

RESEARCH DESIGN

Deciding the Midwest: An Examination of Regional Realignment

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In the discussion of partisanship and polarization exists the theory of realignment, which is commonly accepted by scholars as a relevant change in either the ideological identity of a group or its voting behavior. At its foundation lies the discussion of types of realignment: critical and secular. This theory builds upon itself until it can be applied to specific regions of the United States. There is much existing literature on the relevance of realignment theory in the Southern and Northeastern United States; the regions now stand as bastions of support for the Republican and Democratic Party, respectively. However, there is a gap of analysis on the Midwest, a region renowned for its crucial role in elections and history of hazy political identification. This study will examine specific aspects of realignment theory and its application to the cases of the South and Northeast in order to define a group of common driving factors. These factors will then be utilized in order to create a template which will allow for a categorized exploration of regional realignments. This template will aim to answer the question: what has happened to the Midwest?

In recent years the Midwestern states of Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Iowa, Wisconsin, Missouri and Minnesota have played a key role in both congressional and presidential elections. The region has produced the last three House speakers (Wisconsin, Ohio and Illinois, respectively) and includes a number of key swing states, most notably, Ohio. Though some states in the region lean conservative and others liberal, voters in the region have proven willing to elect candidates from both parties in statewide elections for senate and governor. When compared to the more consistently one-sided records of partisan success exhibited by the Northeastern and Southern United States, the political identity of the Midwest is considerably less stable.

In the past five decades, the parties have undergone a slow and grinding, but ultimately transformative realignment. The Northeastern United States exists today as a stronghold for the Democratic Party and is often seen as one of the strongest bases for the party in terms of consistency in ideological support and election results. On the opposite side of the political spectrum, the American South has been dominated by the Republican Party since the mid-1970s. Over the course of five or six decades, the two regions essentially swapped partisan affiliations.

Researchers have examined realignment in the South and, to a lesser extent, the Northeast in detail and identified economic, political, racial and social factors that contributed to each region's political shift. Presently, little is known about how (or whether) a similar pattern of realignment played out in the Midwest. Due to its history of swinging between candidates in campaigns and a tendency to realign based off of issue type, the Midwest has been viewed as a mixed bag in terms of its political leanings. In this paper, I examine the contribution that the Midwest has made to the changing and increasingly polarized political environment. By comparing voting trends at the county, state and federal levels due to demographic, economic and societal factors, and by examining the changes in congressional makeup, I aim to answer the question: what did realignment look like in the Midwest?

Realignments

Scholars agree that realignments take one of two forms: critical or secular. Critical realignments are those that take place in a very short period of time as a result of a dramatic shift in voter preferences or party positions that take place across no more than a few groundbreaking election cycles (Burnham, 1967). Critical realignments are often dramatic in nature, particularly when they establish a new partisan majority as they did in the 1932 elections. In contrast, secular realignments occur in a much more grinding manner. The process of secular realignment can span decades, with a number of key events over the years punctuating and contributing to substantial political changes.

Whether critical or secular, realignments produce drastic and significant changes in party platforms and coalitions, party identification, voting behavior and the levels of electoral success enjoyed by the respective parties. These large scale shifts don't just happen by chance, often times they are pushed by several major factors that can affect the political identity of a region in a variety of aspects. The processes of a realignment are very much contingent on social, economic and demographic factors, that act in a push-pull manner; that is they are a combined result of factors affecting both political elites and voters.

Parties and Partisanship

Political scientists have long organized American politics by "party systems," which refers to the mapping out of the political history of the United States into definitive periods. In specific election cycles and historical periods, changes in partisan majority represent shifts in both voter behavior and electoral politics (Burnham 1970). Some scholars suggest that realignments follow a cyclical pattern where there is a major shift in partisan majority, which is then followed by several election cycles of normality. Several factors have been named as having a relevant effect on electoral realignments: societal developments that ultimately demand policy changes (Burnham 1970), Societal

traumas (Beck 1974), and changes in ideological interests accompanied with new issue types and a change in expectation of the role of government (Mayhew 2002). Most scholars view the political party system as being very malleable and subject to change, often times moving in a cyclical pattern. Though politics tends to be relatively stable, the process of realignment cycles through roughly every few decades (Burnham 1967).

