# Issue Evolution, Population Replacement, and Normal Partisan Change

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*Students of American political behavior have usually turned to "critical election" realignment theories to explain the dynamics of long-term change in the party system. These theories are problematic on both theoretical and empirical grounds. A theory that can account for change within the context of a stable electoral system is required. We propose a theory of issue evolution that explains normal partisan change, and illustrate the theory by examining the impact of racial issues on party identification. The theory looks to the evolution of new issues as the stimulus of partisan change and to the continuous replacement of the electorate as the mechanism through which such change is effected. In a comparison of three theoretical models of issue evolution, we conclude that racial desegregation has provoked a subtle but permanent change in the recruitment of new members of political parties.*

Students of American political behavior have usually turned to "critical election" realignment theories to explain the dynamics of long-term change in the party system. Realignments, according to most theorists (Burnham, 1970; Key, 1955; Sundquist, 1973), are precipitated by the emergence of new issues about which the electorate has intense feelings that cut across rather than reinforce the existing bases of support for the political parties. It is often assumed that these cross-cutting issues, fueled by major, often highly disruptive social and economic conditions, lead to a fundamental alteration in the party system in that the majority party can no longer command decisive electoral support. One party's previously dominant position is ultimately usurped by a minority or third party, which becomes the chief beneficiary of the unfolding realignment process. According to these theories, partisan realignments involve not only massive changes in voting behavior, but more importantly, abrupt and permanent transformations in the party system as voters are moved to discard old party attachments in favor of new ones.

While realignment theories offer a plausible account of partisan change, we find them problematic both theoretically and empirically. The "critical" conception of realignment is oversimple and incomplete. Pushed to logical extremes, critical realignment models imply that all political eras are characterized by either radical change or none at all. Periods of rapid political destabilization are followed by generations when nothing happens.

Political theorists have not of course explicitly argued that "nothing happens" between realignments. Indeed, the cyclical realignment notions of Burnham (1970) and Beck (1974) explicitly postulate precursors to realignment. But given our understanding of the processes of attitude change, the discontinuity of critical realignment theories is not parsimonious. The linchpin of dichotomous notions of change is of course the event of spectacular magnitude, which temporarily moves the system from one state ("nothing happens") to another ("change"). What is problematic here is that some of the causal events are not very spectacular—what happened in 1896?—and quite a number of truly spectacular events (world wars, political assassinations, race riots in the cities) are followed by undisturbed party alignments.

Realignment theories are also deficient on empirical grounds. Most simply, there is no hard evidence supporting the postulated large-scale partisan conversions, since all realignments occurred before we began seriously to study individual party identification. Moreover, Kristi Andersen's analysis of the New Deal realignment period—the one case from which we can even extrapolate attitudinal data—sharply undercuts the notion of

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massive partisan conversion (Andersen, 1976, 1979). The Republican party may have been the majority party before the realignment and the Democrats the majority party afterwards, but it is not the case that large numbers of Republicans became Democrats. Instead, Andersen argues that the partisan shift resulted from the mobilization of previously inactive partisans.

Realignment theories have produced a serious empirical anomaly as well. If one assumes that no realignment has occurred since the formation of the New Deal party system, one is hard pressed to account for changes of massive proportions which have occurred. The Republican party, nearly equal in numbers with the Democrats after the New Deal realignment, *is now less than half of what it was.* And the numerically negligible category of citizens declaring independence of partisan affiliation is now several times what it once was. These changes are of a magnitude that quite probably dwarfs the (unobserved) changes that occurred *during* the realignment. Explaining significant change over an extended period requires a theory of *normal* partisan change. Otherwise we are left with the palpably wrong conclusion that "no change" occurred or the prospect of searching for an unnoticed realignment.

## A Theory of Normal Partisan Change

Clearly, an alternative theory of partisan change is required, a theory that can account for change within the context of a stable electoral system (Shively, 1979). We propose here a theory of issue evolution that explains normal change in the party system, and illustrate the theory by examining the impact of a particular evolving issue.

Drawing on V. O. Key's often-neglected article on secular realignment, we argue that issues can bring about significant political change by producing slow, steady shifts in the partisan complexion of the electorate. Through gradual replacement of the electorate, political issues have the capacity to stimulate processes that, in Key's apt description, "operate inexorably, and almost imperceptibly, election after election, to form new-party alignments and to build new party groups" (1959, pp. 198-99).

The theory of issue evolution is a theory of normal partisan change, emphasizing that the composition of the electorate is continuously undergoing alterations that, over the course of several decades, may have profound implications for the party system. As Key wrote (1959, p. 198):

> Events and communications of political import play upon the electorate continuously; election returns merely record periodic readings of the relative magnitudes of streams of attitudes that are undergoing steady expansion or contraction. Some elections may be "critical" in that they involve far wider movements and more durable shifts than do other elections. Yet the rise and fall of parties may to some degree be the consequence of trends that perhaps persist over decades, and elections may mark only steps in a more or less continuous creation of new loyalties and decay of old.

