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THE EQUILIBRIUM CYCLE IN TWO-PARTY POLITICS

BY CHARLES SELLERS

Recent research on voting behavior has focused attention on the importance and stability of party identifications in governing individual acts of voting, and on the sum of party identifications as representing a prevailing disposition of the electorate that is only marginally affected by the immediate issues and candidates in any election. This paper seeks to infer this underlying distribution of party identifications from the election returns over the whole period of presidential and congressional elections, and to explain the pattern of regular oscillations that appears to emerge.

Charles Sellers is a Professor in the Department of History at the University of California, Berkeley.

THE PROGRESS of investigations of the American electoral process has now brought us to the point where we can begin to ask whether American elections belong to a structural system with discernible inherent principles of action. The elaborate survey data collected by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan have confirmed and extended the conclusions of a long line of studies emphasizing the importance of party identification in governing voting behavior. Most voters, it appears, enter the electorate with a marked affinity for one or the other major party, and these party identifications grow stronger as the voters grow older. Voters do not often vote contrary to their party identifications and even more rarely change them. Consequently, most of the votes in any given election are distributed according to a pre-existing, underlying pattern of party identifications, leaving only a small but sometimes decisive proportion of the votes to be determined by "short-term forces"—immediate circumstances, issues, and candidates.[1]

These findings suggest the importance of the underlying pattern of party identifications as the mechanism that gives the American party system its extraordinary stability. Since only the most unusual crisis is sufficient to alter the pattern significantly, the relative strength of the parties can ordinarily oscillate only gradually and over series of elections. Do these oscillations occur at random, governed wholly by forces

[1] H. H. Hyman, *Political Socialization: A Study in the Psychology of Political Behavior,* Glencoe, Ill., Free Press, 1959, especially Chap. 4; P. E. Converse, A. Campbell, W. E. Miller, and D. E. Stokes, *The American Voter,* New York, Wiley, 1960, especially pp. 120-167.

outside the electoral structure? Or do they exhibit regularities, and if so, how are these regularities to be explained?

Any attempt to answer these fundamental questions forces us back on historical data and confronts us with a severe difficulty. Our knowledge of current voting behavior and party identifications is derived mainly from survey data, whereas for elections earlier than the day before yesterday we have only the election returns. Can the underlying pattern of party identifications be even roughly inferred from the distribution of actual votes? Several considerations suggest that it may be. The survey data indicate that the actual vote does not usually deviate greatly from the underlying pattern. Moreover, since the underlying pattern can oscillate only gradually, the appearance of a similar gradual oscillation in the distribution of votes over successive elections would increase our confidence that the underlying pattern is being approximately reflected.[2]

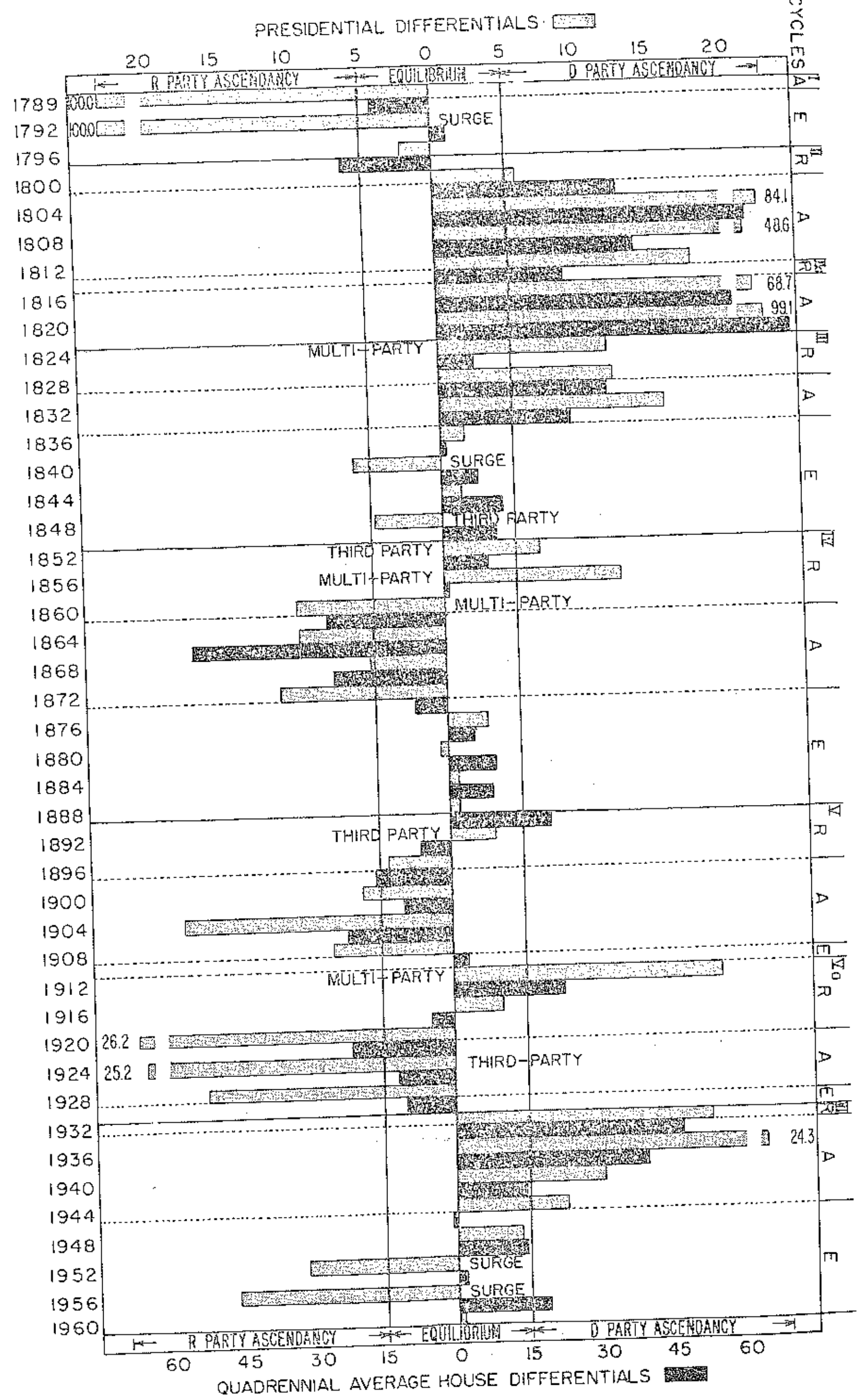
The bar graph presents the oscillations in actual party voting strength since 1789. The lighter bars represent the arithmetic differentials between the two major parties' percentages of the total vote at presidential elections. Bars to the left of the center line represent differentials in favor of the "R party," that is, the Republican Party and its predecessors. Bars to the right of the center line represent differentials in favor of the "D party," the Democratic Party and its predecessors. Before 1824, when only some of the states chose presidential electors by popular vote and where even these election results are unavailable, the presidential differentials are necessarily based on the misleading electoral vote.[3]

The black bars similarly represent the arithmetic differentials between the major parties' percentages of seats in the House of Representatives. Since the presidential party has usually lost House seats at

[2] The Michigan researchers calculate the underlying pattern for the period from 1952 to 1960 as 53 to 54 per cent Democratic, whereas the Democrats won in 1960 with slightly less than 50 per cent of the vote, a deviation of 3 to 4 percentage points. The greatest deviations occur in "surge" elections like those of 1952 (9 percentage points) and 1956 (11 to 12 percentage points), which are discussed below. P. E. Converse, A. Campbell, W. E. Miller, and D. E. Stokes, "Stability and Change in 1960: A Reinstating Election," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 55, 1961, pp. 273-275.