In order to truly determine if a state has undergone a realignment an analysis has to be made on every level of political participation. By examining voting behavior starting at the level of cities, counties, districts and then the state, eventually a clearer image of the politics of the region can be formed. The relevance of this approach lies in the advantage of being able to take into consideration all of the various characteristics of a region. Based solely off of the geography, several predictions and accepted assumptions can be made. Traditionally cities are more likely to support Democratic politicians, while rural areas are more in line with Republicans. Not only does this show the differences presented within an area, it also provides a snapshot of the role of economics in political decisions. On the next level, counties can very well be a mixed bag of political support based off of similar factors found at the city level. However, the geography takes a more prominent role, as counties of differing ideologies can literally be side-by-side. While cities are often clear in their partisanship, a result of small scale and common interests, counties present the challenge of a more diverse constituencies.

All of this builds upon itself until district level politics is arrived upon. Congressional districts present a careful challenge in addressing the intricacies that arise as a result of the meeting of elite level partisanship and voting behavior. Districts house within themselves a variety of constituent interests which are motivated by social, demographic and economic issues, as well as having the unique aspect of being represented by an elected official that isn't necessarily supported by the entirety of the district itself. The challenge that arises for the political elites is accurately representing their district's interests as a whole, while achieving the goal of continued party allegiance. This is compounded by the effects of congressional redistricting and balancing the different needs and beliefs of constituents across diverse geographic areas. As voter interests change, so to must the voting behavior of the elites, which may also have an equal and opposite effect.

Partisan Realignments and Demographic Factors

An important facet of realignment theory is the effect of the roles played by ideological interests, issue type, party identification and policy output. While it is commonly accepted to be cyclical by nature, extenuating factors can cause "buildups" (Burnham 1967) in stable political eras and cause new realignments in the electorate. As new societal systems develop or emerge, new policy is forced to adjust. Often times taking place during periods of crisis or change, strong party identifications are formed

and can proliferate the shift in partisan identity (Sundquist 1973). Though not always wholly true, realignments are typically associated with large clusters of policy transformations, ushered in by the change in partisan dominance (Burnham 1967). Majorities deriving their dominance via critical realignments are normally responsible for large amounts of legislation, a reflection of shifts in voter interests.

When examining changes in a regions political identity certain factors, such as those presented on a geographic basis, cannot be overlooked. There is a benefit of breaking down regions to the smallest applicable units possible (counties) to determine the effect of factors on voting patterns within a geographic area. There would be less allowance for critical intra-state variances, thus overlooking identifying details, if data regarding political identification and voting behavior was presented only on the basis of state level analysis. Furthermore, counties, and ultimately districts will more often than not vote according to their own demographic and economic situations, regardless of the state's voting patterns. (Levernier & Barilla, 2006). Demographic issues present themselves most prevalently in the face of social issues, while issues regarding economics are most impactful on a geographic basis. In elections centered on socio-cultural issues, demographics play a more influential role on voting behavior, regardless of political alignments. (Lesthaeghe & Neidert, 2009). Demographic issues have massive influencing capabilities, sometimes going as far as pushing established voters to vote against their traditional party identifications.

Culturally impactful issues, such as wars or proposed policies regarding issues with strong connections to personal morality have a tendency to sway voters' behavior due to more social or personal factors. A voter may be an established Republican, but when faced with an issue that compromises his or her personal beliefs, go against the stance of his or her party. Socio-demographic factors present strong influencing capabilities in major elections, based solely off personal identifiable factors (Unger, 2005). While cultural issues highlight the differences between the two major parties in American politics, they also depict gaps in voting behavior amongst individual demographic groups. Issues that are gender, race or culturally oriented elicit different reactions per different identifiable groups. A study presented by Kauffmann (2002) demonstrates how specific separating factors, primarily gender, create discrepancies within common groups. In essence, the most personal of characteristics is what influences voting behavior the most. The study mapped the shift taking place within the population of white voters, with more men supporting Republican ideologies, while women favored those of the Democrats. The pervasive and influential impact of demographic factors cannot be understated in the discussion of realignments.

