey data. Though it may provide a basis for plausible inference, polling data is by no means absolutely conclusive. For one thing, polls aren't always consistent with one another. We may have answers to questions that were raised, but some of the questions that weren't asked could be just as important, and because they weren't asked we have no means by which to measure. For the purposes of this analysis, I have chosen to look at two data bases. One is a published survey of the Gallup organization, a well established national polling organization. The other is micro data from the National Election Studies (NES), sponsored by the Survey Research Center and the Center for Political Studies of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan. Whereas Gallup asked most of the standard questions, the NES tended to be more comprehensive. Though there is some variation between them, there is considerable consistency.

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<sup>29</sup> Warren E. Miller, "Party Identification, Realignment, and Party Voting: Back to the Basics," *American Political Science Review* 85,2 (June 1991):557-568

But despite the consistency, there is perhaps ample variation for different impressions to be formed. One of the reasons for choosing these specific data bases is that they may also demonstrate the divide between politicians, journalists and political pundits who would be more inclined to rely on popular surveys on the one hand, and scholars who tend to rely on a more comprehensive data base which provides an internal basis for variables to be checked against one another on the other hand. What neither poll shows, however, is the magnitude and intensity which could so polarize the electorate that this election could necessarily conform to the criteria of a classic realigning election.

The case for a realignment, at a minimum, must rest on the premise that people were dissatisfied with how things were going. Some might suggest that dissatisfaction is measured by disapproval over President Clinton's performance in office specifically. It is one thing to be dissatisfied with how things are going and quite another to assume that because things aren't going well it is because of disapproval over the president's performance. Just prior to the election, 66 percent of those polled by the Gallup organization indicated that they were dissatisfied with how things were going in the U.S. at the time.<sup>30</sup> Only 30 percent indicated that they were satisfied, while four percent had no opinion. And yet, on the question of whether they approved of President Clinton's performance in office, there was an even split with 46 percent approval and 46 percent disapproval, and eight percent having no opinion. The problem is that it doesn't necessarily follow that the general dissatisfaction over how things are going is a function of the President's performance. Or for that matter, it isn't entirely clear just what it means not to be

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<sup>30</sup> This data and all the Gallup data that follows is drawn from "Gallup Short Subjects," *The Gallup Poll Monthly* (November 1994):35-53

satisfied with how things are running in the country. On the other hand, when asked whether they had a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Clinton the person, 50 percent had a favorable opinion; 47 percent had an unfavorable opinion; and three percent had no opinion. The NES survey following the election actually showed Clinton's approval rating to be higher. When asked whether they approved or disapproved of the way he was handling his job as President, 48.2 percent said that they approved and 46.1 percent said that they disapproved. Another 4.9 percent simply did not know. And on the issue of Clinton personally, respondents were asked to rate him on a feeling thermometer ranging from 0 (least favorable) to 100 (most favorable). Only 42.2 percent of the respondents fell into the 0-50 range, but 57.1 percent fell in the 51 to 100 range.

What, then, does it mean to say that the 1994 election was in essence a repudiation of Clinton? When asked whether they would be more likely to support a candidate who either supports Clinton or opposes him, 41 percent said that they would support a candidate who supported Clinton while 46 percent indicated that they would not. At the same time, eight percent said that it was not a factor and five percent had no opinion. When asked in the NES how often their respective representatives supported Clinton's legislative proposals, 57.2 percent didn't know or weren't sure; 11.4 percent said more than half; 5.5 percent said about half and 9.5 percent said less than half. The difference between polls may also render this criterion suspect. If a high percentage of voters aren't even aware of whether their representative supported Clinton or not, how is it really possible to infer that because people were dissatisfied with Clinton they then voted against those who were either members of his party or supported him as a means of demonstrating their disapproval? But then it doesn't necessarily follow that like or dislike of Clinton would constitute a sole criterion for how to vote. For those for whom Clinton was a

factor in the Gallup poll, when pressed on the matter adamancy appeared to dissipate. Of the 41 percent who were pro-Clinton, only 28 percent indicated that they felt very strongly, while 13 percent did not. And of the 46 percent who were anti-Clinton, only 35% indicated that they felt strongly while eleven percent did not. But even if it were true that the 1994 election was definitely an anti-Clinton vote, it still isn't at all clear what they were voting against. Are they voting against him because of his personality, his ideology, his character, or his politics?

