

DEALIGNMENT, REALIGNMENT, AND CRITICAL ELECTIONS

Dealignment is the process whereby a large portion of the electorate abandons its previous partisan affiliation without developing a new one to replace it. It is contrasted with realignment.

Realignment refers to sharp changes in issues, party leaders, the regional and demographic bases of power of the two parties, and structure or rules of the political system resulting in a new political power structure. Realignment elections are elections during periods of expanded suffrage and changes in the economy and society that prove to be turning points, redefining the agenda of politics and the alignment of voters within parties.

A "**critical**" election (sharp, lasting changes in loyalties to political parties) usually serves as the basis for realignment.

FIRST PARTY SYSTEM (1788-1824)

Federalists vs. Democrat-Republicans: Election of 1800 – Thomas Jefferson

This election completed the turnover of power from the Federalist Party, embodied in Alexander Hamilton, to Thomas Jefferson and his Democratic-Republican Party.

SECOND PARTY SYSTEM (1824-1860)

Democrats vs. Whigs: Election of 1828 – Andrew Jackson

This election redefined the party system in the United States. The Democratic-Republicans split into two parties, later renamed as the Democratic Party and the Whig Party.

THIRD PARTY SYSTEM (1860-1896)

Democrats vs. Republicans: Election of 1860 – Abraham Lincoln

After the Whigs collapsed after 1852, party alignments were in turmoil, with several third parties, such as the Know Nothings and the Opposition Party. The system stabilized in 1858 and the presidential election marked the ascendance of the Republican Party.

FOURTH PARTY SYSTEM (1896-1932)

Democrats vs. Republicans: Election of 1896 – William McKinley

The old Civil-War-Era issues faded away. Funding from office holders was replaced by outside fund raising from business in 1896 — a major shift in political history. McKinley's tactics in beating William Jennings Bryan marked a sea change in the evolution of the modern campaigning. McKinley raised a huge amount of money from business interests. Bryan invented the modern technique of campaigning heavily in closely contested states. McKinley forged a coalition in which businessmen, professionals, skilled factory workers and prosperous farmers were heavily represented; he was strongest in the Northeast, Upper Midwest, and Pacific Coast states.

FIFTH PARTY SYSTEM (1932-1968)

Democrats vs. Republicans: Election of 1932 – Franklin D. Roosevelt

The crash of 1929 and the miseries of the Great Depression under Herbert Hoover represented an entirely new phenomenon in American politics. There is no doubt Democrats vehemently attacked Hoover for 50 years. Roosevelt's legacy still defines the Democratic Party; he forged an enduring New Deal Coalition of big city machines, the White South, intellectuals, labor unions, Catholics, Jews, and Westerners. In 1936, African-Americans were added to the coalition (African-Americans had previously been denied the vote or voted Republican).

SIXTH PARTY SYSTEM? (1968-PRESENT) – Era of Divided Government

Democrats vs. Republicans: Election of 1968 – Richard Nixon

Beginning in the 1950s and especially since 1968 the American political system has undergone a prolonged period where divided government has been the norm. Divided government is always a possibility in a system where the president and members of Congress are chosen separately. Since 1968 divided government has more frequent for a longer period of time than ever before in American history. The changes in the American party system since the 1950s and 1960s do not fit the historical realignment pattern. Some scholars have concluded that the election of 1968 turned out to be a critical election which ushered in a new party system in which divided government rather than the dominance of one party was the norm. Some call these changes the "no majority realignment" or the "era of divided government."