

Polls and Elections

The New Deal Realignment in Real Time

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Right after the 1936 election the Gallup Poll began probing party identification. From then on until 1952, when the National Election Studies entered the field, nearly 200 surveys produced measurements of partisanship in the American electorate. We exploit this largely unexplored data set to examine the partisan transformation commonly called the New Deal Realignment in real time. It turns out that it was not until the late 1940s that the Democratic Party secured an enduring hold on the American electorate. The New Deal and the Depression had less to do with this change than did World War II and the postwar prosperity. The lead cohort of the Democratic surge in party identification was the generation that came of age during the 1940s, not the 1930s. The findings suggest that a historic crisis or a new policy program may not be enough to realign partisanship in the electorate but that it takes the success of the ascendant party in mastering historic crises.

American politics in the 1930s underwent an electoral realignment, traces of which can still be felt today. The Great Depression was the proximate cause that toppled the

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Republicans as the dominant party, a status it had enjoyed in national politics since the Civil War, and very comfortably so since the 1890s. Along with the New Deal, the economic crisis installed the Democrats as the newly dominant party in the American electorate for years to come. This is a familiar story, based on surveys conducted long after the events. But as we demonstrate with a “real-time” analysis of party loyalties in the 1930s and 1940s, the Depression and New Deal fell short of giving the Democratic Party a secure lead in the partisan loyalties of ordinary Americans. It was World War II and postwar prosperity that transformed the partisan balance heavily in the Democratic favor. If any particular election may claim a critical role in this electoral realignment, it is the 1948 election. It marks the moment when the Democratic lead in party identification reaches the magnitude that would be recorded in the National Election Studies for decades to come. The Democratic surge in party identification is fueled by the entry into the electorate of a generation that came of age during the 1940s.

We reach these conclusions with the help of survey data on party identification that the Gallup Organization began collecting in early 1937. From that point on until 1952, when the National Election Studies entered the field, nearly 200 opinion surveys were conducted (all but a few by Gallup) that asked about party identification.¹ They comprise a pool of close to half a million respondents. This data set has remained unexplored by students of electoral behavior, except for attention to a scattered survey here or there. Research about party identification as it may have existed in the 1930s or earlier has largely been limited to survey data that were conducted long after the event. The main source, the National Election Studies, did not commence in earnest until 1952. Using such latter-day data to capture attitudes such as party identification 20 years or more in the past requires strong faith in questionable assumptions.

The 1937-52 pool of polls provides an invaluable opportunity to establish the timing of the “New Deal realignment” as it unfolded, the circumstances that generated it, and how much it owed to conversion and generational replacement. Our findings help illuminate the nature and dynamics of historic change in party identification. They also speak to the utility of the realignment concept, which has lost much of its luster in recent years. And finally, the evidence of a major shift of party identification in 1948 should dispel any lingering mystery about Harry Truman’s upset victory in the presidential election that year.

We begin with a review of research on the New Deal realignment, noting shortcomings of the evidence for the timing and process of partisan change. Second, we describe the sampling procedure and partisanship measure used by the Gallup polls that provided the bulk of our data; the measure proves a close match for the one used by the National Election Studies. Third, we track aggregate party identification over the course of 1937-52, locating the point in time at which the Democratic lead reaches the magnitude recorded by the National Election Studies beginning in 1952. Fourth, we probe for causal effects of economic conditions and World War II on fluctuations of aggregate partisanship. Fifth, we

1. The data from all those polls were obtained from *The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research*. We are grateful to the Roper Center for the excellent job of archiving and documenting the data as well as the ease with which the datasets can be utilized.

disaggregate partisanship by birth year to see which age cohort exhibits the strongest movement toward the Democratic Party and how well the various cohorts maintain their partisanship across the years when the polls were conducted (1937-52). Sixth, we probe for a special legacy of World War II on partisanship by examining the effect of wartime service, especially among young veterans. We conclude with a reassessment of the realignment concept. A realignment of partisanship in the electorate requires more than a historic crisis, however traumatic, or a new policy vision, however appealing. It takes compelling success of the ascendant party in mastering historic crises.

The New Deal Realignment

The New Deal realignment stands out as a classic exhibit of this political species.² The realignment concept is touted by its advocates for “divid[ing] much of American political history into clearly demarcated ‘party-systems eras,’ bounded by realigning upheavals from preceding and succeeding eras” (Burnham 1991, 101). The study of realignment has been praised as “one of the most creative, engaging, and influential intellectual enterprises ever undertaken by American political scientists” (Mayhew 2002, 1). At the same time, the realignment concept has been dismissed (by the same author) as a “genre” with little guidance to the last two centuries of American politics: “it is too slippery, too binary, too apocalyptic” (Mayhew 2002, 5, 165). The verdict is based on the examination of 14 claims derived from the realignment literature (primarily Beck 1974; Burnham 1970; Key 1955; Sundquist 1973).³ The 1932 election, widely seen as the critical trigger for the New Deal realignment, does not end up among the top three in American history on these 14 claims, or even ranks highly on many of them (Mayhew 2002, tbl. 7.1). Instead elections not commonly accorded realignment status (such as 1948) fare better than the 1932 election and the other canonical specimens (1860 and 1896) on many of the 14 criteria.

Of greatest concern in this study is a condition embodied in Mayhew’s claim #1, which pertains to V. O. Key’s definition of a “critical election”: a “profound readjustment” in the electorate’s “standing decision” that proves “durable” (Key 1955; Key and Munger 1959).⁴ We translate this to mean a profound and durable shift in the balance of

2. The realignment literature is too voluminous to be reviewed here in any detail. For a reader’s guide and bibliography listing over 600 publications, see Bass (1991). For a more current overview, see Rosenof (2003).

3. The 14 claims, in Mayhew’s shorthand (2002, 144), are as follows: (1) realignment occurs, (2) cyclical pattern, (3) long tension buildup, (4) party id flags before, (5) turnout peaks, (6) convention turmoil, (7) third parties before, (8) new issue cleavage, (9) ideological polarization, (10) nationalized House, (11) policy innovation, (12) policy embedding, (13) redistributive policy, and (14) the voters speak.

4. To accommodate some changes that do not proceed in the manner of “critical” realignments, Key (1959) introduced the notion of a “secular” realignment. This is a gradual type of change that helps capture the realignment associated with the South, especially white voters, in recent years. In such a process partisan loyalties decay over time and are replaced by those for another party. Studies of election returns over long periods of time might reveal such patterns, or any “streams of attitudes that are undergoing steady expansion or contraction” (Key 1959, 198). This is a type of realignment for special circumstances, regions, or groups that is not of concern to us here.

party identification. Did the New Deal realignment produce such a shift? While studies agree that it did, they differ on the timing and the process of attitude change that led to the shift in aggregate partisanship.