One obvious dissatisfaction might be the economy, but this issue didn't necessarily yield any real consistency in responses either. For instance, when Gallup asked whether their family's financial situation was better, worse or the same today compared with two years ago, 26 percent said it was better; 23 percent said it was worse; 50 percent said it was about the same; and only one percent had no opinion. And yet, when asked how they felt about President Clinton's handling of the economy, 51 percent said that they disapproved; 43 percent said they approved; and six percent said they had no opinion. This was actually quite a change from February of 1993 when only 35 percent disapproved and 20 percent had no opinion. Then the approval rating was 45 percent. But the NES survey actually showed more people to approve of Clinton's handling of the economy than disapprove. Here 48.3 percent approved, 44.1 percent disapproved, and 7.2 percent simply did not know. Although it doesn't follow that there is necessarily any ringing endorsement of Clinton's handling of the economy, the closeness of the numbers would also suggest that the economy perhaps was not that critical an issue in 1994, or at least Clinton's involvement in it. But it is also easy to see how the difference in numbers might lead some to believe that Clinton's handling of the economy was a factor. That is, it is perhaps a factor in the Gallup poll, and less of one, if one at all, in the NES. But even if it is a factor in the Gallup poll,

the numbers are still close enough to believe that this alone could not have been an issue of any great magnitude.

From the Gallup poll, at least, it would appear reasonable to conclude that those who had approved of Clinton's handling of the economy for the most part continued to approve, while the growth in disapproval appears to have come from those who earlier had no opinion. And yet, when asked whether they would prefer to return to say President Reagan's economic policies or continue with the current policies, only 34 percent indicated that there should be a return while 48 percent indicated that the country should continue with the current policies. Eleven percent indicated neither and seven percent simply had no opinion. Thus we are left with the puzzling question of why would most of those who aren't happy with Clinton's handling of the economy necessarily want to maintain the current economic policies? These policies, after all, are Clinton administration policies. It is also worth noting, however, that nowhere in the survey were they asked what type of economic policies they would like to see. If there is any monumental policy initiative which preceded the election in which the Democratic leadership played a role, it was the issue of healthcare reform -- the very issue that brought Clinton to power along with 110 other freshmen members of Congress. And yet, it isn't entirely clear from the polling data as to whether this was in any way decisive.

The Gallup poll did not really address itself to the issue of healthcare reform, but the NES did. When asked whether they approved or disapproved of Clinton's handling of health care reform, 59 percent said that they disapproved, while only 33.4 approved. Another 7.2 percent simply did not know. Still, it isn't at all clear what it means. Does the high disapproval stem from the specifics of the Clinton healthcare reform proposals which the public may not have been happy



with, or does it stem from the failure of the administration to secure reform in any form? The two are by no means the same. Interestingly, the disapproval ratings were even higher over Congress's handling of health care reform. When asked whether they approved or disapproved of the way Congress was handling healthcare reform, 70.4 said that they disapproved, while only 23.7 percent said that they approved. Another 5.7 percent simply did not know. On the one hand, we might infer that a majority of respondents simply did not approve of the Democratic plan for healthcare reform. But on the other hand, we might infer that a majority of respondents were dissatisfied over the fact that the Democratically controlled Congress was simply unable to work with a Democratic President. Such an inference might indeed flow logically from the fact that there were many other proposals for healthcare reform coming from Congress, and especially from the Democrats.

Despite the fact that most people in the NES survey had health insurance and were satisfied, when asked how they felt about the country's healthcare system as a whole, satisfaction actually declined. Only 6.1 percent indicated that they were satisfied and another 29.1 percent indicated that they were somewhat satisfied. But 37.5 percent indicated that they were somewhat dissatisfied and another 24.5 percent indicated that they were very dissatisfied, which would suggest that for at least 62 percent healthcare reform may have been an important enough issue upon which to reject the Democratic Congress. When asked whether government should provide a government insurance plan which would cover all medical expenses for everybody, more people leaned in the direction of private insurance as opposed to government provision.. When respondents were asked this question, they were asked to place themselves on a continuum. About 34.9 percent leaned in the direction of government provision, 37.2 percent leaned in the

direction of private insurance, and 19.2 percent were right in the middle. Still, the number of respondents favoring private provision is not so overwhelming as to believe that a healthcare reform proposal, even with the appearance of big bureaucracy, would so motivate people to vote for the minority party.