The theory looks to the evolution of new issues as the stimulus of partisan change and to the continuous replacement of the electorate as the mechanism of change. Every passing day marks the exit of old voters from the eligible electorate and the entry of new ones. And the "streams of attitudes" characteristic of those going out are not likely to be matched by the attitudes of those coming in for the simple reason that young voters can respond to new issues relatively unconstrained by the powerful anchor of established partisan predispositions.

Normal partisan change, according to this view, results from the evolution of new issues coupled with the process of generational replacement. Both of these factors account for the gradual character of the partisan transformation. New issues by themselves are probably not sufficient. While they may lead to temporary defections in voting behavior, new issues alone are unlikely to change fundamentally the long-standing party identifications of older voters (Converse, 1969). Nor does significant secular change develop merely as a response to population replacement. The socialization of new voters into the existing partisan alignment is likely to be substantially continuous so long as the issues underlying the existing political cleavage remain predominant (Irvine and Gold, 1980). New issues thus create the opportunity for political change; new citizens are its most likely agents.

Although built upon the concept of "secular realignment," the issue evolution theory thus differs from Key's notion in postulating the "issue attitude" as the cause of change and replacement the process through which it is effected.[1] These postulates are consistent with the spirit of Key's theory, but exploit well-developed theories of party identification and longitudinal measures of attitude, neither of which was available when Key wrote. The theory is in line with Andersen's focus on new people as the mechanism of partisan re-

[1]It should be noted that secular partisan change among the electorate probably occurs in several different ways, only one of which is highlighted in this article. Such change, may for example, result from demographic trends in which one social group with distinctive partisan loyalties grows more rapidly than other groups in the population.

alignment (1976, 1979), but differs in emphasis on a continuous rather than episodic process. The abnormal changes associated with the New Deal realignment (i.e., the rapid mobilization of the previously inactive) are, like Key's "wider movements and more durable shifts," a special case of the normal pace of replacement.

The evolution of party differences on a political issue has little of the drama and none of the upheaval associated with critical election realignments. Nor do issues that have interesting evolutionary histories necessarily have powerful short-term effects on voting behavior. If issues develop and evolve slowly, the snapshot picture given of them in cross-sectional designs is bound to underestimate their effect, a problem that concerned the authors of *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960) early in history of mass behavior research. Only a longitudinal perspective can capture the long-term consequences of evolving issues.

## Properties of Evolving Issues

All political issues can be described by a general evolutionary model; they emerge, develop, and are (sometimes) resolved within the political system. Yet many policy conflicts are so non-salient that they never capture the attention of mass electorates. Even salient issues, moreover, are sometimes too short-lived to exert much influence on underlying partisan loyalties. They affect immediate voting decisions, but leave the link between citizen and party unchanged. Some issues reinforce the existing party alignment, and are a source of stability rather than change in the party system.

Issues that bring about visible rearrangements in the partisan composition of the electorate would seem to share certain qualities. Three such properties are these:

1. *Issue preferences must be deeply felt.* Preference for one policy option over another is not sufficient to recompose the electorate. Intense feeling is required. That intensity requires appeal to potent symbols to activate less-than-political masses. The issue must have penetrated public consciousness to an unusual degree or it will have too little impact to be noticeable—even in the long term.

2. *Parties and candidates must take up visibly different positions on the issue.* No matter how salient a particular policy conflict happens to be, it is unlikely to foster a partisan evolution if opposing parties and candidates cannot be differentiated on the basis of the issue. This differentiation may come about because one of the parties chooses to ignore the issue while the other party takes a strong stand, or the parties may adopt positions that differ in some degree. The important point is that partisan evolution is likely to go hand-in-hand with issue differentiation, for the latter gives citizens the opportunity to make party choices on the basis of policy considerations. Under these circumstances, parties are likely to recruit new identifiers with distinctive issue positions. The process is reciprocal and interactive; issue distinctiveness allows parties selectively to recruit new identifiers which, in turn, leads to further party differentiation on the issue. Converse (1975, p. 111) has argued that "the degree of objective party differentiation on major issues" is "very critical in the shaping of public opinion"; it is equally critical for the partisan evolution of political issues.

3. *The issue must be long on the political agenda.* Rapid partisan change is unlikely under any but the most catastrophic social and economic conditions, because a number of inertial processes work against it. One restraining condition is that the limited turnover of party elites, and therefore of party elite attitudes, restricts the ability of parties to move quickly to new issue positions. Because turnover is slow, parties are heterogeneous and party issue cues mixed. Where the stimuli are mixed and slow to evolve, mass response should be more mixed and slower still.[2] Finally, because many established party identifiers will selectively perceive party issue cues, most partisan change will occur by the recruitment of new identifiers. Reorientation by generational replacement is necessarily a slow process.

