

POLITICS: WIRTHLIN

PARTISAN CHANGE IN THE 1980s: A ROLLING REALIGNMENT

By Richard B. Wirthlin

"Just definitions," said Emmons long ago, "either prevent or put an end to dispute." Much of the recent controversy about whether or not the 1980 election triggered a political realignment hinges on the contenders' definition of the word "realignment." In this article I will not resist the temptation of proffering my definition, examining partisan change using that definition as my frame of reference, and then offering some guideposts as to how long that seminal political change of the 1980s is likely to endure.

From the perspective of a political strategist, a pragmatic definition of realignment might be:

A massive and rapid change in the most basic measure of party allegiance—party identification—that endures economic and foreign crises and changes the political environment for a decade or more.

The shift in party identification during the Eighties was:

- **massive**—our data show a net shift of 18 percentage points from the Democrats to the Republicans (See Table below.);

- **rapid**—a large part of it came in a period of less than a year from January of 1981 to the spring of 1982;

- **able to endure crises**—while there was a softening of Republican identification during both the 1982-83 recession and the Iran-Contra hearings, the "close to parity" position of the two parties in both cases was restored quickly after the crises faded; and

- **lasting**—we are close to marking a full decade of what can be described as a more Republican- favored political environment.

The massive shift in party allegiance during the Eighties occurred across all demographic subgroups and in every part of the country (See Table below). The Republican gains have come from both expected and unexpected sources. As has often been noted, the party picked up considerable support from men, who shifted from 29% Republican and 50% Democrat in 1980 to 45% Republican and

39% Democrat in 1989, for a 27-point shift overall. The GOP also became more acceptable to women, but here the Republican shift measured a far more modest 5 percentage points.

The most surprising gains have come among blacks and lower income voters. In the past nine years, there has been a 15-point shift among black voters from the Democrats to the Republicans, and a 14-point shift among voters with incomes below \$15,000.

Widely recognized and most encouraging for the Republican party is its new-found appeal among the young. The GOP gained an extraordinary 39 points among voters ages 18 to 24, and 34 points among those 25 to 34. Its gains at the opposite end of the age spectrum have been much more modest. Although the single largest gains by region took place in the South, where the increase measured 28 points, the Republican party also advanced significantly in the Northeast (picking up 15 points) and in the Midwest (up 19 points).

Will these changes endure? Maybe.

In 1981 I described the partisan shift as a "rolling realignment"—to highlight my sense that it was not an accomplished event, but a process. This process could roll to the ultimate favor of either party, simply because it was not then, and is not now, anchored in the same legal and institutional bedrock that gave the Democratic realignment of the 1930s its long-term viability. I see four major factors whose working out will determine whether or not Republicans will be able to hold their 1980s gains through the 1990s.

First, to be anchored institutionally, the new political calculus should, with time, be reflected not only in capturing and holding the White House but also by changing the balance of political power in Congress and the state legislatures. Only if the GOP can exercise major influence upon the make-up of congressional districts through redistricting and reapportionment will the rolling realignment come to a more steady state of rest, with the party having

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CHANGE IN PARTY IDENTIFICATION FROM JUNE 1980 TO AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 1989

	<u>Republicans</u>		Republican <u>Shift</u>	<u>Democrats</u>		Democratic <u>Shift</u>	<u>TOTAL CHANGE</u>
	<u>1980</u>	<u>1989</u>		<u>1980</u>	<u>1989</u>		
AGGREGATE	30	40	+10	51	43	-8	+18
SEX							
Male	29	45	+16	50	39	-11	+27
Female	33	35	+2	51	48	-3	+5
AGE							
18-24	29	57	+28	43	32	-11	+39
25-34	25	44	+19	51	38	-13	+32
35-44	33	39	+6	51	44	-7	+13
45-54	35	31	-4	50	50	—	-4
55-64	28	37	+9	57	51	-6	+15
65+	36	36	—	51	47	-4	+4
EDUCATION							
Less than HS	24	28	+4	62	52	-10	+14
High School	25	41	+16	54	44	-10	+26
Some College	35	43	+8	45	42	-3	+11
College Grad	38	52	+14	44	38	-6	+20
Post Grad	38	55	+17	44	31	-13	+30
GEOGRAPHIC							
Northeast	32	39	+7	50	42	-8	+15
Midwest	31	42	+11	49	41	-8	+19
West	35	41	+6	48	45	-3	+9
South	23	39	+16	58	46	-12	+28
ETHNICITY							
White	34	46	+12	47	39	-8	+20
Black	4	11	+7	82	74	-8	+15
INCOME							
Less than \$15K	24	30	+6	60	52	-8	+14
\$15-30K	30	42	+12	49	45	-4	+16
\$30-40K	36	40	+4	43	44	+1	+3
More than \$40K	54	52	-2	32	34	+2	—

NOTE: The data are based on telephone surveys conducted by The Wirthlin Group: The 1989 surveys were conducted with 2,000 adults age 18 and older on August 21-23, 1989, and September 18-21, 1989; the 1980 survey was conducted in June 1980 with 750 adults age 18 and older. **QUESTIONS:** "In politics today, do you usually think of yourself as (ROTATE) a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?" (IF REPUBLICAN OR DEMOCRAT, ASK: "Would you call yourself a strong (Republican/Democrat) or a not-so-strong (Republican/Democrat)?" (IF INDEPENDENT/OTHER/NO PREFERENCE, ASK:) "Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or to the Democratic party?" Note that the Wirthlin Group counts "unaffiliated leaners" as Republican or Democratic identifiers simply because their data consistently show this group to be more partisan than are "weak" Republican or Democratic identifiers.

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the sense that it has really established an enduring parity with the Democrats.

Second, the new realignment survived the crises of the 1980s, but surely it will be put to the test again in the early 1990s. The question isn't whether the incumbent Republicans will confront serious problems, foreign or domestic, but just how severe these prove to be and how ably the party is seen responding to them.

Third, the Republican party must keep its constituency gains, or add new ones as others soften. The most serious challenge it faces is to hold on to the youngest age group. More than any other group, the young have brought the Republican party to parity. They hold the promise of the future—something the party should not forget.

Can the party register and turn out this cohort, so as to realize its full political potential? In this regard it should be noted that a September 1989 Wirthlin Group study reveals that Democrats hold a substantial lead among *registered voters* in projected congressional vote preference, but that Republicans hold a modest lead among *all adults over eighteen*. The unregistered are disproportionately young and Republican. On the other hand, the Democrats have an opportunity to cut into the Republican base support among the young by exploiting the social issues.

Fourth, the Democratic party must develop a few strong and credible spokespersons if they are to successfully challenge the Republican gains. The Democratic message on the eve of the 1990s is diffused, fractured, and unclear.

All in all, the rolling realignment still has not come to rest.



ANIMALS TAKE HEART	
1948	1989
QUESTION: In general, do you favor or oppose the use of live animals in medical teaching and research?	QUESTION: In general, do you support or oppose the use of animals in biomedical research?
Favor 91%	Support 69%
Oppose 9	Oppose 31
NOTE: Survey by the National Opinion Research Center, September-October.	NOTE: Survey by the Gallup Organization for the American Medical Association, January-February.