The American Voter made a strong case for the generational type of change (Campbell et al. 1960). According to this view, the partisan balance shifts when a new generation of young voters, in response to a profound event, enters the electorate with a partisan imprint that distinguishes it substantially from the rest of the electorate, which stays put (Beck 1974; Jennings and Niemi 1981). Such a process is congenial to the notion of party identification as a largely immovable attitude. Campbell et al. (1960) consider the Great Depression as the key event that triggered the realignment of party identification. It “swung a heavy proportion of the young electors toward the Democratic Party and gave that party a hold on that generation” still visible in surveys conducted in the 1950s (Campbell et al. 1960, 155). The evidence, however, comes from surveys conducted 20 years after the event (the National Election Studies of the 1950s) and recall of votes cast in the 1930 elections. The intervening years may have distorted memories and changed partisan attitudes based on experiences since the 1930s.

Taking issue with the generational type of partisan change, Erikson and Tedin (1981) made a strong case for conversion. According to this scenario, voters across the ages change party identification as they vote for the opposite party under extraordinary circumstances like the Depression and New Deal. Such an interpretation is compatible with the “revisionist” view that treats party identification as a “running tally” of short-term evaluations (Fiorina 1981) or presidential approval and economic sentiment (MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1989). Using *Literary Digest* polls from as far back as 1924, as well as a Gallup Poll from March 1937, Erikson and Tedin (1981) showed that in the 1930s both established and young voters swung toward the Democratic side in party attachments. “By 1936 the realignment was essentially complete. Party identification had become consistent with voting behavior.” (Erikson and Tedin 1981, 961). Though using real-time data on party identification, the analysis did not explore how well the conversion held up in the years to come. Did the Democratic lead in party identification at that moment persist long enough to be matched by the first probe of the first National Election Study in 1952?

Situated somewhat between generational replacement and conversion is the possibility of mobilization (Andersen 1979; see also Campbell et al. 1960). The mobilization in this case concerns the nonpartisan segment of the electorate that has stayed aloof from electoral politics until a crisis like the Depression rouses it to political life. The decision of Independents to embrace a political party clearly entails a change of political mind, though without abandoning another party. It looks more like a late baptism than an outright conversion from one partisan faith to another. Aside from younger voters, *The American Voter* also credits older voters who had failed to vote previously with helping the Democrats gain a long-term gain in party identification (Campbell et al. 1960, 153). But the evidence only covers the vote choices of “delayed voters” in 1932 and 1936, not their party identification. And Andersen (1979) relies on a reconstruction of party identification in the 1920s that has met with strong criticism (Niemi, Katz, and Newman 1980).

These issues aside, it is also fair to ask whether the Depression and the New Deal constitute sufficient grounds for a massive realignment of party loyalties in the electorate. However disastrous the economic collapse may have been, is a purely negative experience enough to move the electorate from the party responsible for the calamity to the opposite one? There is no question that the incumbent party will suffer at the polls, but whether the opposite party will make lasting gains in party identification would depend on satisfactory proof that it can master the crisis that brought the previously dominant party down.

To take a look at contemporary research, the turbulent events of the 1960s and 1970s over issues such as race, the Vietnam War, and law and order led to a decline of (largely Democratic) party identification without boosting the Republican fortunes in party identification, electoral victories notwithstanding (Beck 1984; Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1974; Norpoth and Rusk 1982). This dealignment of partisanship was most acutely experienced by the 1965 high school senior class that was repeatedly interviewed by the Socialization Study as it passed through the events of those decades (Jennings and Niemi 1981). It was not until the Reagan presidency that Republicans began to make gains in party identification (Meffert, Norpoth, and Ruhil 2001; Miller and Shanks 1996). By that time, too, the 1965 high school cohort, which had started out heavily Democratic in 1965, then turned largely Independent, moved to the Republican side in large numbers (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008, 144).

The New Deal was the Democratic answer to the Depression. The American economy certainly made strides in recovering from the Depression during Franklin Delano Roosevelt's (FDR's) first term. Yet unemployment stayed high (14% in 1936), budging little during FDR's second term.⁵ Full recovery from the Depression remained elusive until 1941, when the United States entered World War II (Hall and Ferguson 1998). It was only then that the Democrats could claim success in mastering the most serious crisis on the twentieth century.

Beyond sparking the long-sought return to prosperity, World War II also boosted the Democrats' electoral fortunes. It prompted FDR to seek an unprecedented third and fourth term of office. His electoral victories meant that Americans would experience three historic events under Democratic leadership during the 1940s: (1) U.S. victory in the war; (2) complete recovery from the Depression in wartime; and (3) after the war, prosperity in peacetime. It is hard to imagine a more momentous potential to affect party loyalties, yet their impact has gone unexamined so far. The following is an attempt to do so with a real-time analysis of party identification.

Sampling Method and Identification Measure

The first time, as far as we can tell, that Americans were asked about their party identification in a national survey was in March of 1937 in a Gallup Poll. Respondents

5. The National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) reports an unemployment rate (series #08292) of 23% for 1932, 14% for 1936, and 15% for 1940. The rate for the last year before the onset of the Great Depression, 1929, was 2%. <http://www.nber.org/databases/macrohistory/contents/> (accessed October 16, 2012).

for the poll, as for others in the 1930s and 1940s, were chosen by means of “quota-controlled sampling” (Berinsky 2006). While the Gallup Organizations refers to it as “modified probability” sampling, it does depart from the strict standards of probability sampling. Respondents for a poll were selected through “a combination of . . . a purposive design for the selection of cities, towns, and rural areas, and the quota method for the selection of individuals within such selected areas” (Codebook of the March 1937 Gallup Poll, USAIPO1937-0072). Within the sample areas, respondents were chosen so as to meet certain quotas defined by age, gender, and socioeconomic status. Within these guidelines, the choice of a particular respondent was up to the interviewer, who was allowed to pick them in their homes or on the street. There was no requirement for the interviewer to make these selections by any random procedure. The Gallup sample design did represent the South and non-South according to the votes cast in presidential elections, not the voting-age population. Hence southerners and blacks are underrepresented in these polls. If this may skew the distribution of opinions of the American public, it is consistent throughout the period of this investigation (1937-52).⁶

The March 1937 Gallup Poll ascertained a respondent’s party identification through the question, “*Do you regard yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, a Socialist, or an Independent in politics?*” The wording of the question changed in minor ways over the next 15 years but always contained the options Republican, Democrat, and Independent, which typically commanded more than 95% of responses.⁷ How suitable is this question to elicit long-term party identification, as defined by the authors of *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960; see also Campbell Gurin, and Miller 1954; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008)?