Arguably, the trend of demographics effecting election outcomes will only increase in the decades to come, especially in their impact on Congressional districts. As districts undergo changes in terms of population make-up, location and identity factors will play

an increased role in voter behavior, subsequently causing House and Presidential elections will come to reflect each other more closely (Stonecash, 2014). In order to fully understand the processes of realignments in specific cases, it is important to realize the implications of changes in district-level politics. A major influencing factor in district-level politics is increased levels of partisan behavior, as well the establishment of new party ideology, especially that which is based off of constituent interests. One study suggests that polarization occurring at the level of individual voters within an area has a larger effect on the voting behavior of House Representatives than the other way around (Born 2008). Along the same lines as this, is the suggestion that polarization greatly diminishes the incumbency advantage in elections, leading to further changes in district representation, a phenomenon that contradicts traditional electoral politics (Jacobson, 2015).

Redistricting has often overlooked effects on both voters and political elites. Crespin (2010) highlights the tendency for incumbent elected officials to alter their voting patterns following a partisan redistricting cycle. This alteration of voting behavior is beneficial for constituents, as their interests are more actively pursued, but detrimental to the identity of the Representative's party. This tendency is compounded by the newly present role being played by personal factors on an issue-type basis. Ideology often finds itself on the back burner as districts are faced with issues that resonate on a personal level (Bafumi & Shapiro, 2009). Substantial changes in the demographic make-up of districts following cycles of redistricting also change the severity of impact of increases in partisan polarization (Levendusky & Pope, 2008).

Realignment In the South

Political identity in the Southern United States is an interesting and complicated study. Arguably, the region was in a process of realignment from the end of the 19th century until the late 20th century. While the driving factors of the South are not uncommon to the political phenomenon, they manifested themselves in unique ways. A complexity of Southern political identity is its close ties to the Democratic Party, regardless of the parties' actual ideology. As stated previously, the Republican and Democratic parties underwent a shift in their own political identity which, in essence, reversed the established order of American politics. Republicans became conservative while Democrats became increasingly liberal. However, Southern voters maintained their allegiance to the Democratic Party throughout it all. Not until the 1960s was there the starts of a shift, but conceptual, the process of a secular realignment had already begun.

The Southern realignment was critical in its early stages, in terms of duration and severity of its effects. As voters physically moved in terms of districts and geography, voter behavior moved accordingly (Darmofal & Nardulli, 2010). This arose from a common theme of ideological realignments, where voters physically realign based off of

demographic characteristics and geographic factors. Existing as a major catalyst were the establishments of partisan stances on issues revolving around interests of race and religion (Valentino & Sears, 2005). This crucial aspect permeated the Southern realignment, often times causing periods of critical realignment within the existing secular (Bullock & Hoffman, 2006). As a result of this change of ideologies of the two parties, Southern voters eventually found themselves voting Republican while identifying as Democrat (Knuckey, 2006). As the Democratic party became more established as having a liberal stance on many of the issues based in religious and racial interests, Southern voters became increasingly conservative and moved further along in their separation from the Democratic ideology.

As a greater number of issues rooted in demographic characteristics became the center of American politics, district level elections began to reflect the changes in Southern partisan identification. The more culturally oriented the Congressional election, the more overwhelming Southern support for Republican ideals became (Branton, 2009). Subsequently following a more pronounced shift in district-level voting patterns, House representation became increasingly Republican, a characteristic that eventually would align itself with increased levels of Republican support in Presidential elections (Caraley, 2009). This extensive shift is discussed by Zingher, (2014) who analyzes the longitudinal impacts of a large scale shift in the bases of partisan support. By the late 1990s and early-to-mid 2000s, Southern voters had established voting patterns that emphasized their unique tendencies and ideological stances. Socio-cultural issues became the dominant factors in determining electoral results, as Southern voters held onto their long established and uniquely identifiable political history (Hillygus & Shields, 2009).