Racial desegregation is one issue—quite probably the only issue in American politics today—that has all three attributes. It has nearly a full evolutionary cycle, developing from *partisan* obscurity during the New Deal itself, to dramatic significance during the 1960s, to diminished (but still strong) salience during the 1970s. It is also an issue about which preferences are deeply felt. Like few issues in American history, race touches a sensitive nerve. It is an issue, finally, on which parties

[2]The valence issue is an interesting case of speedy party positioning, but it lacks evolutionary potential because both parties rapidly move to the same position. "Law and order," for example, ceased to be of any political interest when every candidate became equally "for" it. This points out yet another requisite for the evolving issue; it must be a genuine policy conflict. Otherwise, rational party leaders (e.g., candidates) will converge to the same popular position.

and candidates have staked out relatively unambiguous positions—most notably in the 1964 presidential election. Parties and candidates are usually able to deflect attention from highly divisive issues (Page, 1978), but this has not been the case with respect to race.

### The Partisan Evolution of Racial Issues

To trace racial attitudes and party identifications over time, we have used the 1972 SRC/CPS National Election Study because it includes the richest and most varied collection of racial attitude materials. We derive two racial scales from a factor analysis of these diverse items. The first taps attitudes toward desegregation, both in general and in the traditional battlegrounds of schools, jobs, housing, and so forth. The second racial factor, more diffuse and affective, taps attitudes oriented more toward racial protest (and protesters) than the substance of racial policy.[3]

We employ the racial scales, along with personal histories of party identification, to reconstruct the racial attitudes of the electorate for each presidential contest from 1952 to 1972. We recreate the electorate for each presidential contest back to 1952 by reclassifying 1972 respondents according to their reports of party identification change and by eliminating those not old enough to vote in each reconstructed year.[4] By tracing racial attitudes by changes in party identification, this reconstruction technique allows us to determine the racial component of long-term partisan change.[5]

The recreated electorates *cannot* be taken as representative of actual electorates for any given year, but only of those young enough to be sampled in 1972. They do not tell us accurately what past electorates were, but they do, within the limits of respondent recall, tell us where the 1972 electorate came from. Apparent evidence of secular change in racial liberalism particularly should be ignored, for it may well be an artifact of the biased age distributions of the simulated electorates.

Figures 1 and 2 trace the two dimensions of racial attitudes from 1952 through 1972 for self-identified Republicans and Democrats.[6] Figure 1 suggests that the dimension we have called "Black Protest Scale" separates Republicans from Democrats and has always done so. The slight widening of the gap between partisans appears to reflect the infusion of young voters into the Democratic ranks. However, because the partisan differences are nearly constant—the lines nearly parallel—Figure 1 suggests continuity along this dimension of racial attitude.

The trends of Figure 2 are not so easily dismissed. We have already noted the danger of inferring secular trends from these data, but the observed trends do establish a baseline against which changes among subgroups can be judged. That baseline highlights the one major instance of aggregate change in racial desegregation attitudes contrary to the trend, a move to racial conservatism by Republican identifiers in 1964.[7] That movement created a gap between the parties that has never been closed. After at least a decade of similarity to the Democrats, Republican identifiers moved to the racial right in 1964 and stayed more or less in that track while other elements moved uniformly to the left.

The divergence of the parties on the traditional segregation/integration dimension is not large. Neither party can accurately be called the party of segregation or integration. But a divergence did occur, and it went against a century of associating racism with the Democratic party.

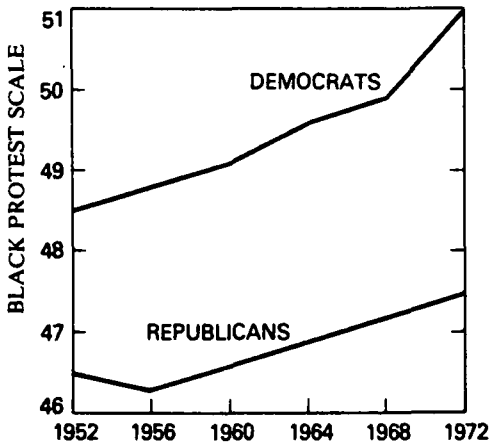
[3]See Carmines and Stimson (1980) for the factor derivation. It should also be noted that racial policy conservatism is not necessarily "racism." The primary referent of our measure is "government." Racism—not well measured in the survey tradition—is doubtless associated with racial policy conservatism, but the degree of association is an empirical question. The distinction is particularly important in assessing attitude trends. The new Republican racial conservatism may, for example, be a considerably different species from the old Dixiecrat variety.

[4]This is a variation of a technique employed by Kristi Andersen (1976, 1979). It differs in that it does not pool multiple surveys for the reconstruction and does not weight respondents by age.

[5]It should be noted that the reconstruction methodology is not without problems. Most importantly, Niemi, Katz and Newman (1980) have shown that there is substantial inaccuracy in the retrospective reports of party identification, particularly with regard to the full 7-point party identification scale. This inaccuracy, however, contributes only a minimum amount of unreliability to our analysis because: (a) we are not distinguishing between shades of party identification, and (b) the party changers are a very small group compared to the newly eligible partisans. Brody (1977) also finds that there is substantially greater stability in the "direction" of party identification than in its "strength."

