Realignment: The Theory That Changed the Way We Think about American Politics. By Theodore Rosenof (Lanham, Md., Rowman & Littlefield, 2003) 230 pp. $75.00 cloth $26.95 paper

This book is the first full treatment of the evolution of “realignment theory,” and it is intellectual history of a high order. It should appeal to students interested in American parties and elections as well as, more broadly, those interested in the development of American political science. For sources, the author draws on vast numbers of books, articles, and collections of personal papers, and he weaves his account with a sure touch.

Rosenof tracks the “realignment” idea from its early traces in the 1920s through its mature development in the 1960s and its continued deployment since. The author makes his most interesting and original contribution in presenting the ideas of such pre-1950s writers as Holcombe, Rice, and Gosnell.\(^1\) The ensuing generation of Key, Jr., Schattschneider, Sundquist, and Burnham built on these pioneers.\(^2\)

Going beyond political science, Rosenof also examines the important contributions of the nonacademic writers Bean, Lubell, and Phillips, as well as the historians Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr. and Jr.\(^3\) He carries his analysis through such recent scholars as Shafer, Aldrich, and Lawrence.\(^4\)

Why did realignment theory crystallize during the late 1950s and 1960s? Rosenof convincingly argues that the 1948 election was key. After that event, the New Deal years could no longer be considered a fluke. A new party era had come about; a new theory of eras was in order. Electoral cycles beginning in 1800, 1828, 1860, 1896, and 1932 could be discerned and their characteristics embellished. New concepts of “party identification” and “normal vote,” which cast Dwight D. Eisenhower’s elections of the 1950s as “deviating,” added agreeable flavor. The notion that a new realignment might be “due” in the 1960s drew attention and excitement.

\(^1\) Arthur N. Holcombe, The Political Parties of To-Day (New York, 1924); Stuart A. Rice, Farmers and Workers in American Politics (New York, 1924); Harold F. Gosnell, Grass Roots Politics (Washington, D.C., 1942).


But Gosnell, Holcombe, and others had the intellectual base for it earlier. They initiated the serious quantitative study of elections, argued for a new emphasis on process or behavior (as opposed to bosses and machines) in studying parties and elections, insisted on placing elections in long-term historical context, and declared, more or less, that party fluctuations in presidential elections were the essence of American political history. This situation had become standard by the 1950s.

From our vantage point today, certain developments folded into the realignment tradition by Gosnell and others look dubious. These pioneering scholars saw electoral politics as basically coalitional demographics (the farmers did this, the workers did that), skimping on what we have come to see as “valence” issues analyzable through times-series econometrics. They seem to have had no idea that the causes or patterns of American elections might be transnational. They dwelt on presidential elections to the exclusion of high-swing, indicative mid-term elections like those of 1874, 1894, and 1910. They failed to recognize the effects of wars on electoral patterns (as in 1920). Overwhelmingly, they dwelt on domestic issues. They largely ignored the 1870s. They dismissed the Democratic ascendancy of the 1910s as an “exception” or an “interlude.” (For a British analogy, imagine dismissing the Liberal era from 1906 to 1916 as a mere insignificant “interlude” in an otherwise nearly unbroken Tory-based era extending from 1895 through 1945.) It turns out that all of these tendencies of the genre were wired before the 1950s.

For his part, Rosenof remains upbeat about realignment theory, which “retains qualities essential to the retrospective analysis of American politics” (167). He has doubts about cycles, however, and he counsels against hauling out the theory every four years to make predictions. It should not become “the plaything of quadrennial contests” (165).

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Vietnam and the American Political Tradition. Edited by Randall B. Woods (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2003) 324 pp. $60.00 cloth $20.00 paper

Vietnam and the American Political Tradition is a work of importance to historians and political scientists. Scholars interested in the Vietnam War, congressional-executive relations, the politics of dissent, and American political culture during the Cold War will benefit from this collection of essays, which are grounded in primary sources that illuminate the understudied role of Congress during the Vietnam War. The contributors, all historians of American foreign relations, blend narrative with interpretation. This conventional approach may disappoint readers looking for the application of quantitative analysis or international-relations theory. Yet, Woods offers an overarching argument in his