[3] For the elections preceding those reported in W. Dean Burnham, *Presidential Ballots, 1836-1892*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1955, party percentages were computed from the rather suspect figures in the best available source, Edward Stanwood, *A History of the Presidency*, rev. ed., 2 vols., Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1928. It should be noted that presidential electors were chosen by the legislatures in a fourth of the states in 1824, in South Carolina and Delaware in 1828, and in South Carolina from 1828 to 1860. I do not mean to imply that the "D party" was a continuous entity before and after the break of the 1820's; and the various components of the "R party" are seen as continuous only in their common opposition to the more continuous "D party."

Oscillations in Actual Party Voting Strength since 1789



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the midterm congressional elections, this regular short-term oscillation has been eliminated by averaging the two congressional differentials for each presidential quadrennium to yield a quadrennial average House differential. Since, also, the House differentials regularly swing more widely than the presidential differentials, the two have been graphed on different scales, with the scale at the bottom of the bar graph referring to House differentials and that at the top referring to presidential differentials.[4]

It is at once apparent that the oscillations from one party to the other do not occur in random fashion, from one election to another. Instead, the parties supplant each other by blocks of elections, both presidential and congressional, each block extending over a period of some years. Moreover, there is a tendency for a party's majorities within a block to rise and fall by regular, graded steps, rather than bouncing up and down in a random fashion.

My hypothesis is that these regularities in the movement of the vote distributions are produced by the gradual oscillations of the underlying pattern of party identifications, and that these oscillations of the underlying pattern are governed in part by certain principles inherent in the system itself. But before discussing these principles, it is necessary to direct attention to the exceptions to the regularities of the bar graph.

ABERRANT ELECTIONS

Most of the exceptions are produced by three classes of aberrant elections—multi-party, third-party, and "surge"—in which the voting differentials seriously distort the underlying pattern. In considering these aberrant elections let us assume that presidential differentials of five points or less (and quadrennial average House differentials of fifteen points or less) are too small to indicate certainly that the winning party had a clear advantage in the underlying pattern. Provisionally we will regard these elections as reflecting a condition of equilibrium or near-equilibrium between the parties in the underlying pattern. Conversely, elections showing greater differentials will be regarded as indicating a condition of ascendancy for the winning party in the underlying pattern.

In multi-party and third-party elections, the normal party divisions are fractured or the minor-party candidate draws his votes dispro-

[4] Computed from figures on party strength in the House as given in *Historical Statistics of the United States, 1789-1945*, Washington, Bureau of the Census, 1949, p. 293; and (for 1946 through 1958) *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1960*, Washington, Bureau of the Census, 1960, p. 356. For the earlier years these figures seem to be based mainly on the vote for Speaker and do not always reflect the party composition of the House accurately.

portionately from the losing major party, so that the differential as shown on the bar graph greatly exaggerates the winning party's strength in the underlying pattern of party identifications. With adjustments for this distortion, the winning differentials for 1824, 1852, 1856, 1860, and 1912 would be reduced from ascendancy back into the equilibrium range, the winning differentials for 1848 and 1892 would be reduced within the equilibrium range, and the winning differential for 1924 would be reduced but probably remain within the ascendancy range.[5]

The concept of "surge" elections developed from the Michigan survey data with regard to the Eisenhower elections of 1952 and 1956. Though the Republicans were winning these presidential elections by ascendancy margins, both the survey data and the results of congressional elections indicated that the Democrats continued to enjoy a substantial advantage in the underlying pattern of party identifications. Campbell's analysis of this anomaly revealed a combination of three unusual circumstances, which may be taken to define a surge election: (1) there was a sharp upturn in voter participation, bringing to the polls a large number of infrequent voters having weak or non-existent party identifications; (2) since such voters are mainly moved by short-term forces, there was an unusually heavy majority for the party that was temporarily advantaged as to circumstances, issues, and candidate personality; and (3) the underlying pattern of party identifications was not significantly affected, reasserting itself in subsequent state and congressional elections when the ephemeral voters stayed home.[6]

By bringing in data on voter turnout and the oscillations of party strength in the House of Representatives, we may identify some other elections that meet these criteria. The clearest case is the election of 1840, when the Whig candidate, William Henry Harrison, won by the ascendancy differential of 6.10, while attracting to the polls the largest increase in turnout over a previous high in the whole history of presidential elections.[7] However, the narrowly contested presidential

[5] Multi-party elections are elections in which three or four major candidates each attract a substantial share of the vote (at least 20 per cent each for three candidates or at least 10 per cent each for four candidates), causing the winning candidate to receive less than a majority of the vote. In third-party elections a minor candidate receives enough votes to affect the winning differential (defined here as between 5 and 20 per cent of the popular vote, and usually at the lower end of the range), but not enough to be really in the running. The election of 1836 is not considered a multi-party election. Although the Whigs supported three different candidates, they ran only one electoral ticket in each state. The aggregate effect was much the same as if Democrat Van Buren had opposed a single Whig ticket, and Van Buren obtained an "equilibrium" differential of 1.70 over his three Whig opponents combined.

[6] A. Campbell, "Surge and Decline: A Study of Electoral Change," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 29, 1960, pp. 397-418.

[7] Reliable turnout figures (expressed as percentages of potentially eligible voters)

elections preceding and succeeding this one suggest equilibrium in the underlying pattern during this period; and this impression is strengthened when we analyze the oscillation of House differentials. In 1838 the Democrats had accomplished the unusual feat for a party holding the Presidency of increasing their narrow margin in the House at a mid-term election; and although a moderate Whig majority was elected with Harrison in 1840, 1842 witnessed a sweeping swing back toward a sizable Democratic majority. Clearly, Harrison ran personally far ahead of Whig strength; when he was not a candidate and when the previously apolitical citizens he attracted stayed away from the polls, the underlying pattern reasserted itself with results favorable to the Democrats.