Following the election, the Republican majority made the claim that the electorate was rejecting the excesses of liberalism, and that on a more positive note they were voting for a Congress that would promote traditional values. When Gallup asked whether government should promote values, 55 percent said that government should promote traditional values; 37 percent said that government shouldn't promote any; and eight percent simply had no opinion. The NES survey approached this issue in terms of "traditional family ties." When asked whether the country would have fewer problems with more of an emphasis on traditional family ties, 56.9 percent strongly agreed and another 27.6 percent agreed somewhat. Only 4.1 percent disagreed strongly and 2.1 percent disagreed somewhat. Another 7.2 percent neither agreed nor disagreed. And yet, it still isn't clear as to what we are supposed to make of all this, for what meaning can the concept of traditional values have when it isn't clear from the question of just how they would be defined.

It could refer to alternative lifestyles or different moral views of the world which might include the abortion issue. When it was suggested that new lifestyles are contributing to the breakdown of society, 37.1 percent agreed strongly and another 32.8 percent agreed somewhat. Only 8.4 percent disagreed somewhat and another 5.2 percent disagreed strongly. 13.9 percent simply did not agree or disagree. On the other hand, when the issue was couched differently, the results were also different. When respondents were told that the world is a changing place and

that we should always adjust our views of moral behavior to those changes, only 10.8 percent agreed strongly with another 28.9 percent agreeing somewhat. 22.1 percent disagreed somewhat and 26.1% disagreed strongly. An additional 10.3 percent neither agreed nor disagreed. When asked for their views on abortion, most respondents indicated that they favored freedom of choice. 41.4 percent indicated that women should always be permitted to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice. This was followed by 29.6 percent who believed that abortion should only be permitted in cases of rape, incest, or that the women's life is in danger. 13.4 percent indicated that abortions should be permitted for reasons other than rape, incest, and saving the mother's life, but only after the need for an abortion has been clearly established. And only 11.9 percent believed that by law abortion should never be permitted. An additional 1.3 percent indicated other and .8 percent simply did not know.

Another measure of traditional family ties might be the way people feel about the women's movement. This measure, then, rests on the premise that those who favor so called traditional values are also opposed to equal rights for women. The NES measured attachment to the women's movement by asking respondents to situate themselves on a feeling thermometer ranging from 0 to 100 with 0 representing the least attachment and 100 representing the most attachment. About 38.2 percent fell within the 0 to 50 range while 59.3 fell in the 51 to 100 range. On the other hand, it also doesn't follow that those who look at the women's movement favorably don't also believe that the world wouldn't be a better place with more traditional family ties.

But many Republicans took the election to be a clear affirmation of conservative values, particularly with regards to the role of government. When asked to indicate their attitudes about the role of government, fifteen percent indicated that they were liberal; twenty percent indicated

that they were populist; twenty percent indicated that they were libertarian; 32 percent said that they were conservative; and thirteen percent indicated that they were undesignated. The NES survey asked respondents where they saw themselves on the liberal/conservative continuum, but also divided the categories into degrees. 1.4 percent saw themselves as extremely liberal; 6.4 percent saw themselves as liberal and 7.8 percent saw themselves as slightly liberal. On the conservative end, 14.6 percent saw themselves as slightly conservative; 18.1 percent saw themselves as conservative; and 3.1 percent saw themselves as extremely conservative. On this basis, there are more conservatives than liberals: 35.8 v. 15.6. But 26.6 percent saw themselves as moderates and an additional 20.6 percent were out of the universe on this question. On the other hand, when the NES attempted to measure this issue via the feeling thermometer, more individuals were clearly conservative. Specifically, they were asked to situate themselves on this thermometer with regards to their attachment to conservatives. 38.8 percent fell within the 0 to 50 range while 53.7 percent fell within the 51 to 100 range.

