

Secular Party Realignment: The Move of Segregationists and White Working Voters from the New Deal Coalition to the Embrace of Conservatism

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Defining Secular Realignment

According to political scientist James E. Campbell, political party realignment is a massive change in the electoral balance of power. **Secular realignment** can be defined as a slow-moving change in the electoral balance of power, usually driven by the electorate. The time period of examination occurs between 1932 through the 1980s and will focus on two demographic groups; segregationists and white working voters.

Origins

After the 1932 elections, the Democratic Party garnered a colossal coalition of different voting groups, including African-Americans, blue collar workers, and Southern segregationists. The coalition became so large that fracturing seemed inevitable. The 1948 presidential election, for example, saw the split of the Democratic Party in three distinct factions. Chiefly, Truman represented a moderate Democratic base consisting of laborers and blue-collar workers. Strom Thurmond, who ran on the platform of state's rights, did especially well in deep southern states that embraced segregation and disavowed President Truman. Henry Wallace represented a progressive wing of the Democratic Party that would continue to grow throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The factions that existed within the Democratic Party during this time would ultimately look for refuge in either the New Left or New Right of the 1960s. In particular, white segregationists and white working class Americans embraced the rise of conservatism that changed the electoral political landscape in the United States.

Rust Belt Region Election Outcomes and National Popular Vote Margin of Victory in Presidential Elections, 1956 – 1980

	1956 (+15.4% R)	1960 (+0.17% D)	1964 (+22.58% D)	1968 (+0.7% R)	1972 (+23.15% R)	1976 (+2.07% D)	1980 (+9.74% R)
Minnesota	Red	Blue	Blue	Blue	Red	Blue	Blue
Iowa	Red	Red	Blue	Red	Red	Red	Red
Illinois	Red	Blue	Blue	Red	Red	Red	Red
Wisconsin	Red	Red	Blue	Red	Red	Blue	Red
Michigan	Red	Blue	Blue	Blue	Red	Red	Red
Indiana	Red	Red	Blue	Red	Red	Red	Red
Ohio	Red	Red	Blue	Red	Red	Blue	Red
Pennsylvania	Red	Blue	Blue	Blue	Red	Blue	Red
New York	Red	Blue	Blue	Blue	Red	Blue	Red

The chart above demonstrates the malleability of the white working vote. Cells shaded in red denote a state that voted Republican, while blue Democrat. The more divided the Rust Belt, the narrower the margin of victory (in parenthesis), such as in 1960, 1968, and 1976.

The Archie Bunker Archetype

Named after the bigoted yet lovable protagonist of the 1971 sitcom, *All in the Family*, the Archie Bunker archetype refers to four distinct factors that drove the white working voter from the New Deal coalition to the embrace of conservatism:

1. Law and order, while criticized for its perceived racial undertones, became attractive to many during a period of social and political unrest.
2. Conservative rhetoric regarding economic issues such as welfare and lower taxes became attractive white working class voters.
3. The Democratic Party's trend leftwards created feelings of isolation and neglect to both the white working class and southern segregationists. The rise of the New Left and emphasis on identity politics contributed to this feeling.
4. Moral topics that, prior to the 1960s, were rarely considered partisan issues, such as women's rights, gay rights, African-American rights, gender roles, the Vietnam War, and abortion, became partisan. Conservative emphasis on "family values" became increasingly appealing to the white working class voter.

Contemporary Effects—White Working Voters

The white working voter continues to have a flimsy approach to voting. Unlike the South, which has evidently become a Republican bastion, white working voters typically vote for the candidate that is perceived to perpetuate positive change. This can be examined by looking at areas containing a high concentration of white working workers, such as the Rust Belt. Barack Obama, for example, carried all Rust Belt states in 2008 amidst a campaign of hope and change, while Donald Trump was victorious in these states on a platform of restoring America's greatness.

Contemporary Effects—The South

The effects of secular realignment are ever-present. Since the implementation of Nixon's Southern Strategy, the South has remained consistently Republican. Some southern Democrats, such as Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, have fared well in winning southern states. Even then, the South remains a Republican bastion. Al Gore, a Democratic Senator from Tennessee, could not win one southern state in the 2000 presidential election.

Segregationists

White segregationists were explicit with their dissatisfaction of the Democratic Party since the realignment's beginnings around 1948. Strom Thurmond's run for President that same year exemplifies this animosity between segregationists and a Democratic Party that seemed willing to embrace African-American civil rights. Thurmond epitomized the segregationist voter who would ultimately find a home in conservatism. His vehement stance against civil rights is exhibited through his record-setting 1957 filibuster against the Civil Rights Act, for which he spoke for twenty-four hours and eighteen minutes. Furthermore, the Democratic Party's embrace of civil rights into the 1960s created heavier tension between white segregationists and other factions of the party. In 1964, Thurmond endorsed Barry Goldwater for President rather than incumbent Democrat Lyndon Johnson, a man who Thurmond campaigned for in the Democratic primaries four years earlier. In 1968, his endorsement of Richard Nixon for President further solidified the idea that as the Democratic Party moved leftward and the Republican Party rightward, historically Democratic segregationists will soon change their allegiance to the Republican Party.