Realignment in the Northeast

Finding its start much more recently, the Northeastern region of the United States has undergone an equally significant and unique transition in its political identity. Just as the South became increasingly Republican, the Northeast became a more liberally centered political base as a result of similar factors. Both secular realignments in many ways peaked during the same political era. This tandem realignment is addressed by Abramowitz and Knotts, (2006) who identify the uniqueness of the Republican Party drifting out of dominance in the Northeast while simultaneously gaining support in the South. While socio-cultural issues drove the Southern realignment, what occurred in the Northeast was grounded much more in socio-economic interests. Similarly to what occurred in the South, the Northeastern realignment began at the district-level, driven by demographic factors and changes in partisan ideology. In many ways, the trajectory of the Northeastern realignment contradicts the gradual Republican domination that permeated House elections starting in the late 1980s (Ceaser & Saldin, 2005).

The extensive shift in Northeastern political identity moved, in many ways, much faster than its Southern counterpart. Perhaps this is due to closer ideological similarities amongst elected officials and their constituents (Ardonin & Garand, 2003). In a very similar manner to that of the Southern process, is the establishment of a highly unique and identifiable pattern of voting that is now present in the Northeast. In recent years, white voters across all demographic groups are migrating towards more conservative policies, especially in regards to racial-based issues such as immigration (Hanjnal & Rivera, 2014). However, this does not seem applicable to white voters in established Democratic districts in the Northeast. Klinker and Schaller (2006) suggest that as partisan politics becomes increasingly divisive, the newly aligned region of the Northeast (and the South) will be less and less likely to undergo dramatic shifts in midterm House elections. Knuckey (2009) attributes the strength of Northeastern Democratic support to its compatibility with social and demographic ideologies in the region. The effect of this deep rooted linkage is a decline in likelihood of changes in partisan dominance, a facet of electoral politics that presides over elections in both the Northeastern and Southern United States (Abramowitz & Gunning, 2006).

Research Question

Realignment theory holds a lot of relevance in modern electoral politics. Not only is the process indicative of societal changes, but it also reveals ideological adjustments within political parties. With the acceptance of a more staunchly established partisanship comes the assumption that election cycles will see a decline in level of competition. As well, with the substantial shift that has occurred in both the Southern and Northeastern United States, understanding the root causes and subsequent effects that acted as driving factors can help determine effective political strategies, as well as maintain a positive connection with regional constituencies. While the regional realignments that effected the Northeast and South dominated the political arena for decades in the late 20th century, the presence of the Midwest in politics following the 1990s exhibit tendencies of a new change disrupting a stable political atmosphere. As the region demonstrates a tendency of lending political support to both the Republican and Democratic Party, at both the state and federal level, the challenge of deciding the Midwest becomes increasingly stiff. With continual change taking place across several areas of political life, the Midwest is entering into a pivotal era, thus exhibiting factors associated with realignment theory. The question now is in what ways are these changes happening. Do they align with the evidence found in the Northeast and South? Given these terms of context, does the Midwest fit realignment theory?

In the examining the secular realignments of the Northeastern and Southern United States, common factors regarding the very nature of political change come to light. Driven by a combination of social, economic and demographic factors, secular realignments at the regional level follow a typical pattern: reactions to partisan ideology, changes in district-level voting which result in changes in Congressional make-up and finally, an alignment of electoral results at all levels, signifying a permanent shift of identity. Taking these factors into consideration, with an analysis of region-specific data a template of identifying secular realignments can be formed. In the context of what occurred in the Northeast and South; has the Midwestern United States undergone a realignment of the same type and scale in recent decades?

Research Design

Previous research has tracked realignment in the Southern, and to a somewhat lesser extent, Northeastern United States. There have been a number of in depth examinations of significant shifts in partisan alignment and party identification over specific periods of time within these regions. These shifts in political identity have been closely associated with the social and economic changes that have occurred in those time periods as well and join together to depict a remolding of the partisan identity of each region. While the realignments of the South and Northeast were, to some extent, separate phenomena they shared a number of common driving factors that resulted in similar outcomes. In both cases, social and economic changes presented themselves, and the electoral politics of the region were driven to adjust. This process of events creates a systematic cause-and-effect in discussing realignment in a regional sense. In this study, I take a closer look at the partisan alignments and party identification in the Midwest and examine the underlying social and economic changes that have contributed to the realignment in this region.