Still, it isn't clear that these results indicate a ringing endorsement of conservative political ideology. Were it to even be assumed that libertarians and conservatives share the same attitudes about government's role, the two are not really the same. The two may well share similar views with regards to government intervention in the economy and questions of taxation, i.e. government should not interfere and should not tax. But the two depart significantly when it comes to social issues. Libertarians are consistent when it comes to government interference in individuals' lives: Government should not interfere in any aspect of individuals lives, especially on questions concerning morality, for when it does it violates the basic principles of liberty. Conservatives, by contrast, believe that government can interfere in social issues for the creation

of the appropriate moral order. On an issue like abortion, for example, conservatives will allow government regulation, whereas libertarians will not. Truthfully, the categories used to designate individuals' attitudes towards government aren't entirely helpful. They don't really tell us what individuals really believe about what government's role ought to be. To simply designate categories is to assume that it is well known what these groups necessarily believe and don't believe. And yet, these monolithic classifications really obscure some fundamental distinctions between categories, as well as distinctions within them. The Republican "Contract" clearly takes aim at liberalism, but liberalism in contemporary discourse is never really defined beyond the simplistic slogan of tax and spend. In reality, liberalism is a highly complex concept which has meant different things to different people at different times. And what it often encompasses as a political philosophy are the other classifications which, in the polls, are used as alternatives to it.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, it isn't inconceivable that because the term liberal has acquired such a pejorative meaning that persons with "liberal" views may not see themselves as liberals, or at least they choose not to be labeled as such..

Ladd has suggested that the central issue was perhaps the desire to see a more limited central government, and he bases this claim on the observation that the public generally favored those "contract" provisions that pertained to limiting government.<sup>32</sup> But when the question was approached in terms of federal spending in specific areas, the claim that the public would like to

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See, for example, Oren M. Levin-Waldman, *Plant Closure, Regulation and Liberalism: The Limits to Liberal Public Philosophy* (Lanham, MD; University Press of America, 1992), particularly chapters 3 & 4; and *Reconceiving Liberalism: Dilemmas of Contemporary Liberal Public Policy* (Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, forthcoming); also see Stephen Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 1993)

<sup>32</sup> Ladd, "The 1994 Congressional Elections, p. 10

see less government actually becomes inconsistent. When NES asked whether the federal government needs to spend more money on health and education even if it meant that ordinary people would pay more taxes, 15.4 percent agreed strongly and 43 percent agreed somewhat. Only 24.2 percent disagreed somewhat, with 15.3 percent disagreeing strongly. At least 57.4 percent agreed with the proposition that more should be spent on health and education and only 39.5 percent did not. When asked whether they thought society should do whatever is necessary to make sure that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed, 61.3 percent agreed strongly and another 25.4 percent agreed somewhat. Only 5.6 percent disagreed somewhat and 2.5 percent disagreed strongly, with 4.1 percent neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Again, 86.7 percent generally agreed with the proposition while only 12.2 percent disagreed. That an overwhelming majority believes that society ought to doesn't mean that government should. The distinction between government and society is a traditional one with deep roots in political theory.

The NES survey asked a series of questions about whether federal spending for certain programs ought to be increased, remain the same or decreased. Though there was some variation depending on the specific program, overall there was no real indication that respondents wanted to see less spending on most things. This can be seen in Table I.

**Table I Attitudes about Federal Spending**

<i>Policy</i>	<i>Increased</i>	<i>Same</i>	<i>Decreased</i>	<i>Don't Know</i>	<i>Inapp.</i>
Environment	39.2	47.8	10.5	1.9	.5
Foreign Aid	6.9	36.0	54.0	2.6	.6
Social Security	50.3	42.5	4.7	1.8	.8
Welfare programs	12.5	32.3	51.7	2.8	.7
AIDS research	48.7	34.9	13.4	2.4	.6
Food stamps	9.3	45.9	40.9	3.0	.9
Public schools	66.8	24.5	6.6	1.6	.6

Child care	54.0	33.1	9.1	3.0	.7
Crime	73.4	19.6	4.5	1.8	.7
Healthcare	61.9	26.6	9.1	1.8	.6
Defense	22.4	46.5	28.9	1.7	.5

If the responses with regards to most of these issues were to be placed on a continuum, most people, it would appear, would fall into the category of keeping funding where it is, at a minimum, or increasing it. There are nonetheless some interesting anomalies to what we might expect were it true that the public would prefer less government. The school issue is particularly interesting because public education is traditionally a function of local government. If the issue in 1994 was a desire to return to a phase of “dual federalism” where the states and the national government are co-equal in their respective spheres of sovereignty, why would they want to increase federal spending on schools? This is precisely a policy sphere which symbolizes local self-rule. The welfare issue was also interesting. Although, as to be expected, more people wanted to see federal spending on welfare programs decreased, the number that wanted to see food stamps decreased actually declined. Whereas close to 52 percent wanted to see spending on welfare programs decreased, 40.9 percent wanted to see federal spending on food stamps decreased. On the other hand, considerably more people wanted to see federal spending on child care increased. To the extent that federal spending may be a measure of the size and presence of the federal government, there is little indication that its role should be reduced. On the contrary, on most issues the role of the federal government should remain the same, and in some cases it should be increased.