The path-breaking study on “macropartisanship” by MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson (1989) treated the Gallup measure as such, but this was challenged by Abramson and Ostrom (1991), touching off a spirited debate (Abramson and Ostrom 1992; MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1992; see also Bishop, Tuchfarber, and Smith 1994). The Gallup measure does produce more variation over time than the National Election Studies measure, which includes modifiers like “generally speaking” and “usually.” But Gallup also polls partisanship far more often (nearly every month, and sometimes even more frequently) rather than just at election time. These days the National Elections

6. Berinsky (2006) proposes procedures for weighting data from polls conducted during this era. Using the weight “profBlackGender” which is considered best by Berinsky and Schickler (2011) for estimating national opinion, we did a test for party identification with unweighted and weighted responses in the March 1937 poll. The responses for the major parties (weighted percentages in parentheses) were: Republican 31.0 (30.5), Democrat 52.0 (53.7). The difference is not statistically significant even with a sample of almost 3,000 respondents (Chi Square = 0.40, $p > .50$). Use of the weights, we concluded, would not make a discernible difference in party identification. The analysis reported in this article uses unweighted data.

7. The reference “in politics” was moved to the opening of the question in the December 1939 poll, while “regard” was replaced by “consider.” The modifier “as of today” was added in the March 1944 poll so that the question now opened in the familiar format, “In politics, as of today.” The inclusion of “Socialist” was replaced by “Progressive” in the July 20, 1948 poll, which was dropped in the September 1951 poll. Each of these options rarely elicited more than 1% of responses. For a brief period, between September 28, 1952, and July 25, 1953, the preface, “In politics, as of today,” was replaced by “Normally,” but then Gallup restored the familiar opening. Gallup occasionally varied the ordering of the partisan options, but most of the time, Republican preceded Democrat.

TABLE 1
Party Identification in Gallup and SRC Surveys (in percentages)

| <i>Party Identification</i> | <i>Gallup</i> | <i>SRC</i> |
|-----------------------------|---------------|------------|
| Democrat | 46 | 47 |
| Republican | 31 | 28 |
| Independent | 23 | 23 |
| Total | 100 | 98 |
| Observations | (15,849) | (1,784) |

Note: The Gallup data come from six polls conducted in September and October before the 1952 election while the SRC data come from the preelection interviews (September and October) in 1952; responses coded as “apolitical” by SRC are not shown (3%).

Studies question is a staple of media polls like the *New York Times*/CBS News Poll. A comparison of the measures used by Gallup and the *Times*/CBS over a lengthy span of time found that both produced very similar patterns of responses (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 1998).

As for the period of concern in this research (1937-52), the only overlap between Gallup and National Election Studies occurs at the time when the Survey Research Center (SRC) introduced its measure of party identification in 1952. To facilitate the comparison, we have aggregated all Gallup polls during the months of September and October, 1952, to match the time frame of the preelection wave of the 1952 SRC election study. As can be seen in Table 1, the partisan breakdown produced by Gallup for September/October 1952 matches that of the SRC for the same time period to an uncanny extent. Democrats enjoy a huge edge in the Gallup polls (46%) as in the SRC survey (47%), compared to Republicans (31% in Gallup, 28% in SRC). So in the time frame covered by the National Election Studies, the two organizations agree in their findings on partisanship, at least for 1952. It would be hazardous to generalize too far from this test, but it does suggest that responses to questions about party identification may be quite robust, regardless of whether modifiers like “generally speaking” or “in politics, as of today” are used.

Partisan Change in Real Time

Figure 1 charts the party identification responses reported by Gallup (and a few other polling organizations) from 1937 to 1952. Note that the nearly 200 polls yielded observations for 94 months, or every other month, of that time period; whenever more than one poll was conducted in a given month, we averaged the responses. With close to 3,000 respondents per poll, Figure 1 depicts the behavior of close to half a million Americans. As can be seen in Figure 1, the first poll on party identification, done in March of 1937, reports an overwhelming lead in party identification for the Democratic Party. Readers will quickly note that this is almost exactly the lead that Democrats

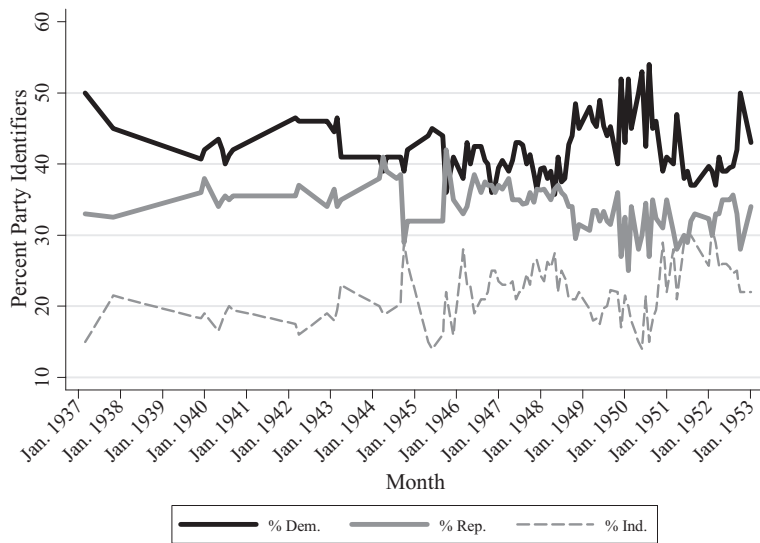


FIGURE 1. Party Identification in Monthly Gallup Polls.

enjoyed over Republicans in the 1952 preelection polls of both Gallup and SRC (Table 1). So, does that prove the realignment that was evident in the breakdown of party identification in 1952 was fully accomplished by 1937?

Erikson and Tedin (1981) reached that conclusion, based on the analysis of the 1937 poll, and attributed the change in party identification largely to conversion. Yet the Democratic lead shrank quickly in subsequent polls, undoing much of the “conversion” that was apparent in the 1937 poll. By 1940, Republicans were close to parity with Democrats in party loyalties. So it appears that FDR’s landslide victory in 1936 gave his party the kind of short-term boost in identification that has been noted for other landslide elections since (e.g., in 1964).