A somewhat different case is 1792, when George Washington had the distinction, shared only with Eisenhower in 1956, of winning the Presidency by an ascendancy differential while the opposing party was winning a majority in the House. Clearly, the personal popularity that caused the Electoral College to vote unanimously for Washington masked something like a condition of equilibrium in the pattern of preferences that was forming with regard to the emerging political parties. In addition to these elections of 1792, 1840, 1952, and 1956, which fall clearly into the surge category, there is evidence of some surge effect in the elections of Andrew Jackson in 1828, Zachary Taylor in 1848, and Ulysses Grant in 1868 and 1872.[8]

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are not readily available for earlier elections. The percentage of white adult males voting between 1824 and 1844 has been computed by Richard P. McCormick, "New Perspectives on Jacksonian Politics," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 65, 1960, p. 292. For 1900 to 1912 my percentages are based on the number of males twenty-one years of age and over, as reported in *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1953*, p. 330. For 1920 to 1960 they are based on the number of citizens of voting age as reported in *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1960*, p. 359. In addition, I have calculated the percentage of the total population voting in all presidential elections, 1824 to 1960. By these calculations the elections showing marked increases of turnout over previous highs are those of 1828, 1840, 1928, 1936, 1952, and 1960. Relatively low turnouts appear in 1852, 1904, 1908, 1912, and 1948.

[8] The Jackson election in 1828 showed a dramatic rise in turnout and an ascendancy differential, but it was accompanied by an enduring realignment of the underlying pattern of party identifications.

In 1848 the Democrats won a majority in the House while Taylor was winning the Presidency, but Taylor's differential of 4.82 barely falls short of our arbitrarily defined ascendancy boundary of 5 percentage points. Turnout at the 1848 election slipped back slightly from the extremely high level established in the surge election of 1840 and maintained in 1844. The 1848 situation is further confused by the presence of a substantial third-party vote.

The evidence of surge in the Grant elections derives from measuring the relative mid-term declines in House strength for parties holding the Presidency. The largest such declines have occurred during the Pierce Administration, the second Cleveland Administration, the Benjamin Harrison Administration, the first and second Grant Administrations, and the William Henry Harrison Administration. In the first three instances the decline was produced by spectacular upheavals in the political environ-

It is strikingly apparent that all the Presidents whose elections have shown a greater or lesser surge effect—Washington, Jackson, Harrison, Taylor, Grant, and Eisenhower—were "popular hero" candidates who were widely revered for their military achievements and personal characteristics before entering politics, as distinguished from such highly respected politician-Presidents as Lincoln and the two Roosevelts. The presence of such a candidate would seem to be, in fact, the essential ingredient of a surge election. Apparently, only such candidates have the power to draw to the polls the previously apathetic citizens who mainly create the surge effect.

In the three classes of aberrant elections, then—multi-party, third-party, and surge—the Presidential differentials shown on the bar graph greatly exaggerate the winning party's strength in the underlying pattern of party identifications. If the appropriate downward adjustments are made—from the ascendancy into the equilibrium range for all these elections except 1924—most of the exceptions to regular, graded oscillations of party strength in the underlying pattern disappear. In fact, the oscillations appear to conform at least roughly to a common profile. In most cases we can see the winning party building toward a peak of strength in the block of elections where it holds the advantage, and then declining steadily back toward equilibrium, usually to make way for a block of elections in which the other party reproduces the same profile.

REALIGNMENT

In attempting to account for this profile, we begin by asking why the shifts from one party to another and the rises into ascendancy occur. Here Key's "theory of critical elections" offers a provocative suggestion. After a painstaking analysis of the presidential elections of 1896 and 1928, Key has concluded that there exists a category of widely spaced and critical elections characterized by a realignment within the electorate both sharp and durable. Translating the concept into the terms I have derived from the Michigan researchers, I will speak of "realigning elections" as elections in which the underlying pattern of party identifications is substantially and durably altered.[9]

ment, which were causing a fundamental realignment in the underlying pattern of party identification. There is no indication of such a realignment in the Grant and William Henry Harrison Administrations, and the mid-term losses seem partly accounted for by "surge" voters who were drawn to the polls by the popular presidential nominees but who did not turn out to support their co-partisans for Congress two years later. The turnout figures for the Grant elections are not impressive, but the abnormal conditions under which the South voted may have lowered turnout there so as to mask an increased turnout in the North. Grant won by ascendancy differentials of 5.36 in 1868 and 11.66 in 1872.

[9] V. O. Key, Jr., "A Theory of Critical Elections," *Journal of Politics,* Vol. 17, 1955, pp. 3-18.

To identify realigning elections precisely would require the kind of close analysis of trends in the voting behavior of various areas and social groups over the whole of American electoral history that Key has made for the elections of 1896 and 1928. Yet even our gross national data give us a basis for making some reasonably confident approximations.

If the advent of an ascendancy phase reflects a shift in the underlying pattern of party identifications toward the ascendant party, then we may expect to find realignment at or near the beginning of each ascendancy phase. This suggests a close examination of the years preceding 1800, 1828, 1860, 1896, 1920, and 1932.

At this juncture the biennial figures on the distribution of House seats enable us to pinpoint, at two-year intervals, the periods when the relative electoral strength of the parties was fluctuating most widely or shifting most decisively, indicating a dislocation of normal party allegiances. If such short-term fluctuations end by going in the direction of an immediately succeeding ascendancy phase, they can be taken to indicate that realignment is occuring.

In order to determine when the widest shifts have occurred, I have taken the D party's percentage of House seats in each Congress and computed its arithmetic loss or gain in percentage points from the preceding Congress. The largest shifts, by this measure, occurred (in order of magnitude) in the following years: 1822-1824, 1852-1854, 1892-1894, 1798-1800, 1888-1890, and 1930-1932.[10]

All of these periods of large shift fall within the periods preceding ascendancy that we marked out as possible periods of realignment. When they are located on the bar graph, it becomes apparent that it is not enough to speak of single realigning elections. Instead it appears that *ascendancy phases* are regularly preceded by *realignment phases*, sometimes of considerable duration. These realignment phases are in turn usually preceded by *equilibrium phases* of stable party balance, from which the realignment phases are distinguished by their sharp short-term oscillations. Key's "critical election"—that election when a "realignment within the electorate both sharp and durable" becomes fully manifest—is seen to occur as the culmination of a realignment phase, and to belong both to the realignment phase and to the ascendancy phase that follows.