Also, when it came to the issue of the federal deficit, an issue also symbolic of federal spending, respondents simply did not think it as important an issue as did Republican members of

Congress. When asked whether the federal deficit should be reduced even if it meant that ordinary people would have to pay more in taxes, 11.4 percent agreed strongly and 30.9 percent agreed somewhat. But 29 percent disagreed somewhat with an additional 26.6 percent disagreeing strongly. And when asked whether the federal deficit should be reduced even if it would mean spending less on health and education, only 8.6 percent agreed strongly with an additional 20.3 percent agreeing somewhat. 36.5 percent disagreed somewhat and 32.5 percent disagreed strongly. Therefore, it isn't entirely clear that a case can be made that the budget deficit was that critical an issue.

Perhaps the issue is the institution of Congress. Americans have traditionally divided on the issue of Congress. While the public generally finds fault with the institution of Congress, respondents generally tend to like their own representative. This election appears to be no exception. Overall, most of those polled by Gallup indicated that they would reelect their own representative, but they would not reelect most of Congress. When asked whether their own representative deserved to be reelected, 53 percent said yes; 29 percent said no; and 18 percent had no opinion. But when asked whether most members of Congress deserved to be reelected, 39 percent said yes; 45 percent said no; and 16 percent had no opinion. On the other hand, when the NES asked whether they approved or disapproved of the way Congress was handling its job, 61.8 percent indicated that they disapproved; 30.3 percent indicated that they approved and 7.6 percent simply did not know. On the other hand, if there was any issue in 1994 which best captured the public sentiment towards Congress, it was that of term limits. In the NES survey, respondents were asked whether they favored or opposed an amendment which would limit members of Congress to no more than twelve consecutive years, 75 percent said they favored such



an amendment, and only 19.8 percent said that they were opposed. Another 1.7 percent indicated other and 3 percent simply did not know.

The issue that really stands out is that individuals were by and large dissatisfied with the way things were going in the U.S. at the time of the election, although it still isn't entirely clear what this means. By the end of November 1994, about three weeks following the election, according to Gallup, 67 percent said that they were dissatisfied while only 29 percent indicated that they were satisfied and four percent had no opinion. And when asked whether they believed those policies proposed by Republican leaders in Congress would move the country in the right or wrong direction, 55 percent said it was the right direction, 27 percent said it was the wrong direction, and eighteen percent had no opinion. Interestingly, however, the question of policies was posed as a general question with no specific mention made of the "Contract with America." On the other hand, when the NES survey asked which party they thought would do a better job handling the nation's economy, 50.2 percent indicated that there was no difference. 15.2 percent said the Democrats; 30.4 percent said the Republicans; and 1.6 percent said neither. When they were asked which party would do a better job at making health care more affordable, 37.6 percent said the Democrats and only 20.6 percent said the Republicans. 34 percent had indicated that it made no real difference and 3.3 percent said neither. But the Republicans did have the edge when it came to the issue of welfare reform. 36.5 percent said the Republicans would do a better job while only 21.9 percent said that the Democrats would do a better job. 34.3 percent believed that there was no real difference and 3 percent indicated that neither party would do a better job. Interestingly, however, when it came to the issue of which party was more likely to raise taxes -- an issue the Republicans accuse the Democrats of being guilty of -- 57.5 percent said that there

was not much difference between the two parties. After that, 28 percent thought that the Democrats would be more likely to raise taxes and only 11.6 percent thought the Republicans would be more likely; 2.4 percent simply did not know.

Still, it isn't clear what people mean when they say they are dissatisfied or what it means for things to be moving in the right direction. In 1992 the Democrats swept to power on a platform of change, and it could well be that the failure of the Democratic party to deliver that change that may account for many of the perceptions of the Republicans being the party now most able to move the country in the right direction. When looking at specific issues, there is in the Gallup polls a virtual reversal of the public's perceptions about the ability of Democrats vs. Republicans to solve certain problems from December 1992 to November 1994. The differences between 1992 and 1994 can be seen in Table II.