Sample

The United States Census Bureau defines the Midwest as a region containing the states of Nebraska, Kansas, North and South Dakota, Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, Iowa, Michigan, Missouri and Minnesota. In this study, the region discussed as the “Midwest” will refer to the states of Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, Iowa, Michigan, Missouri and Minnesota (Census Regions of the United States: U.S. Census Bureau). For the purpose of focusing on the states’ similarities in geographic location, demographic makeup, economic market and political culture, Nebraska, Kansas and the Dakotas will be excluded. Based off of my own hypotheses, I exclude these latter states on the basis that they do not share the same identifiable factors found in the previous states. Alongside these identifiable factors, those states in the Midwest, as defined in this study, share a common reputation as modern “swing” states, based off of their absence of firm

partisan identity. This facet makes the Midwest crucially important to study due to the ability of the region to decide highly-contested elections on the federal scale.

Midwestern states share a similar geographic identity. This cartographic outlook is important to take into consideration for its often overlooked influences on concepts such as proximity voting, congressional districting based off of population density and the effects of the urban-rural ratio on economics. The balance of the Midwestern economy rests between a vastly rural agricultural base, with a small number of major urban areas that were formed and developed as hubs of industrialization. While the industry of the Midwest has slowed in recent years, it still exists as the “breadbasket” of the United States (U.S. Department of State, 2011). Due to its close commonalities in the ratio of rural to urban areas, the demographic makeup of the Midwest finds many common linkages. Traditionally, Midwestern cities housed a higher percentage of minorities while rural areas have typically housed a population of people of European descent. However, due to urban migration and an influx of Latino immigrants, Midwestern cities have undergone a gradual demographic change.

Politically, the Midwest has been responsible for the decision of major elections for decades due to its ambiguous partisan identity and substantial number of votes in the Electoral College. With a combined total of one hundred-one votes, the Midwest has an immense influence in Presidential elections. Building on this, is the effect produced by the similar voting patterns of the Midwest in terms of its political culture. All of the states comprising the Midwest exhibit dominant characteristics of with an Individual or Moral political culture, with many of the states sharing traits of both cultures. (Elazar, 1972).

The region’s shared political, social, demographic and economic factors provide the framework in which its partisan identity can be established. To add a level of specification to this study, the Midwest will be analyzed on a basis of regional identity, economic and social change from the year 1960 to the present day. This time frame allows for a consideration of a commonly proposed hypothesis of realignment: the process of partisan change occurs in a thirty-to-thirty-six year cycle. Certain elections are accepted as being critical in terms of their impact on partisan identity and party dominance, one of which occurred in 1932. By establishing a beginning point of analysis at the year 1960, electoral politics should have, in theory, entered into a new cycle of realigning politics, with the culmination of a stable cycle. As well, another full stable-to-changing cycle would have occurred between 1960 and 1990.

Variables

Integral to the examination of realignment theory in the Midwest is establishing measurable partisan change as a dependent variable. In a regional analysis an accurate examination needs to take state variations into account in order to present reliable

findings and hypotheses. State-level partisan changes will be assessed using several measures drawn from *the Almanac of American Politics*, including the percent of the two party vote received by the Republican Party candidate in presidential and U.S. Senate elections, the proportion of Republican seats in the state's delegation to the U.S. House of Representatives, and party control of the office of the governor and state legislature. This data will be complemented by survey data from *The American National Election Study* to assess changes in party identification among voters in each state from 1960 to 2012.

A common point of analysis in the study of realignments are the factors that influence changes in voting behavior. These factors that serve as catalysts for changes in partisan identity are labeled as being "driving" in their relation to realignments. Social, demographic, economic factors, and the type of political issue in current elections are often examined as being the factors most likely to drive realignments. As such, they will stand as the independent variables of this study. Population and demographic data will be collected via federal census and electoral redistricting maps, as well as regional depictions of election results. Major patterns of migration or an influx of new ethnic groups, namely Hispanics, will be taken into consideration in order to determine if partisan voting has undergone change, or if different geographic areas have changed in terms of population density. The examination of social factors will be much more quantitative; simply looking at major events that reshaped or challenged the established societal norms during the periods of realignment. However, there will be special consideration given to the examination of any changes in average level of education, as this factor influences societal trends and partisan voting. Economic data, in the form of state GDP, unemployment rate, poverty level and major area of production, will be gathered from surveys conducted by the U.S. Bureau of Labor to determine the similarities and differences of each states' economy. This data will serve to identify any influential economic changes that could contribute to a change in partisan voting.