When realignment phases, ascendancy phases, and equilibrium phases are demarcated by the horizontal lines on the bar graph, a marked cyclical profile emerges. The key in the right hand margin

[10] Four other periods of large shift, 1872-1874, 1868-1870, 1870-1872, and 1840-1842, have been eliminated from this group as arising from the surge or semi-surge elections of Grant and Harrison (see footnote 8).

defines a seemingly inexorable progression from realignment through ascendancy to equilibrium, with new realignment phases occurring at wide intervals (occasionally before equilibrium is reached) to begin the cycle over again.

The identification and dating of the various cycles and phases on the basis of gross national figures is at best approximate, and more detailed research would doubtless suggest modifications. The reader should bear in mind that in Cycle I the two-party system was just emerging under the surge conditions of the Washington elections; that in Cycle II the Federalists had not yet learned to play the game of two-party politics and were moving toward extinction; and that the sharp realignment of Cycle III, reviving the two-party system, is somewhat masked on the bar graph by the arbitrary assignment of both the Jeffersonian Republican Party of Cycle II and the Jacksonian Democratic Party of Cycle III to the same D-party category.[11]

An inspection of the equilibrium phases of Cycles III, IV, and VI not only confirms our confidence in our ability to approximate the underlying pattern of party identifications from the election returns, but even suggests that we have been too conservative in assuming that inferences cannot safely be drawn from presidential differentials of less than 5 points or quadrennial average House differentials of less than 15 points. The moderate D-party differentials shown in Phase VI-E seem to reflect rather closely the moderate D-party advantage in the underlying pattern that the Michigan survey data reveal. From the consistency of the configurations in phases III-E and IV-E, it seems likely that they, too, reflect rather closely a narrow D-party advantage in the underlying pattern.

In accounting for realignment phases, we must recognize that one major form of realignment may not even appear in the aggregate national statistics from which our cycles are derived. This is what Key calls "secular realignment," defined as "a movement of the members of a population category from party to party that extends over several presidential elections and appears to be independent of the peculiar factors influencing the vote at individual elections. Such gradual

[11] The most debatable point is the designation of a separate Cycle Va, which may alternatively be interpreted as merely a momentary disturbance, under the influence of the multi-party election of 1912 and wartime conditions, in the Republican ascendancy phase of Cycle V. However, the Democratic equilibrium showing in the quadrennial average House differentials for 1908-1910, the Democratic ascendancy showing for the House in the succeeding quadrennium, and the overwhelming Republican ascendancy showing beginning in 1920 seem to me strong indications of a Republican descent toward equilibrium in the Taft administration and a long and confused realignment phase in the Wilson years. There is no reason why realignment should not produce ascendancy for the same party that has been ascendent in the preceding cycle, as in Cycles IV to V.

shifts of occupational, income, religious, geographical, or other groups are probably constantly going on, with shifts of some groups in one direction often being balanced by shifts of other groups in the opposite direction. Such shifts sometimes occur because of the growing or decreasing political homogeneity of the groups, but probably more often because of some change in the relation of the group to the social environment.

Secular realignment also occurs because of migration—for example, the influx of Republicans from Northern states into Florida in recent decades. The entry of new groups into the electorate would also fall into this category. Much of the dramatic growth of Jefferson's Republican Party in Cycle II was a result of the gradual politization of a potential Republican majority that had been present all along, combined with the admission of heavily Republican new states in the West. Whatever their nature, there is considerable evidence that these secular trends are accelerated by and often culminate in our realignment phases, those periods when "events with widespread and powerful impact or issues touching deep emotion produce abrupt changes."[12]

Unfortunately, the traditional preoccupation of political history with the short-term forces that marginally affect particular elections has made historians slow to recognize the importance of realignment phases. Only the merest beginning has been made at explaining what these "events with widespread and powerful impact" or these "issues touching deep emotions" have been. Only with regard to Cycle IV, where deeply felt differences over Negro slavery were brought to a focus by the territorial question, do the traditional explanations seem wholly adequate to account for realignment.

It is well to remind ourselves at this point that we are talking about realignment in the underlying pattern of party identifications, and that the individual identifications that make up this pattern arise only slightly from rational calculations based on specific issues, specific group interests, or conscious ideologies. Most people form their identifications early in life, simply adopting the identifications of their parents, which are usually in turn the predominant identifications in the social groups to which they belong or the areas where they live.[13]

Realignment seems not to be caused mainly by permanent changes on the part of people with established identifications (though a good

[12] V. O. Key, Jr., "Secular Realignment and the Party System," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 21, 1959, pp. 198-210.

[13] For a suggestive discussion of the factors that influence party identification, see Lee Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1961, Chaps. 13-14, especially pp. 278-287. Benson treats these factors as influencing discrete acts of voting, whereas it seems to me more accurate and more useful to think of them as influencing the formation of party identifications.

number of such voters may shift for one or more elections before returning to the party with which they identify), but rather by a strong shift to the advantaged party by younger people and other new voters still in the process of forming their identifications. A realignment phase is in large part, then, a period when "events with widespread and powerful impact or issues touching deep emotions" are commanding enough to cause new voters, in the process of forming party identifications, to take their cues from the political environment rather than simply from the identifications of their parents.[14]

This process of forming party identifications has a marked psychological aspect. Party identification is one of the important means by which people make sense out of an otherwise incomprehensible social universe, by which they establish their relationship to the baffling flow of political events, and by which they identify the leaders from whom they take their cues in forming attitudes and rudimentary ideologies with regard to social and political issues. Attitudes and ideologies seldom determine identification, but instead are commonly determined by it. During a realignment phase, the crucial factor would seem to be the gross images of the parties as they are perceived (whether accurately or not) by voters in the process of forming or, to a lesser extent, changing identifications.

During the realignment that began Cycle II, for example, Jefferson's Republican Party may have been perceived by large numbers of voters as standing for democratic attitudes as contrasted with the Federalists' alleged aristocratic attitudes, and for "agrarian-mindedness" as opposed to the Federalists' "commercial-mindedness." Both Virginia planters and farmers in western Pennsylvania doubtless tended, for somewhat different reasons, to perceive Jefferson's party as the party of "our kind of people," while New York merchants and Congregationalist farmers in Massachusetts tended to perceive John Adams's party as the party of "our kind of people."[15]

It should also be remembered that people often understand themselves as much in terms of what they are not as in terms of what they are; and party identifications are sometimes influenced more by a neg-

[14] This discussion is based mainly on Converse *et al., The American Voter,* Chap. 7, "The Development of Party Identification." The survey data that the Michigan group report here are a shattering refutation of any theory that sees ideology, issues, or direct perception of interest as a primary determinant of voting behavior.