**Table II Who Does a Better Job (Percentages)**

<i>Issue</i>	<u>1992</u>		<u>1994</u>	
	<i>Democrats</i>	<i>Republicans</i>	<i>Democrats</i>	<i>Republicans</i>
Unemployment	61	23	41	48
Healthcare	64	21	41	46
Economy	57	28	33	54
Taxes	44	37	30	57
Budget deficit	53	25	31	52
Welfare reform	47	36	35	55

It is interesting to note that even on traditional Republican issues like taxes, the federal budget deficit and welfare reform, there were reversals from 1992 --when there was a greater sense that the Democrats could accomplish things. If the Republican victory in 1994 represents an episode in a larger trend, how, then, do we account for such strong support for the Democrats in 1992? If a trend, it would have to follow that 1992 was merely a deviation from the norm. But it isn't clear

based on the survey that such a determination can be made. If anything, the data may appear to lend support for the traditional model of rejecting the incumbent. Or it might be inferred that the greater hope attributed to the Democrats in 1992 was a function of the fact that the Democrats then were perceived to be more in touch with the public, whereas the Republicans were not. That more people see the Republicans as more able may not speak so much for Republican ability as it does for the sense that the Democrats have simply lost touch.

All these issues were precisely those on which Clinton campaigned on a platform of change in 1992. That many have not been happy with the way things have been going and many also disapproved of the President's performance in office may merely indicate that the public believes that Clinton and his party failed to deliver the change that was promised. The problem was that the principal obstruction to change came not necessarily from the White House, but from the Democratic leadership in Congress. The change that Clinton promised was principally a reform of the nation's healthcare system. The Democratic leadership, having its own political agenda, did quite a bit to thwart the effort. And as seen in the NES data, an overwhelming majority was dissatisfied over health care reform. It is also interesting to note that when the NES data are selected on the basis of those who disapproved of the way Congress was handling the healthcare reform issue, the percentage of those disapproving of the way Congress overall has been handling its job also increased as well. Whereas the general percentage of disapproval was 61.8 percent, it was 72.6 percent among those who disapproved of the way that Congress was handling healthcare reform. Meanwhile the percentage of approval among this group was only 22.4 percent compared to 30.3 among the general sample. Also those who disapproved of how Congress handled healthcare reform also had a higher disapproval of Clinton's handling of his job

as president as well. For this group, the disapproval of Clinton's job as president was 49.6 percent compared to 46.1 percent among the general sample. And his approval among this group was only 45.8 percent compared to 48.2 percent among the general sample. Moreover, those who disapproved of the way Congress was handling healthcare reform were also likely to have a higher disapproval of Clinton's handling of healthcare reform as well. The general disapproval of Clinton's handling of health care reform was 59 percent; the disapproval of those who disapproved of Congress's handling of health care was 66 percent. The actual approval rate dropped from 33.4 percent to 28.5 percent. It would appear that the most important variable in explaining why the Democratic Congress was removed from power was the issue of healthcare reform.

It wasn't clear, however, as to whether public dissatisfaction was a function of the specific proposals made by Clinton, or the fact that he failed to deliver on the issue. For when asked whether they thought it an important issue, an overwhelming majority thought that it was. In the wake of this failure, the answer from voters may well have been a pocks on both houses. And yet, the inability of a Democratic congress to work with a Democratic president doesn't necessarily represent a political crisis as much as perhaps the straw that broke the camel's back. It may well speak to the corruption of leadership, the same leadership which in 1992 and years before appeared to be the source of gridlock. Gridlock, however, never disappeared. It was also the same leadership that presided over ethical lapses such as the House banking scandal, which did much to call into question the credibility of Congress in the minds of the public.