[6]"Leaners" are treated as independents and, as a result, are excluded from the analysis. Thus the category self-identified Democrats includes both strong and weak Democrats, just as self-identified Republicans combines both strong and weak Republicans.

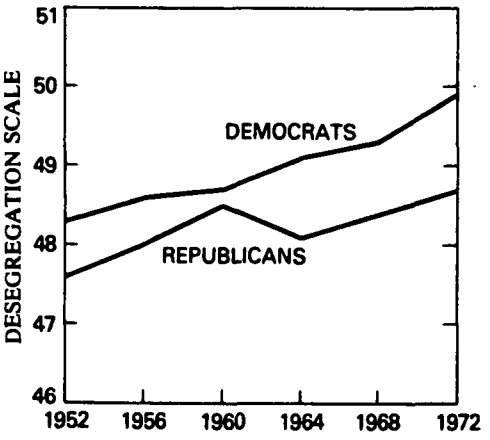
[7]We use the term "move" loosely. We cannot discriminate between individual attitude shifts and aggregate shifts caused by the gain and loss of identifiers. We assume the latter process is the major one.




*Source:* Computed from data collected in the 1972 Center for Political Studies Election Study, University of Michigan.

**Figure 1. Attitudes toward Black Protest by Year**

Because we can trace the entrance of new party identifiers over time, we can highlight the larger attitude differences among *new* partisans that are considerably diminished when aggregated with the old. In Figure 3 we plot the aggregated attitudes toward desegregation among new identifiers, by year and cumulatively since 1956. New party identifiers are in the main newly eligible voters, but the category also includes a very much smaller group, made up of those, formerly Independent, who have joined a party, or who have moved from one party to the other.




*Source:* Computed from data collected in the 1972 Center for Political Studies Election Study, University of Michigan.

**Figure 2. Desegregation Attitudes by Year**

After attracting new identifiers slightly more liberal than the Democrats in the period through 1960, the Republican party in 1964 not only moved to racial conservatism, but also did so quite dramatically. Those who report first identifying with the GOP in 1964 are strikingly more segregationist than any other group. About two-thirds of those new identifiers were newly eligible voters; their attitude distribution is, in any case, almost identical to the previously eligible voters reporting a new Republican identification. Movement away from the GOP contributed virtually nothing—contrary to much speculation at the time—to the new look of the Republican identifiers.

What is interesting about the 1968 new identifiers is not what did happen, but what did not. The appearance of George Wallace on the electoral scene in 1968 appears to have stopped for a time the racial polarization of party identification. Although the causes are no doubt multiple and difficult to sort out, it seems reasonable to assume that Wallace delayed the normal development of identification with party for his disproportionately young constituency. The Wallace candidacy removed a large number of racial conservatives form the ranks of new identifiers. The desegregation attitudes of those who did form identifications are slightly more liberal than would be expected and, more importantly, undifferentiated by party. Ideologues of the left may also have been slow to identify in 1968 because of the McCarthy/Kennedy insurgency in the Democratic party. But the number of new identifiers is too small to permit systematic analysis of these speculations.

Whatever was the case in 1968, the alignment of desegregation attitudes with party identification began again in 1972. Although the change was considerably less dramatic than in 1964, the Democratic party again went against its southern heritage to recruit distinctively more liberal identifiers and the Republican party moved slightly to the right.[8] That turn toward the right is less slight in contrast to the attitudes of other new identifiers; a small move to the right is stark against a trend in the other direction.

The net effect of adding new identifiers is shown in the cumulative portion of Figure 3. Since the Republican party has attracted both more liberal (before 1964) and more conservative

[8]The pattern is obfuscated by the fact that new Republican identifiers, while racially conservative relative to other new identifiers, are liberal relative to "old" Republicans. Thus the party in aggregate became more liberal by recruiting the most conservative group of new identifiers.

identifiers over the 20-year span, the net effect—an average of both trends—is not large. But the inter-party differences in racial attitudes in 1964 and beyond are so large that they easily outweigh the earlier pattern. And the new identifiers (of Figure 3) today comprise more than half of each party's base. Thus we have a change of some permanence, for even if race now ceases to be a salient aspect of partisan divisions, the changes already effected will be carried into the future by the inertia of established loyalty.[9]