It is not until 1948 that the Democratic Party takes a commanding and enduring lead in party identification. This will surely come as a surprise to most observers. After all, the election that year was one the Democrats were universally expected to lose, with an unpopular president trailing in the polls. Instead the Democrats make huge gains in the affection of the American electorate. A close look at the timing of the surge shows that it is not a postelection rally, but that it starts several months before the 1948 election. Given such a big lead in party loyalties, it is hard to imagine how Truman could lose in 1948, barring unfavorable issues in domestic or foreign policy or a hugely popular opponent.⁸ This time the Democratic lead in identification does not dissipate soon afterwards as it did in 1936. Some ups and downs notwithstanding, the lead holds up

8. Nobody seems to have noticed the Democratic advantage in partisanship at the time. We are not aware of the Gallup Organization reporting it. Any report of that finding should have immediately raised a caution flag about the expectation that Truman was doomed in the 1948 election. The frequent polling of party identification by Gallup notwithstanding, neither the polling profession nor the scholarly community seems to have been familiar with the concept then. One wonders what made Gallup poll party identification.

firmly over the next four years. The lead is confirmed by the polls taken during the 1952 election and from then on for the next three decades in the party identification probes of the familiar National Election Studies. What prompted this historic shift in party identification?

Causal Effects: Economy and War

The realignment literature claims that such a transformation requires “the presence of a great national crisis, leading to a conflict regarding governmental policies and the association of the major parties with relatively clearly contrasting programs for its solution” (Campbell 1966, 76). But this proposition offers little help for the case at hand. The late 1940s lacked a “great national crisis” comparable to the Great Depression or the battle over slavery in the nineteenth century. Policy conflict between the major parties continued to be shaped by the New Deal agenda set out in the 1930s. Whatever new issues rose to salience, be it civil rights or the Cold War, did not sharpen the divide between the major parties. If anything, those two issues prompted third-party challenges for Truman in the 1948 election that should have diminished, not enhanced, Democratic allegiance.⁹

The macropartisanship theory focuses on factors that are supposed to constantly move party identification (MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1989). If potent enough, these factors might be able to produce quantum leaps in partisanship. Presidential approval is one such factor. Yet, as is well known, Truman was so unpopular in 1948 that everyone predicted his defeat in the presidential election. Throughout his tenure as president, Truman’s approval ratings barely correlate with Democratic partisanship and, if anything, in the wrong direction (−0.14). FDR’s approval ratings do show the expected pattern (0.59), but the observations are few and most occur in wartime.

The other predictor proposed by the macropartisanship theory, broadly speaking, is the economy.¹⁰ The key premise is that a good economy boosts identification with the incumbent party while a bad economy harms it. This seems to hold some promise for the case at hand. “Happy Times are here again,” most Americans would eagerly agree by 1948. While the end of the war precipitated a sharp contraction of the economy in 1946–47, the economy grew by a robust 4.4% in 1948 and continued to do so for the next four years. Similarly unemployment in 1948 fell below the 4% mark after a brief spike from practically zero during the war years. Any fears that the country would slide back into a depression once wartime production ended proved unfounded. The postwar prosperity, achieved under a Democratic administration, sharply contrasted with the Great Depression, which struck the economy when Republicans last controlled the federal

9. Mayhew (2002, 144) puts 1948 on his short list of realigning elections, but none of the 14 claims that justify this inclusion offer much leverage for the change of party identification.

10. MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson (1989) used a subjective measure of economic conditions (the Index of Consumer Sentiment). Absent such a measure during the period of interest (1937–52), we turned to macroeconomic indicators, personal income and unemployment. Monthly data for these indicators are reported by the NBER. <http://www.nber.org/databases/macrohistory/contents/> (accessed October 16, 2012).

government. It was a chasm that Harry Truman reminded people of in the starkest terms during his whistle-stop campaign tour (Holbrook 2002; McCullough 1992, chap.14).

But economics does not tell the whole story about partisan transformation. A war like World War II, we contend, must also be considered a potent mover of macropartisanship. Unlike any other event in American history, it prompted a sitting president to seek and win an unprecedented third and fourth term of office. These rather unique electoral victories might be expected to spill over to Democratic gains in partisanship or at least prevent erosion if Republicans had returned to power. It was under Democratic leadership that Americans experienced a full recovery from the Depression as well as victory in war. It is hard to imagine that this experience would not register in party loyalties.

Results of tests using an error correction model (ECM) are presented in Table 2.¹¹ This type of model allows us to examine both short and long-term effects on party identification. It is applied separately to the percentage of Democrats and Republicans, presented in Figure 1, as well as the Democratic lead (the difference between the percent Democrat and percent Republican). These measures of partisanship are related to the unemployment rate and personal income (each monthly), along with a dummy variable for the World War II period, in this general form:

$$\Delta Party ID_t = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \Delta Unemployment_t + \beta_2 \Delta Personal Income_t + \beta_3 WWII_t \\ + \gamma_1 Party ID_{t-1} + \gamma_2 Unemployment_{t-1} + \gamma_3 Personal Income_{t-1} + \varepsilon_t$$

Table 2 presents estimates for the Democratic lead, percent Democrat, and percent Republican. For the Democratic lead and percent Democrat, the estimates are provided separately for the 1937 to 1945 period and the 1946 to 1952 period. In the earlier period far fewer polls are available (only 15) than in the latter (58 polls), leaving large gaps between polls in the 1937 to 1945 period. Preliminary tests showed that this affected the estimates for Democratic lead and percent Democrat, but not for percent Republican, where the results apply to the whole 16-year time frame. The coefficients β_1 and β_2 represent the short-term effects of changes (Δ) in unemployment and personal income on changes in party identification. β_3 is the effect of World War II on party identification. Long-term effects are estimated through the lagged values ($t-1$) of party identification, unemployment, and personal income. These effects, denoted by the γ coefficients, mate-

11. The Error Correction Model (ECM) is appropriate when time series are cointegrated, meaning the series exhibit unit root behavior, but their linear combination produces a series that is stationary. The traditional means of testing for error correction, assuming the series have unit roots, is to estimate a model using ordinary least squares and examining the residuals for stationarity. All of these conditions are met. Augmented Dickey-Fuller tests, for which the null hypothesis is the presence of a unit root, on the Democratic lead, percent Democrat, percent Republican, unemployment, and personal incomes all suggest the presence of unit roots across the full time span analyzed here (1937-52) and within each of the time periods analyzed separately for the Democratic lead and percent Democrat (1937-45 and 1946-52). The p -values for each series are 0.81, 0.69, 0.56, 0.77, and 0.99, respectively. Each of the party identification series was included in a separate regression with the unemployment rate and personal income as the independent variables. Augmented Dickey-Fuller tests on the residuals from each of the three models suggest that the residuals are stationary. Test statistics for all three residuals were significant beyond the 0.001 level.