At the same time, however, there are a couple of problems with the realignment model as it may be applied to 1994. For one thing, it isn't at all clear from the electoral results that the

electorate has changed its party affiliation. It certainly wasn't clear from the Gallup poll what the party affiliations were, and the NES survey never really asked. The NES survey did raise the question in terms of which party respondents felt they most closely identified with. Although this isn't the same as formal party identification as measured by party registrations, it is perhaps the measure in these data of whether there has been any real change in party identifications in the electorate. For a realignment to occur, it really isn't enough to look at how many House and Senate seats the Republicans obtained. The real question is whether the public feels more comfortable being identified as Republicans, for if they do not the election may be no more than another political anomaly. When respondents were asked how they thought of themselves, 34.1 percent said that they thought of themselves as Democrats, and 30.3 percent thought of themselves as Republicans. But 28.6 percent thought of themselves as Independents, and it is this number which is significant. For if there was a true realignment, we would expect to see few independents and an overwhelming majority thinking of themselves as Republicans. And yet the indication here is that a sizeable percentage of the electorate sees itself as independent and considers itself free to choose to go after whichever party best fits its needs at any give time. In addition, 6.3 percent simply had no preference. When the NES attempted to gain a sense of how respondents felt about each party via the feeling thermometer, with 0 representing cold feelings and 100 representing warm feelings, it wasn't entirely clear that the Republican party had that much of an edge over the Democratic party. On the Democratic party, 48.9 percent fell in the 0-50 range, while 49.2 percent fell in the 51 to 100 range. And on the Republican party, 44.8 percent fell in the 0 to 50 range while 53 percent fell in the 51 to 100 range. But that respondents felt favorable or unfavorable about either party may really say very little about how much they

really support them.

Even when it comes to those who do see themselves as one party or the other, it is not clear that those identifications are very strong. When they were asked whether they would call themselves either strong Republican or not very strong Republican, and/or strong Democrat or not very strong Democrat, 33 percent said not very strong and only 31.1 percent said strong. 35.6 percent were simply out of the universe on this question, which actually is close to the combined percentage of those who considered themselves independents and had no preference. What this data would seem to suggest is that this election was perhaps another episode in a trend towards dealignment, rather than realignment. Interestingly, when respondents were asked how favorable they were to political parties in general on the feeling thermometer, 55.7 percent fell in the 0 to 50 range, while only 40.5 percent fell in the 51 to 100 range. Still to assess this we might have to look at party trends over the years and examine the whole concept of dealignment. And the other problem with the realignment model is that it isn't clear from this election that there was a single issue, or set of issues, which so polarized the nation. At no time in the Gallup poll, for instance, were people asked what specific issue or issues caused them to overwhelmingly reject the Democratic majority in Congress in favor of the Republicans, nor was it any more clear from the NES survey.

### **Lessons?**

There is no question that something happened in 1994, but a majority party in government -- even if it yells "revolution" -- is no real proof of a realignment. Still, this doesn't dismiss the issue entirely. Or perhaps the focus on traditional realignment is simply wrong, though this isn't to

say that there aren't elements of it. According to John Aldrich, 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."<sup>33</sup> 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. As Aldrich explains:

The decline of Key's parties-in-the-electorate can apparently be attributed to voters plausible perceptions that parties were indeed less relevant to them in elections than were the direct observations of the candidates. This clear and sustaining shift from party-centered to candidate-centered (or at least to party-and-candidate-centered) elections resolves the puzzle of how voters can perceive clear partisan differences in policy stances but care less about parties in themselves. They see parties as increasingly irrelevant to their decision making, or in effect they do not bother to "see" the parties at all.<sup>34</sup>

In other words, the party system that reigned from the 1860s began to collapse around the 1960s. And the 1960s, as many have suggested were, a critical period in American politics, but Aldrich sees it as having a very different meaning than those who have latched onto traditional realignment theory. The 1960s were critical because of sweeping and fundamental changes in American politics, especially in public opinion and electoral behavior, and this occurred following a period of relative stability. And on this basis, many commentators may have been misled into

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<sup>33</sup> John H. Aldrich, *Why Parties? The Origin and Transformation of Political Parties in America* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 165 , 260

<sup>34</sup> Aldrich, *Why Parties?*, p. 253

believing that the 1960s was a realignment. And yet, that is the point. There were important elements of a partisan realignment, but the events of the 1960s were events “associated with a critical era that led to fundamental changes in the *institutional* bases of political parties.” At the same time, the Democratic advantage in Congress was really unaffected by the events of the 1960s.