### 1976 and Beyond

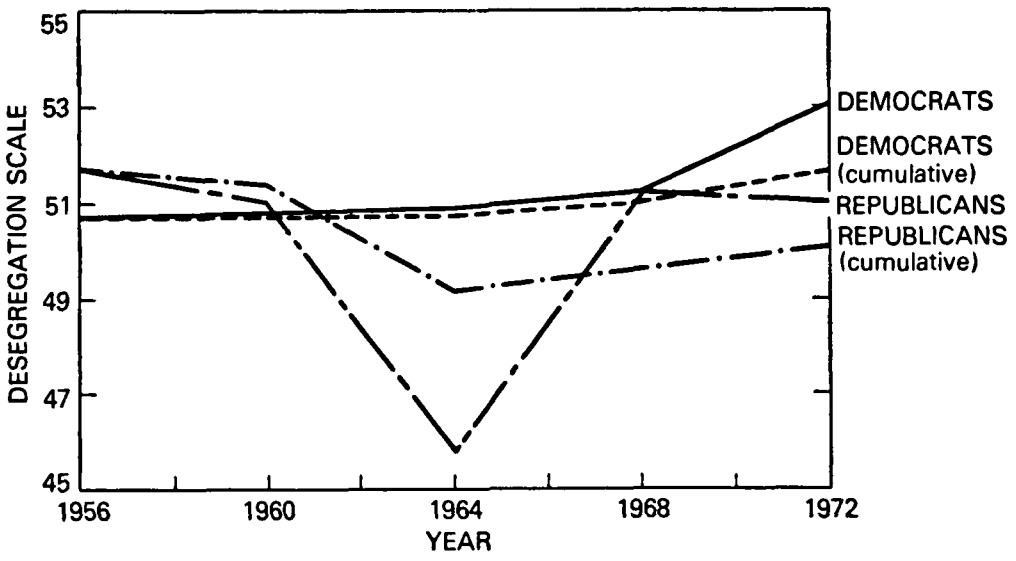
The 1972 electoral contest is the centerpiece of this analysis for a number of reasons. It was the first U.S. presidential election subsequent to the electoral period when racial issues were generally believed to be highly salient. Thus it is important for us to speak to the contention that 1972 marked the end of racial politics. The quantity and diversity of racial attitude materials that the 1972 CPS study offers also are unsurpassed in the national election study series. And with neither Nixon nor McGovern closely identified in the public mind with the racial politics of the sixties, the 1972 study offers an opportunity to study the long-term impact of race relatively free from short-term disturbances.

The 1976 election, on the other hand, was clouded by Jimmy Carter's identification with southern regional pride, culture, and politics side by side with appeal to and support from black voters. This confusion makes the 1976 contest a poor vehicle for the study of the partisan evolution of racial issues. The 1976 CPS measures of racial attitudes also are not the equal of the earlier study. But to assert that an issue evolution was in progress compels us to look at this newest evidence.

Because we regard the 1976 contest with some suspicion, we treat it as an independent test of the issue evolution thesis.[10] Our method is as before:

[9]The new partisans of Figure 3 are both black and white. But the interpretation of the figure would be considerably different if it were the case that blacks accounted for much of the observed change. They do not. Inter-party differences for whites only (Democratic mean minus Republican mean) are: 1952, -.04; 1956, -2.88; 1960, -3.89; 1964, +2.32; 1968, +.38; 1972, +.63. This is exactly the pattern of Figure 3, Republican racial liberalism through 1960 and conservatism in 1964 and after. Blacks are left in the figure out of theoretical preference, but their tiny numbers rule out significant impacts on the aggregated party groups.

[10]It is a genuinely independent test in the important sense that our analysis to this point was completed before we examined the 1976 study. Our predictions are




*Source:* Computed from data collected in the 1972 Center for Political Studies Election Study, University of Michigan.

**Figure 3. Desegregation Attitudes of New Party Identifiers by Year and Cumulatively Since 1956**

Table 1. Attitudes on Desegregation of 1976 and (Reconstructed) 1972 Party Identifiers*

| Party | All Identifiers 1972 | All Identifiers 1976 | "New" Identifiers 1976 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Democrat | 50.73 | 51.18 | 54.40 |
| Republican | 48.05 | 48.22 | 50.20 |
| Difference | 2.68 | 2.96 | 4.20 |
| | ($p < .001$) | ($p < .001$) | ($p < .05$) |
| N | 1035 | 1136 | 114 |

*Source:* University of Michigan Center for Political Studies 1976 American National Election Study.

*Entries are mean scores on desegregation scale. Higher scores indicate stronger advocacy of desegregation measures (see n. 11).

we project a scale of contemporary (i.e., 1976) attitudes toward desegregation[11] backward in time (to 1972) by reclassifying respondents who reported shifts in party identification or who were not old enough to vote at the earlier time. There are two possible outcomes of this analysis:

1. Party differences in attitudes toward desegregation could decline or even disappear over the 1972-1976 period. That would undermine the issue evolution thesis, leading to the inference that the observed party change was either weak or transitory.
2. Party differences on this issue could increase or stay about the same over the period. That would be evidence of the continuing partisan evolution of attitudes toward desegregation.

The outcome reported in Table 1 is clear. The desegregation attitudes of Republican and Democratic identifiers are significantly different in both 1972 and 1976, and the margin of difference grows. The partisan evolution of racial issues was continuing in 1976.

Comparison of the 1972 and 1976 cross sections is muddied by the fact that they are partially overlapping samples. We can get a somewhat cleaner view of change by looking only at new partisans,[12] those who either are newly eligible to vote or who report a change in party identification subsequent to 1972. That analysis, also reported in Table 1, shows that the Democratic party continued to recruit new identifiers more favorably disposed toward racial desegregation than their Republican counterparts, a difference that is statistically significant. It is notable that this occurred in the face of Jimmy Carter's evident appeal to white southerners of traditional inclination.

