

Political parties, coalitions and realignments in the united states essay example...

[Politics](#), [Civil Rights](#)



In their book *The Macro Polity*, Robert Erikson and his coauthors strongly disagree with the theory that American political parties are weak or that the partisan and activist cores of their coalitions are relatively lacking in ideology and commitment. On the contrary, they found that there were very durable partisan loyalties in the United States that only shifted as a result of major upheavals and realignments, such as the Civil War, the depressions of the 1890s and 1930s, and (arguable) the great crises over Vietnam, civil rights and the cultural rebellions of the 1960s and 1970s. In between these crisis periods, the two-party system on the macro or national level has been remarkably stable for decades, and even third-party candidates with significant popular support like George Wallace in 1968 and Ross Perot in 1992 have failed to break the old duopoly (Erikson et al 113). Short-term events like the surge against Barry Goldwater in 1964, Watergate scandal in 1973-74 or the Iran hostage crisis in 1979-80 may cause some temporary fluctuations, but do not really affect the two-party system or the core convictions of most partisans and activists. They also argue that a slow realignment did take place in the 1980s and 1990s and that the Republicans and their ideology of Reaganism and limited government were the beneficiaries of the shift. This gradual realignment was not simply caused by the demographic shift of white males, particularly in the South, toward the Republicans, but to voters in all regions “switching their partisan disposition” (Erikson et al 186). Real parties have always existed in the U. S., and the bulk of the historical and contemporary evidence indicates very strongly that they do and have core groups of very durable partisans whose loyalties rarely fluctuate. It is just that there are more than two political

parties in the U. S., in reality if not in name, with the Southern regional party being the best-known example.

V. O. Key's classic book *Southern Politics* (1949) described the Southern or Solid South regional party that existed in the United States from the 1870s to the 1940s. In national eleven of these states almost never voted for Republican candidates during that era, and in 1928 Virginia, North Carolina and Texas defected only because the Democrats nominated a Catholic candidate (Key 10). Key noted that the white planters and other conservative interests that dominated the Deep South had been unusually successful in causing their states to secede in 1860, in using the Ku Klux Klan to defeat Reconstruction in the 1870s, and in turning back the radical Populist challenge in the 1890s, thus keeping the South a one-party region for decades. Civil war and Reconstruction had left a high level of resentment among whites toward the federal government and greater "southern unity against the rest of the world than had prevailed before", but Upper South and highland whites who lived in areas where blacks were fewest had always been the least sympathetic with the large planters in the lowlands and river valleys (Key 7). Even so, the South had "developed no system or practice of political organization and leadership adequate to cope with its problems in this period", which included poverty, a feudal-agrarian economy, and of course racism and segregation (Key 4). This Solid South no longer exists, of course, and for many years after the traumas of the 1960s it even looked like it was now becoming mostly solid for the Republican Party, at least among white voters. This has certainly been one of the major seismic shifts in American politics over the last 30-40 years, and has made the Democratic

dominance from the 1930s to the 1970s merely a fading memory.

In 1963, in the midst of the crisis over segregation and civil rights, the political scientist James MacGregor Burns described the American political system as dysfunctional and unable to deal with the country's major problems, particularly in the domestic sphere, and this view has been widely shared among many academic specialists. Burns found that the Democrats and Republicans each had presidential and congressional wings, so that there were really four political parties. In both cases, the congressional wings were oriented toward state and local issues and the presidential wings were mostly concerned with national and international problems. American presidents were therefore faced with the almost impossible task of forging the "right combination of presidential party and congressional party strength" over months and years to pass any policies at all (Burns 260). In this situation, the national parties were far more willing to take action on civil rights and other important issues than the regional and local interests that controlled Congress. Old-style political parties and bosses had disappeared almost everywhere by the 1960s, apart from a few holdouts like Chicago and Albany, New York, but party organizations and their core groups of activists remained intact and grew even stronger (Cohen et al 24). During the 1960s and 1970s, "liberal activists defeated the defenders of southern racism within the Democratic Party" while conservatives in the Republican Party began to push out the moderates in the North and West, and this gradual realignment is basically complete at this point (Cohen et al 107). Political parties made use of the new media technologies and organizational methods, and shifted their coalitional bases and ideological perspectives, but

they are as vital a force in today's polity as they ever were in the past.

In the 1960s and 1970s, there was even considerable speculation about whether traditional political parties would survive at all in an age of mass media and celebrity politics, and whether Richard Nixon would lead a major political realignment as the New Deal coalition broke up over Vietnam, civil rights and various youth and countercultural rebellions. Probably because of Watergate, 1968 and 1972 did not turn out to be realigning elections like 1860, 1896 or 1932, leading to an era of one-party dominance at the national level for decades, although the gradual shift to the Republicans did occur over the following 20-30 years (Sundquist 7-8). Neither major party has yet been replaced—and in fact the last time this occurred was with the Whigs in the 1850s—but it did force the Democrats to shift to more conservative and defensive positions on a wide variety of issues, particularly under Bill Clinton in 1993-2001. For a time, there was speculation that Barack Obama might lead a realignment in a more social democratic or progressive direction, particularly as a result of the reaction against the Iraq War and the worst recession since the 1930s, although at present it appears that the conservative opposition, largely based in the South and rural areas, is absolutely tenacious in its ideological opposition and determination to prevent major social change or political realignment.

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