TABLE 2
Determinants of Aggregate Party Identification (1937-52)

| Variables | Democratic Lead | | % Democrat | | % Republican | |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------|------------|------------|------------|--------------|------------|
| | Coef. | Std. Error | Coef. | Std. Error | Coef. | Std. Error |
| | 1937-45 | | 1937-45 | | 1937-52 | |
| Δ Unemployment _t | 1.692 | 1.759 | 0.808 | 0.839 | 0.083 | 0.759 |
| Δ Personal Income _t | 0.382 | 0.295 | 0.230 | 0.138 | -0.044 | 0.095 |
| Party Identification _{t-1} | -0.621* | 0.297 | -0.825** | 0.288 | -0.811*** | 0.122 |
| Unemployment _{t-1} | 2.273 | 1.612 | 0.600 | 0.848 | -0.622*** | 0.195 |
| Personal Income _{t-1} | 0.137 | 0.185 | -0.005 | 0.100 | -0.055*** | 0.013 |
| World War II | 18.154** | 6.933 | 7.670** | 3.318 | -3.679** | 1.436 |
| Intercept | -40.157 | 38.023 | 26.336 | 28.289 | 42.018*** | 6.507 |
| Observations | 15 | | 15 | | 73 | |
| Model F | 3.31* | | 4.14** | | 7.87*** | |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.497 | | 0.574 | | 0.364 | |
| | 1946-1952 | | 1946-1952 | | | |
| Δ Unemployment _t | -1.589 | 2.386 | -0.828 | 1.539 | | |
| Δ Personal Income _t | -0.218 | 0.235 | -0.182 | 0.151 | | |
| Party Identification _{t-1} | -0.923*** | 0.137 | -0.799*** | 0.134 | | |
| Unemployment _{t-1} | 3.597*** | 0.834 | 2.076*** | 0.542 | | |
| Personal Income _{t-1} | 0.080*** | 0.027 | 0.027* | 0.016 | | |
| Intercept | -23.961*** | 7.367 | 19.578*** | 5.688 | | |
| Observations | 58 | | 58 | | | |
| Model F | 9.51*** | | 7.69*** | | | |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.428 | | 0.370 | | | |

Note: The dependent variable is the monthly change (Δ) in party identification. For the Democratic lead and percent Democrat, we provide estimates for two time periods: 1937-1945 and 1946-52. Empirical testing suggested that estimates are significantly different between these two time periods for these two party identification series, but not the percent Republican. We, therefore, provide one set of estimates for percent Republican encompassing the entire time period examined (1937-52). All sets of estimates are derived from error-correction models.

* $p < 0.1$ ** $p < 0.05$ *** < 0.01 .

realize over the course of time. The speed with which this happens is determined by γ_1 , the coefficient for lagged party identification. The absolute value of this coefficient signifies the proportion of the effect realized in each subsequent period. The closer this coefficient comes to -1 , the faster the full effect of a shock is realized.

Unemployment and personal income have significant long-term effects on party identification, particularly in the postwar era. The income effect is especially impressive, raising the Democratic share in the period covered in this study, while diminishing the Republican share, and widening the Democratic lead. As graphed in Figure 2, an increase in personal income by one standard deviation (\$98 billion) would predict close to an 8% boost of the Democratic lead in party identification. This goes quite a long way toward accounting for the Democratic surge in the postwar years as the American economy defied fears of sliding back into depression and instead grew at a brisk pace under a Democratic administration.

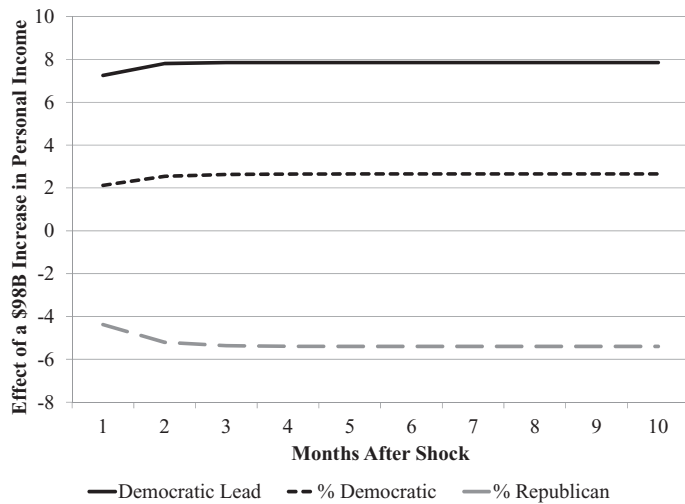


FIGURE 2. The Effect of Personal Income on Party Identification.

Note: The \$98 billion amount corresponds to one standard deviation of personal income during the period of study.

The long-term effect of unemployment, however, is puzzling. It is not significant during the earlier period (1937-45) and the positive sign for percent Democrat, and the Democratic lead in the later era (1946-52) implies that Democrats are gaining in identification from increases in unemployment even while the party is in control of the White House. Technically speaking, the unemployment rate is quite low during most of the period of interest (1937-52) for which partisanship observations are available; it also has a small variance. Whatever impact unemployment may have had during this period is bound to be limited.

The findings in Table 2 also support the proposition that World War II moved the partisanship of the American electorate. The war handed the Democrats a substantial lead over Republicans, enough to break the near parity between the parties that prevailed right before the war. The war, of course, sparked a recovery from the Depression that would be beneficial to Democratic partisanship, but even controlling for economic conditions World War II clearly emerges with a sizable effect on partisanship. The end of the Great Depression during World War II may not have paid partisan dividends, given the special conditions of a wartime economy. No such reservations stood in the way of awarding partisan benefits for delivering prosperity in peacetime.¹²

The next section probes for generational effects. Did the Democratic gains in party derive from the influx of a new generation of Americans? What generation, in particular?

12. We also considered the possibility that changes of the response categories for party identification (i.e., offering respondents a "Socialist" option from March 1937 to June 1948, and a "Progressive" option from July 1948 to August 1951, might have affected aggregate partisanship. So we included binary variables to represent these conditions in preliminary tests of the error-correction models. Neither the Socialist option nor the Progressive one made a significant difference.