[15] See Lee Benson's perceptive discussion of "agrarian-mindedness" and "commercial-mindedness" in *Turner and Beard: American Historical Writing Reconsidered,* Glencoe, Ill., Free Press, 1960, pp. 215-228. As has already been suggested the realignment of 1800 may not have been effected primarily by "events with widespread and powerful impact or issues touching deep emotions." Rather, as the new parties steadily brought more people into the effective electorate, Jefferson's "kind of people" came to cast far more votes than Adams's "kind of people."

ative reaction to what the other party represents to the voter than by a positive reaction to the party with which the voter identifies. In Cycle II, for example, many Republican identifiers may have been influenced mainly by an image of the Federalist Party derived from the snobbery of conspicuous Federalists in their communities. Similarly, in the 1850's the Democratic Party was seen by many Republican identifiers as the party of slavery; and in the 1890's Eastern urban voters moved more heavily into the Republican ranks partly because they perceived the Democrats as the party of radical Western hayseeds, while the less numerous Southern and Western farmers saw the Republicans as the party of Wall Street.

This may explain why nearly every realignment phase has been attended by a multi-party election, and/or a strong third party, and/or the emergence of a new major party, and why these phenomena occur almost wholly in realignment phases. Such new parties arise because the old parties cannot adjust quickly enough to the disturbing conditions causing realignment; having arisen, they provide a halfway house for voters who are ready for a change but who could not easily move at once all the way into the major party *against* which they or their families or social groups have been identifying.

Thus the images that the parties project, the ways in which they do this, and the ways in which the voters perceive the parties seem to be the major determinants of political alignment. Political historians have only begun to give attention to these factors, and have been especially slow to investigate the more elusive psychological elements that figure in some realignments. The realignment of the 1820's, for example, produced party identifications perhaps stronger than any in our history, but historians have been hard put to find enough at stake between the parties during the ensuing cycle to account for the deep and widespread emotions aroused by their electoral contests. Only recently have scholars begun to discover a fundamental conflict in the psychological-ideological realm lying behind the façade of overt issues and group interests. Similarly, beginnings have been made toward understanding the realignment of the 1890's in terms of rural-urban conflict, crystallized by Populist protest and the depression of 1893, while the depression of 1929 is beginning to be seen as only bringing to culmination a secular shift of urban voters which was rooted in ethnic consciousness and which began long before the depression.[16]

Obviously, we need to know much more about realignment phases.

[16] Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief*, Stanford, Calif., Stanford University Press, 1957; John William Ward, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age*, New York, Oxford, 1955; Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy*; Carl N. Degler, "American Political Parties and the Rise of the City: An Interpretation," *Journal of American History*, Vol. 51, 1964, pp. 41-59.

How do events in the social and political environment so alter the voters' images of the parties as to impel some voters, especially new voters, to identify with the party they would not otherwise have favored? Only detailed analysis of the voting behavior of various social and geographical groups can prepare us to answer this, the fundamental question of American political history.

Whatever the reasons for realignment phases, their consequences are invariably similar. As the bar graph indicates, realignment phases are always followed by ascendancy phases. The advantaged party tends to reach its peak ascendancy differential within an election or two following the "culminating realignment election" in which the new alignment first became manifest. Thereafter, the ascendant party declines steadily toward equilibrium, as measured by both presidential differentials and quadrennial average House differentials.[17]

The cumulative movement into ascendancy continues as long as the conditions making for realignment continue to exist sufficiently to benefit the advantaged party in three ways; first, by causing a few voters with established identifications to change them to the party whose image has become more appealing in terms of the circumstances causing realignment; second, by causing a larger number of voters to desert to the advantaged party for an election or two, without abandoning their identification with the disadvantaged party; and, third and most important, by causing the great majority of new voters to form identifications with the advantaged party.

EQUILIBRIUM

The ensuing countermovement back toward equilibrium is to be explained only partly by the return of deserting identifiers to the disadvantaged party and by restoration of the disadvantaged party's ability to capture its share of new identifiers. In addition, there seems to be at work a constant tendency toward equilibrium that is built into the very structure of the American two-party system. The persistent narrowness of the margin between the parties is one of the most striking characteristics of the system. In the era of popular presidential elections, differentials have ranged from a low of .17 percentage points in 1960 to a high of 26.24 percentage points in 1920, with the median differential being the 8.48 percentage points of 1908. Eliminating the minor-party

[17] One exception to this regular decline in presidential differentials, the election of 1872, may be explained by the semi-surge effect associated with Grant's candidacy. The other, in the elections from 1802 to 1822, is explained by the steady decline of the Federalist Party toward extinction. Even here the trends suggest that the Jeffersonian Republicans, after attaining an overwhelming ascendancy in the peak years 1804 to 1806, were moving back toward equilibrium when the Federalists' opposition to the War of 1812 doomed them to extinction.

vote, we could say that half our Presidents have been elected by majorities of 54.24 per cent or less. Elaborate statistical analysis has proved that such continuously close results could not be produced by chance, and that an equilibrium tendency must be an inherent property of the system.[18]

Many explanations have been advanced for this equilibrium tendency, most of them emphasizing certain inherent disadvantages of the party in power.[19] These factors, I would suggest, are only part of a more general explanation that sees the politicians of both parties as skillfully manipulating the party images in a continuous effort to maintain minimal majorities of identifiers.

The nature of this process is determined by the heterogeneity-within-homogeneity of American society. Divisions along class, economic, and ideological-religious lines have been less sharp in the United States than in most other modern societies. Therefore, American voters do not form deep and irrevocable attachments to parties based on fundamental ideologies or social cleavages. Instead, political affiliation is left to be conditioned by a host of secondary social differences and tensions, reflecting the wide range of regional, occupational, and cultural variations in American society. Indeed, the stability of party identifications arises, paradoxically, because the parties are only marginally differentiated from each other and because political behavior is influenced by so many factors pushing the individual in different directions. Perceiving nothing very fundamental at stake, the average voter is not deeply interested in the political process; and party identification, as we saw earlier, serves for him the function of bringing a somewhat fictitious order out of the apparent chaos of the political universe. Thus party identification is strong enough to stabilize the system, but malleable enough to permit gradual fluctuations in the balance of political forces.

Under these circumstances American political parties have been

[18] D. E. Stokes and G. R. Iversen, "On the Existence of Forces Restoring Party Competition," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 26, 1962, pp. 159-171.