The basis for many claims that a realignment had occurred at least in 1968 is the fact that Republicans won every presidential election since 1968 with the exception of 1976 and 1992. At the same time, however, the election of 1968 wasn't a realignment in the sense that 1932 was. It wasn't brought about by sharp forces which produced a strong reaction against the majority party. Although any number of conservatives who witnessed the debacle of the 1968 Democratic convention and viewed the Democratic party as symbolizing lawlessness and disorder, the election really came to symbolize the beginning of a trend. In part, the trend in the South began as early as 1948 when the dixiecrats bolted the Democratic party and voted for South Carolina governor Strom Thurmond because of his strong anti-civil rights stand. But following 1968, any number of southern states would continue to vote for the Republican candidate in presidential elections.<sup>35</sup> Burnham too also noted that if it was the case that deviations from the norms of American politics in 1968 were part of a critical realignment, they must be viewed as an intermediate stage in a larger disruption.<sup>36</sup>

But also given that the Democratic majority maintained its position in both chambers for most of the time, the only real result has been divided partisan control of the national

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<sup>35</sup> See Philips, *The Emerging Republican Majority*

<sup>36</sup> Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics*, p. 142



government. So in this sense, there has been no realignment since the critical era of the 1960s. But the second sense in which there has been no realignment is that “there was no aggregate shift in the balance of partisan loyalties in the electorate.” Even though there were some changes in party identification, the affect was so minimal that the end result could not be considered a partisan realignment.<sup>37</sup>

Prior to the critical era of the 1960s, candidates had no alternative to using party organizations to gain access to office. Parties, in short, held an effective monopoly over resources. What the 1968 election did was usher in an era of party reform which essentially led to greater reliance on primary elections and participatory caucuses as the basis for party nomination. This then meant that anyone with the resources to create a campaign organization could potentially receive the party’s nomination without having to demonstrate the type of partisan loyalty which in the past had been obligatory.<sup>38</sup> For Aldrich, the key point is that it became possible for ambitious politicians to win both nominations and elections without relying on parties. The critical era itself did not create a new institutional form of party; it simply meant the death of the old. The critical era did occur on time insofar as it was approximately thirty years after the New Deal realignment, but it led to changes in partisan institutional form rather than changes in partisan alignment.<sup>39</sup> Or to state it differently, because the criterion of periodicity appeared to have been met, there was perhaps the appearance of a realignment, when in fact there was none.

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<sup>37</sup> Aldrich, *Why Parties?*, pp. 263, 265

<sup>38</sup> See Nelson W. Polsby, *Consequences of Party Reform* (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1983)

<sup>39</sup> Aldrich, *Why Parties?*, pp. 272-273, 278-279

All this may be true, but as to which is cause and effect may be somewhat debatable. The major reforms in the political parties did not occur until after the 1968 election. 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.<sup>40</sup> 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

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<sup>40</sup> See Polsby, *Consequences of Party Reform*

Carter in 1980 and George Bush in 1992 to face a challenge from within their own parties.

Another way to think of this is that parties no longer provide the types of social services they did during their heyday of the last century. Prior to the Progressive era and the rise of good government and civil service systems, parties used to deliver an array of social services in exchange for votes.<sup>41</sup> As they no longer distribute services and they no longer control nominations, they have increasingly become vehicles for mobilizing the electorate behind particular candidates. They are, in essence, nothing more than middlemen towards the attainment of a particular objective: winning the election. And yet, given the trends in dealignment, it would be too complacent for the new Republican majority to assume that because they swept the Congress in 1994, we are in a new era in which the Republican party agenda can reign supreme. On this point, the polling data is vague. The best evidence against a realignment is that there has been no overwhelming shift in the electorate and no clear issue which could so polarize the nation along the lines of existing political cleavage. If anything, the lessons of dealignment suggest the need for anybody in power, whether they be Democrats or Republicans, to constantly be in touch with the electorate at all times.

Something was clearly bothering the public in 1994, and it may well have been that the leadership in Congress really wasn't in touch, and therefore the majority in power had to be displaced. To this extent, 1994 continues the trend of 1992 whereby the electorate rejected an incumbent president who was perceived to be out of touch as well. But it isn't clear from the data that the Republican majority with its agenda is any more in touch. The Republican majority, in the

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<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Amy Bridges, *A City in the Republic: Antebellum New York and the Origins of Machine Politics* (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1987)

name of Revolution, continues to put forth an agenda, especially as reflected in budget talks, for limiting the Federal government. But as survey data suggest, it also isn't clear that is what the public wants either. To merely assume that a sweep means overwhelming public support for a particular ideological agenda may reflect wishful thinking with no bearing in reality and could prove to have disastrous consequences.