Table 2 is a verbal summary of the complicated changes we have observed since 1960. It displays a

thus a priori in more than the normal connotation of the term.

[11]The 1976 scale is composed of four items (school integration, neighborhood integration, "civil rights too fast," and [de]segregation) which were central to the 1972 desegregation scale (Carmines and Stimson, 1980) and continued in the later study. The scale is a sum of the four equally weighted items, expressed as a standard score with a mean and standard deviation of 50 and 10, respectively.

[12]Inter-party differences could also increase from the disappearance from the electorate of pre-realignment age cohorts, in effect, without continuing realignment. The separate examination of "new" partisans allows us to rule out this possible artifact.

Table 2. Sources and Consequences of Changes in Racial Attitudes, 1960-1976

| | Sources of Change: New Democrats | Sources of Change: New Republicans | Net Difference Between Parties |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1960 | No Change | No Change | None |
| 1964 | No Change | More Conservative | New Difference |
| 1968 | No Change | No Change | Sustained Difference |
| 1972 | More Liberal | No Change | Increased Difference |
| 1976 | More Liberal | No Change | Increased Difference |

*Source:* Authors' summary.

growing split between the parties that is by no means symmetrical, a result of one powerful move to the right by the new Republicans in 1964 and two later counter-moves to the left by the new Democrats (in 1972 and 1976)—all superimposed on an apparent secular trend for the electorate.[13] Over this 12-year period the parties have become clearly differentiable, mainly as a result of the behavior of new partisans.

Desegregation has provoked a slow but significant shift in the partisan composition of the electorate. It has realigned the coalitional basis of the party system. It is a strange sort of realignment, however, for it appears to work to the detriment of the minority party. Not a new issue cleavage to balance the scale of party strength, desegregation appears rather to cause further imbalance. Why then would a minority party deliberately raise such an issue?

Segregationists as a pool of "available" party supporters are something of a mirage. They exist, and in no small number. But the slight association of segregationist views with age (r = .15) makes a conservative appeal on this issue a dubious long-run proposition for two reasons. One is that older voters with their established party loyalties are less available for conversion than their younger counterparts. The South in the last several elections illustrates the point: Republican success in attracting votes has been accompanied by failure to secure large numbers of conversions to the party (see Beck, 1977; Campbell, 1977a, 1977b; also see Wolfinger and Arseneau, 1978).

The regularity of human mortality is the second reason why an appeal to older voters with segregationist views is dubious in the long run. Older voters, once converted, cannot be counted upon to stay in the electorate very long. To court the old and forego the young has predictably devastating consequences. And that appears to be precisely what the Republican party has done. In the period since 1960, 51 percent of those newly identifying themselves with the Republicans are *not* newly eligible voters, while the comparable figure for the Democrats is 22.5 percent. The segregationists are a tempting target; elections can be won with them. But to court them may squander a party's future.

[13]Throughout this entire period (1952 to 1976) Independents have been more liberal in their racial attitudes than the identifiers of either party. Converse (1976) has speculated that racial conflict (as well as public reactions to the war in Vietnam) contributed to the increase in numbers of Independents beginning in the mid-1960s. Some of our analysis is suggestive of the truth of Converse's conclusion, but a thorough analysis of this phenomenon requires a different analytic strategy than that developed in this article.

## Modeling Issue Evolution

The concept of issue evolution is dynamic; it implies an ongoing process (Przeworski, 1975). We conceive the process of the partisan evolution of an issue as:

1. A party system that is in equilibrium with respect to issue $X$ at time $t - 1$, followed by
2. A disturbance at time $t$ which results in the selective recruitment of party identifiers with regard to $X$, followed by
3. Either continuing selective recruitment or decay of th time $t$ impact at $t + 1$ and beyond.

Each party is assumed to consist of a stable base of identifiers plus an increment[14] added at each election. Evolving issues are assumed to affect only the increment, except under extraordinary conditions. The net impact of issues on the party system is thus limited by the size of the increments affected. As a proportion of the party, each increment is largest the year it is added, declining thereafter as newer increments are added.

The constraints on issue evolution are thus severe. Few issues are powerful enough to affect the recruitment of party identifiers. For issues powerful enough at one time—the controversy over the Vietnam War may be a good example—initial effects are small, since the increment of new identifiers is only a minor proportion of the party. And even that small effect decays as the affected increment becomes an ever-smaller proportion of the party. To exert substantial change, an issue must influence the recruitment of party identifiers over an extended period.

These simple assumptions allow us to model some possible alternative conceptions of the impact of desegregation on the American party structure. With regard to the apparent partisan evolution beginning in 1964, we can examine the predictions of three models. They are, in order of impact:

### Model 1: "Flash in the Pan"

The apparent 1964 partisan change was purely transitory, perhaps only a temporary reaction to Goldwater.