[19] Stokes and Iversen give a good summary of the explanations in *ibid.*, pp. 159-160: ". . . the tendency of interest groups to remember the favors an administration has dispensed less than the favors it has not; the ability of the party out of power to make more flexible and extravagant promises of future benefit, while the party in power is limited by what it can actually deliver; the greater motivational strength of the public's negative response to an administration's mistakes than of its positive response to an administration's successes; the liability of the party in power to disastrous splits as its majority grows and its sense of electoral pressure lessens; movements of the business cycle, generating new support for the opposition party in periods of economic decline; the alternating moods of liberalism and conservatism that have marked our national temper; and a vigorous popular belief in rotation in office, which turns the pecadilloes of a party long in power into convincing evidence that the time for a change has arrived."

coalitions of a wide variety of overlapping groups whose loyalties have to be cultivated in different and irreconcilable ways. The more of these groups a party includes, the more it risks alienating, and the less stable is its coalition. If too many groups are included, the party will be able to reward none of them and to take no significant action upon attaining power, because any action that one part of the coalition favors will be opposed by another part of the coalition. Since in the American electoral system only a bare majority is necessary to win all the power, there is a tendency not only for a minority party to readjust its image so as to detach groups from the majority coalition, but also for a party with an oversized majority to force out groups in the process of deciding which part of its coalition its policies will favor. Thus we find the leader of the Missouri Democratic Party in the 1840's complaining that "Our majority is *too large;* we shall be much stronger when the number is reduced, and when two or three newspapers shall *openly* act with the enemy which are now secretly doing it."[20]

While most politicians do not consciously prefer minimal majorities to overwhelming ones, the pressures of a system of competing coalitions built on such a diversity of groups compel them to behave as though they did. Hence we may observe in American political history a steady pressure toward equilibrium. Operating through the mechanism of secular realignment, the equilibrium tendency is overborne only at wide intervals by realignment phases and the push into ascendancy, after which it reasserts itself to produce the decline back toward equilibrium. The cycles that result may appropriately be called equilibrium cycles.

The most spectacular realization of this equilibrium tendency will be seen to occur in Cycle IV, while its manifestation in Cycle III is only slightly less striking. At the level of aggregate national strength the equilibrium tendency has failed to operate only in Cycle II. As we saw earlier, the Federalists, distrusting democracy, alienated a majority of the growing electorate and brought overwhelming defeat upon themselves. Even then they might have made a comeback if they had been willing to adjust their position to the dominant mood of the country. Instead, the War of 1812 prompted them to identify themselves even more narrowly with the parochial interests of one section of the country, and they doomed their party to extinction. Later politicians, observing their fate, have been more flexible.

The tendency toward equilibrium is also conspicuous, though less completely realized, at the level of sections, states, and lesser political subdivisions. This is dramatically illustrated by the changing geograph-

[20] William H. Riker, *The Theory of Political Coalitions,* New Haven, Yale University Press, 1962, pp. 55-66.

ical distribution of party strength during Cycle III, when the two-party system was being re-established and extended. The cycle opened with a strongly sectional pattern of presidential voting in 1824. By 1828 this sectional pattern was mitigated somewhat; and after 1828 there was a steady and rapid movement toward equilibrium between the parties in all sections.[21]

One method of measuring the decline of sectional imbalance is to calculate the deviation from a proportional distribution of the candidates' votes among the sections. For example, in 1828, 15.98 per cent of the total presidential vote was cast in New England. If there had been no sectional imbalance whatever, both Jackson and Adams should have gotten 15.98 per cent of their total votes from New England. Actually Adams received 25.62 per cent of his votes from his native section, a deviation of 9.64 percentage points above what a perfect sectional distribution would have given him, while Jackson received only 8.42 per cent of his votes from New England, a deviation of 7.56 below. Averaging the two deviations together yields an average deviation of 8.60 for New England in 1828. This was much the highest deviation for any section; when the deviations for all sections are calculated and averaged, they yield a national average sectional deviation of 3.29. Application of the same method to all presidential elections, 1828 to 1844, yields a striking pattern of declining sectional deviations: 1824, 16.04; 1828, 3.39; 1832, 2.63; 1836, .71;[22] 1840, .57; 1844, .21.

The same tendency toward equilibrium may also be seen at the state level. This tendency may be tested by ranking the states in each presidential election according to the size of the differential between the

21 The politically meaningful sections in this period are taken to be the following: New England, Middle States (N.Y., N.J., Pa., Del., Md.), Southeast (Va., N.C., S.C., Ga.), Southwest (Ala., Miss., La., Tenn., Ark., Tex.), and Northwest (Ky., Ohio, Ind., Mich., Ill., Wis., Mo., Iowa).

In 1824 Adams got 84 per cent of the popular votes in New England and less than 10 per cent of the popular votes in the Southeast; Jackson got 84 per cent of the Southwest and none in New England; Clay got nearly half in the Northwest, none in New England, and less than 10 per cent in the Middle States, the Southeast, and the Southwest; and Crawford got nearly half in the Southeast and less than 10 per cent in the Middle States, the Southwest, and the Northwest. In 1828 Adams's sectional percentages ranged from 18 per cent in the Southwest to 70 per cent in New England, while Jackson's ranged from 30 per cent in New England to 82 per cent in the Southwest.

22 The sharpness of the drop between 1832 and 1836 is partly accounted for by the fact that the Whigs ran three different candidates in an effort to capitalize on the sectional factor. This enabled the Whig candidates (treated here as a single ticket) to run closer to the strong Democratic candidate in all sections than a single Whig candidate might have been able to do. The underlying pattern of party identifications shaped by the preceding realignment crystallized in this election, and the nonsectional distributions of party strength, to which the Whig maneuver of running sectional candidates contributed, continued to characterize subsequent elections.

percentages of the two leading candidates, and then taking the median state differential for each election. This yields, for the elections from 1824 to 1848, the following results: 1824, 40.58; 1828, 36.07; 1832, 23.20; 1836, 8.72; 1840, 11.00;[23] 1844, 6.09; 1848, 5.24. Only 11 per cent of the states had presidential differentials under 6.00 in 1824, but the percentage increased at every election (except for a falling back in the surge year 1840) until, by 1848, 59 per cent of the states had such narrowly contested elections. Similarly, the percentage of states with presidential differentials under 12.00 increased from 22 per cent in 1824 to 76 per cent in 1848.

No measurement of the degree of equilibrium tendency in political units below the state level has been attempted for this paper, but Lee Benson finds that in New York during the nineteenth century there was a tendency for the majority party in a county to lose strength gradually during periods of stability.[24] It is clear, however, that equilibrium is not so often fully manifested in counties as in states, or in states as in the nation. The averaging effect that occurs as we move to larger units is not just an arithmetic phenomenon, but also reflects the fact that smaller units are more likely to be socially and economically homogeneous. If the equilibrium tendency arises from the efforts of the parties to build coalitions out of the diverse elements of American society, it should operate most strongly in the most diversified units. Relatively homogeneous units, on the other hand, may maintain over long periods of time a predominant preference for one party.

This may be illustrated for my Cycle III by taking each state's presidential differentials for the elections from 1828 to 1852 and ranking them so as to obtain each state's median presidential differential for

[23] The rise in 1840 is accounted for by the abnormally large Whig majorities in that surge election. Richard P. McCormick (*op. cit.*) presents a similar calculation. McCormick used national averages of state differentials where I have used median state differentials, but the results do not differ appreciably.