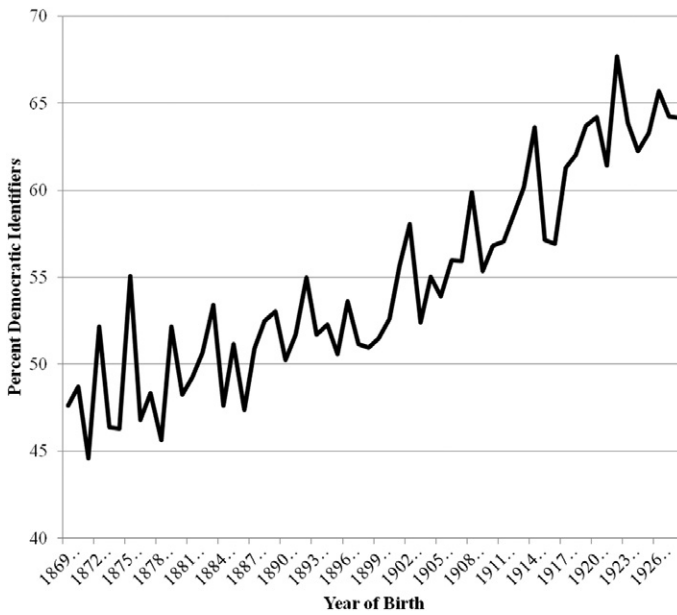


FIGURE 3. Percent Democratic of Party Identifiers by Year of Birth, 1869-1928.

What were the formative events during its impressionable years? Or did Democrats sweep all age groups, making gains through conversion among established voters?

Cohort Dynamics of Partisan Change

As a first step in addressing this question, we have sorted out the partisanship of respondents by their year of birth. We have done so with a selection from the pool of nearly 200 polls available for the 1937 to 1952 period. Taking one poll each year yields a total of approximately 28,000 partisan identifiers.¹³ Note that quite a few birth years are represented by enough cases to come close to the size of a whole survey, the average being 460 cases per birth year. We are able to cover birth years all the way back to 1869 and up to 1928, practically from the end of the Civil War to the onset of the Great Depression.¹⁴

The first impression conveyed by Figure 3 is one of steady growth of Democratic identification (as a percentage of party identifiers, omitting Independents) across the

13. Aside from 1937, where we picked the historic poll to ask the party identification question for the first time, we took the median poll in the sequence of a given year's polling. Only practical reasons of time and resources prevented us from using all 170 or so polls for this analysis. If done, it would enlarge the pool of partisans to close to 400,000. We owe Gallup a special note of thanks for asking in every poll the exact age of a respondent.

14. We set a count of 100 party identifiers as the minimum case number for a birth year to be included.

birth-year scale from 1869 to 1928. It is tempting to see this as proof of the old adage that the older one gets, the more Republican one becomes. Research has debunked this view as myth (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008, chap. 7). What Figure 3 reveals instead is the imprint of history on partisanship. In the oldest cohort, born in the 1870s, Republican identification is quite common because those Americans came of age in an era when that party was dominant. In contrast, the Democratic Party has a hold on the loyalties of the cohort that entered the electorate under the weight of the Great Depression in the 1932 election (born between 1908 and 1911). It does so even more so on the next youngest cohort (born between 1912 and 1915), which came of age during Roosevelt's first term, which witnessed some recovery from the Depression and the unveiling of the New Deal. Those events undeniably brought into the Democratic fold many young voters who otherwise would have followed in the Republican footsteps of their elders.

Though distinctive from older cohorts, the Depression/New Deal generation is not the most Democratic one in party identification. That credit belongs to the cohort that came of age during World War II and the postwar years (born in the 1920s). Some of these Americans, to be sure, lived through the Depression as children and may have learned about FDR and the New Deal as adolescents. But many of the men, as well as some of the women, of the 1920s birth cohort were in uniform during World War II, suggesting that military service may have affected partisanship. FDR reaped significant electoral benefits from the wartime condition in both 1940 and 1944 (Norpoth 2012; Norpoth and Sidman 2007). His victories in the wartime elections may have boosted his party's standing with Americans then coming of age.

Yet for all the Democratic gains among younger cohorts, it is also clear from Figure 3 that Democrats already have an edge over Republicans among Americans born between 1896 and 1907. These are Americans who came of age in the 1920s prior to the Depression, in an era where Republicans held the dominant position in American politics. Lacking survey data on party identification during that time, an estimate based on the vote in congressional elections points to a partisan advantage of 54-46 in favor of the GOP during the 1894-1928 period (Norpoth and Rusk 2007, 399). Most members of that cohort hence did not grow up as Democrats but switched to that identification later in life, presumably under the impact of the Depression, New Deal, or later events. This would seem to lend support to the conversion hypothesis, though whether conversion from erstwhile Republicans or Independents is impossible to say.

The same would go for another cohort of Americans. Those born between 1887 and 1906 also favor the Democratic Party, though less so. Some of them may have grown up as Wilson Democrats, who came of age during his elections and tenure (1912-20). Yet others probably switched to the Democrats later in life, just like the next youngest cohort. Even in the cohort born in the 1870s the Republican edge is not as sharp as might have been expected, given the dominant position of the GOP following the 1894 realignment (Norpoth and Rusk 2007). It would appear that a few of these voters swung toward the Democrats during the Depression.

How well a given cohort maintained its partisan allegiance throughout the period of study (1937-52) is charted in Figure 4. To do so with reasonably large numbers of respondents, we have formed 10-year birth cohorts. The oldest cohort (born in the