*Prediction:* Party differences on the desegregation issue should revert to their pre-1964 level. That is not the case.

[14]We use the term "increment" in preference to the familiar "cohort" to maintain the theoretical distinction between new partisans (of any age) and newly eligible partisans.

**Model 2: "Incremental Shock"**

The 1964 impact was permanent, but it affected only party identifiers recruited in that year.

*Prediction:* Since we know (a) the attitudes of the two parties in 1964, and (b) the size of the 1964 party groups as a proportion of all partisans in later years, we can predict expected inter-party differences purely as a function of (a) and (b) and the assumption that later increments are undifferentiated by racial attitudes. The aggregate difference between the parties will be at maximum in 1964, reflecting the impact of the new partisans with their distinctive racial attitudes. The difference should decline steadily (and predictably) after 1964 as undifferentiated increments are added in succession to the previous party base. The predicted decay of party distinctiveness over time appears in the center column of Table 3.

**Model 3: "Issue Evolution"**

The 1964 realignment was permanent, and the process it began is continuing.

*Prediction:* Party differences do not decay over time.[15] This will be the case if and only if differences in successive increments are greater than or equal to existing aggregate party differences. The last column of Table 3 shows actual attitude differences between the party groups at time *t* (1964) and beyond.

The pattern of decay predicted by the "Incremental Shock" model does not occur. Differences remained about constant in the confusing 1968 three-way contest. In two subsequent elections they have increased.[16] We are left with the inference of Model 3, that an issue evolution has occurred. With the 1964-1976 increments now more than a third of all party identifiers, inter-party differences are growing by the year. It is likely, given the self-generating dynamic of issue evolution, that this process will continue. Even if it does not, what has already occurred by 1976—barring major realignment along some other dimension—will be carried into the twenty-first century.

## Another Look at Issue Evolution: A Cross-Method Validation

Reconstructed party identifications have dominated the analysis to this point. The reconstruction technique gives us a portrait of a mass electorate undergoing slow, steady transformation. Such transformation would be expected to yield modest (but significant) empirical evidence, and that is what we have seen. But modest evidence—

[15]Readers familiar with the time-series tradition will recognize Model 2 (Incremental Shock) as a (stationary) first-order auto-regressive process and the expected inter-party differences in Table 3 as a variation on the characteristic exponential decay process. Model 3 is also AR(1), but it is nonstationary (i.e., not tending toward equilibrium), which accords well with our conceptualization of issue evolution.

[16]There is some irony in the fact that distinctiveness appears to grow in the face of declining salience. It seems reasonable to speculate that the open conflict of the 1960s was prerequisite to: (1) clarified party images and hence (2) continuing selective recruitment in the 1970s.

**Table 3. Party Differences in Attitudes Toward Desegregation: Expected[a] and Actual**

| | | Ratio 1964 Identifiers to All Party Identifiers | Expected Party Differences | Actual Party Differences |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| T | 1964 | 1.000 | .993 | .993 |
| T+1 | 1968 | .912 | .906 | .968 |
| T+2 | 1972 | .795 | .789 | 1.197 |
| T+3 | 1976 | .715 | .710 | 2.960[b] |

*Source:* University of Michigan Center for Political Studies American National Election Studies for 1972 and 1976.

[a]Expected differences are simply the 1964 difference (.993) multiplied by the ratio of 1964 (and earlier) identifiers to all party identifiers in each year.

[b]Estimation of the exact 1976 difference is made problematic because measurement of desegregation attitudes is not perfectly comparable to the earlier scale. The 1976 scale is composed of the same dominant items and is standardized to the same mean and standard deviation (50, 10) as the earlier scale. An alternate estimate can be derived from combining the 1972-1976 change in Table 1 (based wholly on the 1976 scale) with the actual 1972 difference. That lower estimate (1.480) also supports our interpretation.

however appropriate to expectations—may have many explanations, one of which is artifact. It is thus reasonable to ask whether these findings would be sustained outside the context of the method in which they were developed.

The obvious alternative to reconstructing is to use contemporaneous reports from voters regarding their attitudes toward desegregation and party identification. The difficulties involved in such over-time comparisons from cross-sectional data are well known (see Achen, 1975: Bishop et al., 1978; Sullivan et al., 1978). The important point for our purpose, however, is that they are a different set of problems from those associated with the reconstruction technique. We have, therefore, conducted cross-sectional analyses of each of the SRC/CPS presidential election studies from 1956 through 1976. A racial desegregation scale[17] is developed from the best items of each. The result is arrayed in Table 4 in party bases, new increments for each year, and the difference (Democratic minus Republican) between new party increments.

The patterns of Table 4 are notably convergent with Figures 2 and 3. Although only the data from 1972 and 1976 are common to both analyses, with but very small deviations the same year-to-year patterns are found in both. The Republican ("base") party emerges are more racially liberal than the Democrats through 1960, followed by a turn to the right in 1964 and beyond. The inter-party differences are highly significant for 1964, 1968, and 1976. But more important, the pattern across all six elections is as predicted.