[24] My analysis of national electoral cycles has been greatly influenced by Benson's discovery of a similar cyclical pattern in New York voting behavior. The cycles, he finds, begin with a "fluctuation phase" lasting five to eight years, during which the party percentages in many counties fluctuate sharply and at the end of which the relative strength of the major parties has changed significantly and lastingly. These "fluctuation phases" are followed by "stable phases" of much longer duration, during which the only changes are a gradual tendency toward equilibrium (in our terms) and some other tendencies of gradual change called "secular trends" ("secular realignment" in our terms). It is apparent that Benson's "fluctuation phase" is analagous to our realignment phase, and that his "stable phase" is analagous to our ascendancy phase plus our equilibrium phase. Moreover, Benson's cycles, based on voting by counties in New York, coincide remarkably with the national cycles I have derived from very different data. Benson's cycles are as follows: (I) fluctuation phase 1827-1832, stable phase 1832-1853; (II) fluctuation phase 1854-1860, stable phase 1860-1892; (III) fluctuation phase 1893-1900 (Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy*, pp. 125-131).

the period. If the states are then ranked by the size of their median differentials, they appear in the following order:

A		*B*		*C*	
1. Delaware	3.36	9. Kentucky	8.98	17. Georgia	11.56
2. Pennsylvania	3.45	10. Michigan	9.62	18. Mississippi	13.14
3. New Jersey	3.58	11. Illinois	9.83	19. Missouri	13.73
4. Louisiana	3.88	12. North Carolina	10.36	20. Alabama	17.98
5. New York	4.20	13. Maine	11.03	21. New Hampshire	18.90
6. Ohio	4.28	14. Tennessee	11.32	22. Massachusetts	19.19
7. Connecticut	5.24	15. Virginia	11.42	23. Rhode Island	20.14
8. Maryland	5.74	16. Indiana	11.54	24. Vermont	20.82
				25. Arkansas	24.22

It will appear at once that the states with the most closely contested elections—those in Column A—embrace the most densely populated, urbanized, and diversified region of the country, during this period, stretching from Connecticut on the North to Maryland on the South and Ohio on the West, and including also the widely separated big-city state of Louisiana. The predominantly one-party states, on the other hand—those in Column C—embrace rural and relatively homogeneous northern New England and the planting and frontier states of the lower South and Southwest. Rhode Island's anomalous presence in Column C is readily explained on the grounds of a marked Whig ascendancy arising from a restricted suffrage and a strong reaction against Democratic "radicalism" as manifested in the "Dorr War"; the equally strong adherence of urban, diversified Massachusetts to the Whig Party is more difficult to explain. The remaining states—those in Column B—constitute, except for Maine, a compact region including the upper South and the Old Northwest, areas that fall halfway between the extreme categories on the ranges of urbanization and economic and social diversity.

The existence of sustained disequilibrium in some units (counties or states) is no deterrent to the establishment of equilibrium in the next larger units (states or the nation). There is no more striking testimony to the skill of the American Democratic politician than the success with which he performs this delicate operation. The New York politicians, for example, continuously maintained a spectacular equilibrium at the state level throughout the last two-thirds of the nineteenth century, despite the most sweeping changes in the geographical distribution of party strength. The expansion of Democratic strength in New York City as a result of population growth was matched step for step by a contraction of the originally wide areas of Democratic control upstate, until, about 1900, the boundary between Democratic and Republican

territory settled at its present location along the northern boundary of the Bronx.[25]

Similarly, during Cycle IV the politicians achieved at the national level the most spectacular degree of equilibrium in American history, despite a host of factors making for party imbalance in the sections and states—the manipulation of Southern electoral strength during Reconstruction, the creation of a solidly Democratic South thereafter, the emergence of many solidly Republican areas in the North, agrarian discontent, massive immigration, and growing urban unrest. Political moralists who castigate the "politics of dead center" of this period must still admire the political skill that produced and maintained it.

The example just cited serves to remind us that historical circumstances as well as social and economic homogeneity can limit the operation of the equilibrium tendency below the national level. The great sectional conflict of the mid-nineteenth century froze many areas into a political disequilibrium that is only now thawing. The Republican vote is rising steadily in the South, Maine is debatable ground once again, and even Vermont can go Democratic. If our hypothesis about the equilibrium tendency is correct, we might expect a continuing drift at every level toward the degree of equilibrium manifested at the national level in the 1840's and 1880's.

DISCUSSION

It should be pointed out that the whole concept of an equilibrium cycle, however valuable it may be for understanding past politics, has only limited predictive value. Insofar as the concept is valid, we may expect realignment to be followed by ascendancy and then for the equilibrium tendency to reassert itself. Yet realignment itself is produced by forces wholly external to the equilibrium system and may interrupt the cycle at any time. Even after a realignment phase has begun, there is no way to tell which party will emerge into ascendancy. Often realignment seems to begin with a sharp shift toward one party, followed by an even sharper reverse shift carrying the originally disadvantaged party into ascendancy. Note the biennial House differentials for the following realignment phases:

Cycle II-R	*Party*	*House Differential*	*Cycle V-R*	*Party*	*House Differential*	*Cycle VI-R*	*Party*	*House Differential*
1796	R	9.4	1888	R	2.2	1926	R	7.7
1798	R	28.8	1890	D	44.3	1928	R	23.0
1800	D	31.4	1892	D	25.5	1930	D	1.4
1802	D	44.6	1894	R	39.0	1932	D	44.7
			1896	R	25.4	1934	D	50.0

[25] I am indebted to Lee Benson for this illustration.

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D	25.5	1930	D	1.4
R	39.0	1932	D	44.7
R	25.4	1934	D	50.0

s illustration.

It appears that a party is sometimes misled by its success early in a realignment phase into overadjusting to the conditions making for realignment, thus provoking a reaction that carries the other party into ascendancy. For example, realignment began in Cycle V with the Populist third party, arising from rural-urban tension, taking votes away from Western Republican candidates for Congress and giving the Democrats an abnormal majority in the House. When the Democrats sought to attach these defecting rural Republicans firmly to themselves by nominating Bryan, urban voters shifted massively in the other direction and carried the Republican Party into ascendancy.

In addition to these limitations on the predictive value of the concept, the cycle has operated far less regularly in the twentieth century than it did under two-party conditions in the nineteenth. This is apparent from a final set of anomalies in the bar graph. Presidential differentials have been far larger in the twentieth century than in the nineteenth; they have been far larger proportional to adjacent congressional elections than in the nineteenth century; and surge elections have occurred more often and produced larger majorities. I would suggest that these differences may be attributed to a growing surge effect in all twentieth-century presidential elections.