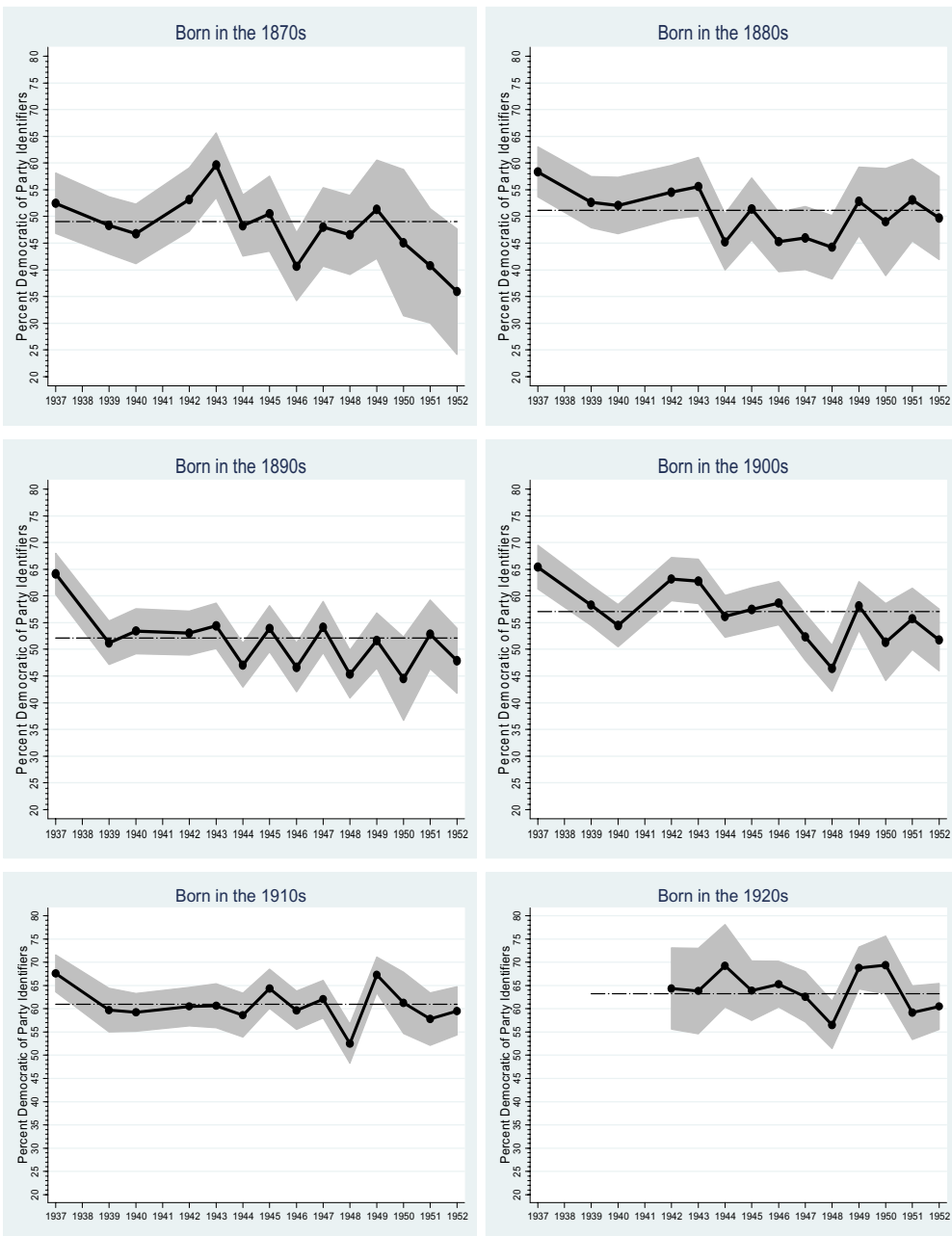


FIGURE 4. Percent Democratic of Party Identifiers by Decade of Birth (With 95% Confidence Intervals).

1870s), which is the most Republican, shows some erosion of Democratic gains made in the 1930s. With time many of the converts reverted back to their old habits. The Democratic Party loses its 1937 edge in all the pre-1920 cohorts, as they are tracked through the surveys from 1937 to 1952 in Figure 4. By 1952, the Republican Party has regained a commanding lead in the 1870s birth cohort, and is close to parity in the cohorts born in the 1880s, 1890s and 1900s. By comparison, the Democratic Party retains a firm hold on the cohort born in the 1910s, which came of age during the Depression and New Deal, an even bigger one on the one born in the 1920s, which came of age during World War II and the postwar prosperity. What adds to the impact of the cohort born in the 1920s is that by 1952, it happens to be the largest 10-year age group, almost as large as all the cohorts born before 1890 combined.

Military Service and Partisanship

Perhaps no event was more defining for this cohort than World War II. Many of its members joined the 15 million or so Americans who served in the armed forces during the war. What did this experience do to their partisanship at the most impressionable stage of development? Perhaps not much, given the results of studies that have examined the effect of military service on political attitudes in World War II (Rugg and Cantril 1940) and the Vietnam War (Jennings and Markus 1977).¹⁵ But is it just a coincidence that the cohort that professes the most decided Democratic loyalties also wore the uniform in large numbers during World War II?

We have examined this question with the help of a 1948 Roper poll that asked respondents about their military service. The poll provides age information for three groups: 21-34 years, 35-49 years, and 50 or older. The youngest of these groups covers those who came of age in the 1940s, but also includes some who came of age earlier. The Roper poll shows that one in five of the 21-34-year-old cohort report to have served in World War II, compared to one in ten among those 35 or older. Table 3 presents our findings for the effect of military service on party identification separately for those two cohorts. The identification of interest is the one with the Democratic Party. The table also displays the estimates for control variables such as socioeconomic status, education, region (the South), and union membership.

Military service in World War II did affect the party identification of the younger cohort (21-34 years old). The young who served embrace the Democratic Party in larger numbers than do those who did not serve. Among older voters (above 34 years of age), military service makes a less significant difference in partisanship. The predicted probabilities of Democratic identification for veterans and nonveterans, holding constant all the other factors considered, are displayed in Figure 5 for the two age groups. Chances are about one in two that a veteran in the younger cohort is a Democrat compared to one in three among nonveterans in the older cohort. At the same time, Republican attachments are quite rare among young veterans while being predominant among older nonveterans.

15. Erikson and Stoker (2011), however, show that vulnerability to the draft, as conveyed through one's number in the draft lottery, affected political attitudes.

TABLE 3
World War II Service and Party Identification with Controls for Demographics

| <i>Variables</i> | <i>21-34 Years Old</i> | | <i>35+ Years Old</i> | |
|-------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| | <i>Coef.</i> | <i>Std. Error</i> | <i>Coef.</i> | <i>Std. Error</i> |
| World War II Veteran | 0.383* | 0.159 | 0.246 | 0.147 |
| Socioeconomic Status | | | | |
| Lower-Middle | -0.392* | 0.154 | -0.183 | 0.124 |
| Upper-Middle | -0.955** | 0.201 | -0.392** | 0.142 |
| Upper | -0.538 | 0.333 | -0.762** | 0.170 |
| Education Level | | | | |
| No Schooling | — | — | 0.995** | 0.526 |
| High School | -0.037 | 0.170 | -0.419** | 0.103 |
| College | -0.303 | 0.205 | -0.512** | 0.129 |
| Female | 0.231 | 0.153 | 0.210* | 0.088 |
| Union Member | 0.369* | 0.175 | 0.675** | 0.148 |
| White | 0.001 | 0.353 | 0.795** | 0.293 |
| South | 1.538** | 0.188 | 1.464** | 0.128 |
| Intercept | 0.518 | 0.383 | -0.456 | 0.297 |
| <i>Model Statistics</i> | | | | |
| Observations | 1,254 | | 2,132 | |
| Log-Likelihood | -1,210.958 | | -2,084.473 | |
| Wald χ^2 | 136.19** | | 256.23** | |

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$.