The changes are again more visible among the new partisans, a category that includes the newly eligible and those reporting a recent party change. As is also shown in Table 4, those newly identifying with the Republican party tended to be more liberal in 1956 and 1960, but an abrupt

[17]Assuming measurement comparability across time is chancy at best; neither the items, their wording, or indeed the issue itself is constant from year to year. Thus we report the cross-sectional analysis with some trepidation and only in a secondary confirmatory role. Each desegregation scale is as before set to a standard metric (50,10). The 1972 cross section is based upon the desegregation factor we have already employed. Items used for other years are "Civil Rights Movement Too Fast/Too Slow" (1964, 1968, 1976); "Favor Desegregation" (1964, 1968, 1976); "School Integration" (1956, 1960, 1964, 1968, 1976); "Fair Treatment in Jobs/Housing" (1956, 1960, 1964, 1968); public accommodations (1964, 1968); and open housing (1964, 1968, 1976). The 1960 scale is subject to unusually large fluctuations from the combination of both few items and very few (unweighted) respondents.

**Table 4. Desegregation Attitudes of Partisans, Old and New**

| Year | Democrats | | Republicans | | Democratic Minus Republican Difference in Increments |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Previous Base | New Increment[a] | Previous Base | New Increment | |
| 1956 | 49.132 | 49.606 | 50.252 | 51.131 | −1.525 |
| (N) | (404) | (35) | (284) | (23) | |
| 1960 | 49.162 | 49.465 | 49.784 | 55.025 | −5.560 |
| (N)[b] | (640) | (59) | (436) | (27) | |
| 1964 | 50.555 | 50.200 | 48.257 | 45.643 | +4.557 |
| (N) | (396) | (57) | (192) | (20) | |
| 1968 | 51.528 | 53.610 | 48.126 | 50.923 | +2.687 |
| (N) | (462) | (38) | (236) | (18) | |
| 1972 | 49.282 | 53.301 | 48.382 | 51.041 | +2.260 |
| (N) | (726) | (143) | (466) | (74) | |
| 1976 | 50.808 | 54.403 | 48.025 | 50.202 | +4.201 |
| (N) | (645) | (76) | (378) | (38) | |

*Source:* University of Michigan Survey Research Center American National Election Studies for 1956, 1960, 1964, 1968, 1972 and 1976.

[a]Newly eligible to vote or reported party identification change subsequent to the previous presidential election.

[b]Weighted.

change occurred in 1965. Beginning in that year and continuing unabated through 1976, newly identified Republicans were considerably more conservative on racial issues than new Democrats.[18] Differences between these much smaller groups are significant for 1960, 1964, and 1976, and nearly so for 1968 and 1972. The over-time pattern with the partisan increments, as with the base, is perfect.

The cross-sectional analysis thus tells essentially the same story as the earlier reconstructions. Partisanship and racial attitudes among the electorate are undergoing secular change; an issue evolution is in progress.

## Conclusion

The picture presented of the electorate and the party system is often a quite static, if not stagnant one. Thought to be fixed in time, anchored firmly to the social structure, and dependent for vitality upon the economic system, mass political behavior is conceived of as both stationary and nonautonomous. Periodically, it is assumed, the mold is broken as abrupt and massive changes are manifested in a critical election realignment, resulting in the overturning of the old party system and the forging of a new one more responsive to the altered economic and social conditions.

Political reality, however, is considerably more complex and less dramatic than the contours painted in this oversimplified picture. The electorate is continuously undergoing small, incremental but persistent changes that over an extended period can leave an indelible imprint on the political landscape. The theory of issue evolution is a theory of normal partisan change—the gradual transformation of the party system caused by evolving issues and effected through population replacement.

How large is that change? Students of critical election realignments look for convulsive shifts in partisan alignment. What we have demonstrated is that one particular issue, racial desegregation, has provoked measurable change in the recruitment of party identifiers over a 12-year period, less than a full generation. Evolutionary change is difficult to appreciate, becuase it is never so large from one election to the next to attract much attention.[19] But its cumulative impact is substantial when extrapolated to the millions of voting-age citizens and its implications for the development of the party system are unmistakable.

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[18]Again, to be sure that these cross-sectional trends were not due solely to the behavior of black partisans, we conducted an identical analysis among new white partisans only. The *differences* in desegregation attitudes between new partisans were: 1956, -.162; 1960, -6.04; 1964, +4.06; 1968, +1.22; 1972, +.61; 1976, +3.29. These figures support the same interpretations; new Republicans are more liberal prior to 1964 and more conservative thereafter.

[19]The principal characteristic of evolutionary change in Darwinian biology is the notion that changes of considerable magnitude occur over very long periods of time by the successive replacement of generations of species, one by another. The generations differ only in the proportions of individuals possessing minor distinctive traits, but that is enough to effect large scale change over time. That is precisely the postulated causal mechanism of issue evolution.

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