Converse has explained these phenomena by pointing to the increased flow of political information, especially via radio and television, in twentieth-century presidential elections. This stimulus activates an increased proportion of those voters who have slight interest in or information about politics, who are only slightly if at all identified with any party, who are consequently extremely susceptible to the short-term forces emphasized in the flow of current information, and who vote overwhelmingly for the candidate most advantaged by the short-term forces. Therefore, the presidential elections in which such voters are present in large numbers swing more widely under the influence of short-term forces than the congressional elections, where the weak flow of current information fails to stimulate such voters into voting.

I would suggest in addition, from the evidence about the kinds of presidential candidates who produce surge effects, that such voters are especially susceptible to personality factors. The crucial difference between twentieth-century and nineteenth-century elections may not be a difference in the amount of information flow, but the fact that the modern media (especially radio and television) are more effective in projecting the candidates' personalities.[26]

[26] P. E. Converse, "Information Flow and the Stability of Partisan Attitudes," University of Michigan, Survey Research Center, August 1961, mimeographed. Converse uses the Michigan data to show that apolitical voters who receive some new information during a campaign are highly susceptible to short-term forces, while a

Finally, it should be noted that the generalized surge effect began to manifest itself at the time when large numbers of women were first entering the electorate, with the discrepancies between presidential and House differentials being particularly notable in the 1920's. The Michigan data seem to show that women are less sophisticated and issue-oriented in their political attitudes than men, and this confirms a strong subjective impression that women are more susceptible to personality factors. The Michigan researchers argue notwithstanding that so many women simply follow their husbands in voting decisions as to leave little difference in the actual voting patterns of the two sexes, but one may wonder whether survey techniques can establish that husband influences wife more than wife influences husband.[27]

In any case, it seems clear that voting in the nineteenth century followed the underlying pattern of party identifications even more closely than it does today. In the 1840's, politicians predicated their campaign activities on the hope of shifting handfuls of votes from one election to another. When the voting was over, they were able to extrapolate with greater confidence and accuracy than modern Univacs the first returns from a few townships or counties into predicted state results. The press frequently noticed the rigidity of partisan alignments by reporting instances like Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, which the Democrats carried in 1840 and in 1844 by identical votes of 4704 to 2778, or Davidson County, Tennessee, which the Whigs carried in the gubernatorial election of 1843, the presidential election of 1844, and the gubbernatorial election of 1845 by identical majorities of 583 votes.[28]

Thus the concept of an equilibrium cycle is proposed as an especially useful tool for the analysis of earlier American political history. At

much smaller group of apolitical voters who receive little or no new information adhere inflexibly to whatever slight party identifications they may have. He accounts for the apparently higher degree of party voting in the nineteenth century by arguing that information flow was so weak that the apolitical voters fell mostly into the second category. This argument seems dubious for Cycle III, the period of American political history I know most intimately. While the available data do not permit a precise test of the proposition, there is abundant evidence to suggest that politics as recreation played a much larger role in most people's lives in the earlier periods, that the press was almost exclusively devoted to political debate, that the populace submitted with apparent willingness to far more and infinitely longer political speeches than even the most politically avid moderns would endure, and that local party activity was more intensive than at present. My subjective impression is that informal political discussion was more widespread and that the general level of political interest and information was, if anything, higher; and this seems to me a more plausible explanation for the high degree of party regularity. The twentieth-century electorate, on the other hand, would include more low-interest voters attracted to the polls by the personality factors purveyed through the modern media.

[27] Converse *et al.*, *The American Voter*, pp. 483-493.

[28] *Niles' Register*, Oct. 26, 1844, p. 128; Washington *Union*, Aug. 15, 1845.

the very least, our growing understanding of the electoral process should admonish political historians, first, that particular elections must be understood in terms of their place in a gradually fluctuating balance of party strength; second, that the effect of short-term forces must always be measured against the massive long-term influence of the underlying pattern of party identifications; and third and finally, that attention must be focused on the processes by which party identifications are formed and by which they are altered during realignment phases. If these propositions are even partly valid, then a new political historiography offers a challenging frontier for historical research.[29]

Although the increasing incidence of surge effect renders the concept of an equilibrium cycle a less precise tool of analysis for recent elections, there can be no gainsaying the continuing importance of the underlying pattern of party identifications, whose movements the concept seeks to define. Assuming the present Democratic differential of 6 to 8 points in the underlying pattern, Stokes has calculated the probability of an election's going the other way as less than three chances in ten.[30] Writing in August, 1964, it is hard to resist speculating about the meaning of the concept for the presidential campaign that is just getting under way.

The Democratic presidential differential of .17 in 1960 and the Democratic quadrennial average House differential of 20.0 for 1960 to 1962, together with preceding election returns and the survey data, suggest that we are still in the moderately pro-Democratic phase of near-equilibrium that has prevailed since the mid-forties. Within the terms of the concept, this equilibrium phase could continue, with the chances strongly in favor of at least a moderate Democratic majority. The only alternative would be the onset of a realignment phase, the outcome of which would be completely unpredictable.

The question thus becomes: Is realignment at hand? Realignment phases seem to be produced by a variety of social unease so diffuse, for all its power, that practiced politicians, let alone academic observers, have difficulty discerning its precise content and thrust. Yet the extraordinary action of the Republican National Convention in nominating Goldwater suggests—like the Democratic nomination of Bryan in 1896 or the Southern Democratic secession of 1860—that some politicians think or hope that such a powerful unease is present.

[29] See Lee Benson's essay, "Research Problems in American Political Historiography," in Mirra Komarovsky, ed., *New Frontiers in the Social Sciences,* Glencoe, Ill., Free Press, 1957, pp. 118-183; and Samuel P. Hays, "History as Human Behavior," *Iowa Journal of History,* Vol. 58, 1960, pp. 193-206.

[30] D. E. Stokes, "1960 and the Problem of Deviating Elections," paper read at the meeting of the American Political Science Association, 1961, Survey Research Center, mimeographed.

Three outcomes seem possible. First, the Republican convention may be right. Whatever unease it is that presumably grips some middle-class, suburban segments of our society could combine with traditional conservatism and resentment of the Negro's thrust for full equality to produce a Goldwater victory and a durable reshuffling of the underlying pattern of party identifications in the direction of a redefined Republicanism. In the process, the existing secular trend toward Republicanism in the South would probably be accelerated and eventually stabilized near the level of regular two-party competition in the region. A second possibility is that a Goldwater victory could deceive the Republicans into overplaying to the forces bringing them initial success, provoking a strong reaction that would carry the Democrats into ascendancy.

Finally, of course, the Republican Convention may have miscalculated badly in gambling on the existence of forces making for realignment. If such forces are not in fact strongly present, then the Republicans appear doomed to suffer the kind of defeat that the Democrats brought on themselves by their quixotic second and third nominations of Bryan.