Due to the nature of this state-by-state study and its relevance in terms of comparative study, conditional variables in the form of regional variations, state and district differences must be taken into consideration in order to maintain accuracy. To combat these challenges, data will be presented as a nominal, (either Democrat or Republican) ordinal (relative percentages based off of a norm; higher or lower demographic makeup) or interval (percentage of a two party vote) variable.

The design itself of the study will take the form of a comparative template. Utilizing characteristics of realignment discussed by Burnham, Sundquist and Mayhew, a summarized overview of the accepted realignments in the South and Northeast will be made. From there, given data gathered from the categories of driving factors, a template of realignment will be formed. The same process will be repeated for the Midwest. The findings will be organized into a series of graphic representations addressing the driving factors of realignment. The template will serve as a means to compare and contrast the

relevance of the South and Northeast to realignment theory, which will then be applied to the Midwest in order to closely examine what has occurred and determine if it fits the same template.

Hypothesis

Following the application of the “realignment template” to the Midwest, there is an expected relationship to appear between changes in social norms, economic stability and population makeup in congressional districts and changes in partisan voting behavior. In states of the Midwest that have experienced increases in urbanization, immigration, economic growth and changes in the average level of education, it is expected that, as a whole, the state will exhibit a pattern of electing Democratic candidates. States that have experienced little to no change in terms of GDP per capita, shifts in population or differences in social trends are expected to show increases in election rates of Republican candidates. There would be inconclusive data to support an assumption regarding the voting patterns of those states that have experienced large scale decreases in population, economic stability, or have experienced a “culture shock” in terms of drastic changes in that societal status quo. Due to state-by-state discrepancies and the lack of foundational partisan identity of Midwestern states, it is challenging to say that the region as a whole has shifted its ideology from that of one party to the other. However, it can be surmised that specific states have moved closer to establishing a defined partisan identity based off of party dominance in the electorate. This movement towards partisan identity falls in with realignment theory, based off the analysis of driving factors.

Discussion

While the aim of this study is to comprehensively examine the Midwest as a region that has undergone a realignment, it is unable to say for certain that the phenomena exhibited coincides as closely with realignment theory as it has in the cases of the Northeastern and Southern United States. The limiting boundaries of this study lie in the formation and application of a “realignment template” on a regional basis. By presenting the design of the study as a comparison of the realignments of the Northeastern and Southern United States to the occurrences in the Midwest there is an inherent risk of assuming that all presentations of realignment theory will share a common appearance with the Northeast and South. This assumption would exclude the possibility of other factors, unseen in the regions that form the design template, which might have served as driving factors of realignment. The primary limit of this study is its scope and the limitations imposed on it by the confines of undertaking the analysis as a comparative design.

A viable extension of this study would be a deeper analysis of social, economic, demographic and partisan issues on a state-by-state basis. The analysis would take the form of a more extensive application of the “realignment template” and would establish

the relevance of realignment theory in a more specific manner and give a better representation of political change in the Midwest as a whole. Perhaps another worthwhile extension of this study would be an examination of the Midwest in a way that excludes the usage of a comparative template altogether and instead focuses on examining why factors pertaining to society, economics and demographics play a critical role in the case of the Midwest. Since the political culture and history of the Midwest is unique in the fact that it has never had a definitive identity, as opposed to the Northeast and Southern United States, the factors having been discussed as “driving” could affect how a realignment looks in the region.

The Midwest stands as a crucial, albeit unpredictable, facet of electoral politics. As the face of party identities continues to change and adapt to a constantly evolving and modernizing society, the ability to determine where partisan support will come from becomes an even more valuable asset. The analysis undertaken in this study covers a wide range of factors, aiming to develop a holistic look at the partisan identity of the Midwest. While there exists a sizeable amount of literature regarding realignment theory and its application in the cases of the Southern and Northeastern United States, this study of the Midwest as a region unique in its partisan identity stands relatively alone. The study of the development of Midwestern political culture and partisan change provides an opportunity to examine the deeper underlying factors that present themselves within the region’s realignment, which lends itself to further work that analyzes the effects of changes in economic stability, population densities and societal makeup at the regional level.

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