Note: The estimates in the table were obtained with a multinomial probit analysis. The dependent variable is party identification (Democrat, Republican, and Independent). Only results for Democratic identification are shown. Republican identification was used as the base category.

The greater responsiveness of younger voters to events that might shape or shake partisan loyalties is well documented (Jennings and Niemi 1981, Lewis-Beck et al. 2008). Less apparent is the calculus that may have connected the war with the Democratic Party. Was it the fact that the commander in chief during a popular war was a Democrat? Or was it the “Band of Brothers” experience in the field? Or how veterans were treated after the war by such policies as the G.I. Bill? We are unable to address these questions here, but it is indisputable that wartime service helped the Democratic Party gain a foothold in the Greatest Generation.

Conclusion

The New Deal realignment of the American electorate owes much less to New Deal or the Great Depression than is widely believed. Those events, to be sure, led to Democratic landslides in the 1932 and 1936 elections, and probably to some shifts in party identification. But what gave the Democratic Party its overwhelming hold on party loyalties for much of the second half of the twentieth century was the wartime experience and the postwar prosperity. It is not until 1948 that the Democrats take a commanding

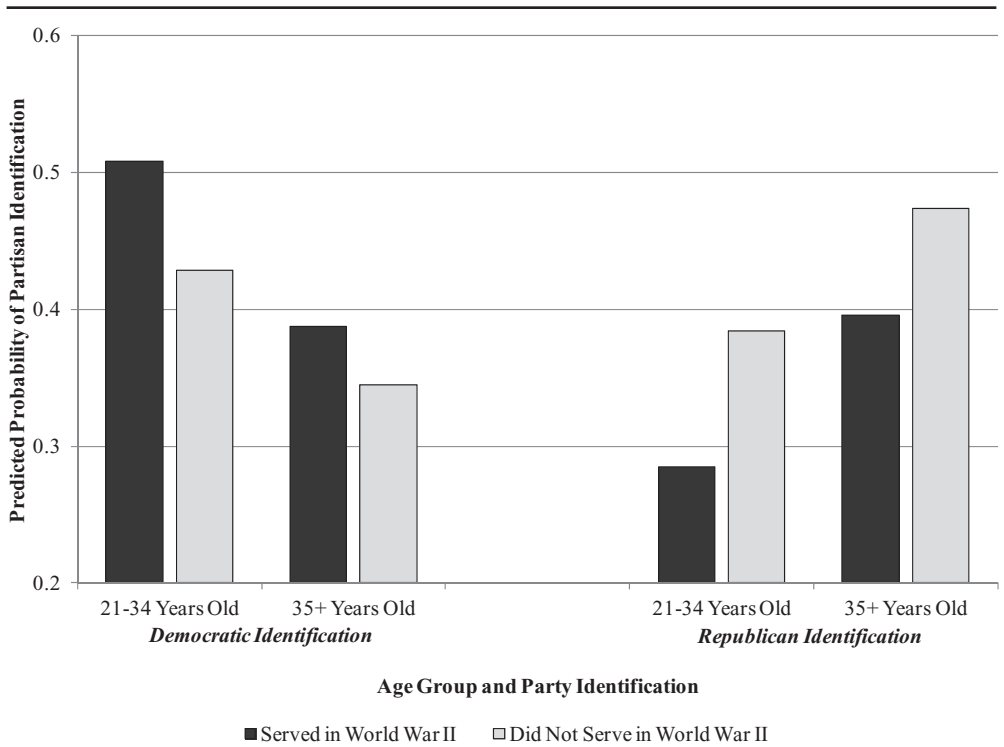


FIGURE 5. Predicted Probability of Democratic and Republican Identification.

Note: Predicted probabilities are derived from the multinomial probit models presented in Table 3. Note that Table 3 does not present coefficients for Republican identification because it is used as the base category in the estimation. Probabilities were generated holding sex at male and all other variables except the variable of interest at their modal categories (nonveteran, lower-middle socioeconomic status, high school education, nonunion member, white, and non-South).

lead in party identification, which registers in the National Election Studies for the next few decades. What is more, the generation of young voters with the strongest attachment to the Democratic Party is the one coming of age in the 1940s, part of the Greatest Generation, for whom World War II was a personal experience. At the same time, gains from conversion of older cohorts prove largely short lived and insufficient to tilt the partisan balance decisively in favor of the Democratic Party.

These findings come from a “real-time” analysis of polls that inquired about party identification between early 1937 and 1952. Nearly 200 such polls were conducted during that period, all but a few by the Gallup Organization, with a staggering total of close to half a million respondents. This data set, which has remained largely unexplored until now, provides for a far more timely gauge of partisanship during the realignment era than do the National Election Study surveys. The latter only begin probing party identification in 1952. Whatever insights such material provides into party identifications of an earlier period must be taken with a grain of salt. Recall is notoriously faulty and especially so in times of great upheaval.

The Great Depression fell short of tilting the partisan balance in the American electorate in favor of the Democrats. That credit belongs to the postwar prosperity. While studies of vote choices have shown the opposite, namely, that bad times hurt incumbents while good times do not help (e.g., Bloom and Price 1975), such a negativity effect may not work for long-term partisanship. It is one thing to vote against the incumbent party in an election and quite another to form a lasting bond with the opposite party. The economic calamity that struck the United States in the late 1920s probably cost the Republicans some long-term support, aside from the White House and the Congress in 1932, but why should that event trigger a surge in favor of the Democratic Party, the big harvest of votes notwithstanding? The fact that one party gets tarred with the image of Depression need not anoint the opposite one as the party of prosperity. It was a reputation that took the Democrats quite a while to acquire.

The New Deal also fell short of handing the Democrats a sustained lead in party identifications. Many of its programs, to be sure, were quite popular and alleviated some economic misery. Yet recovery from the Depression remained limited during the 1930s. Between 1932 and 1936, the ranks of the unemployed shrank, but nowhere close to the pre-Depression level. Even worse, during FDR's second term the U.S. economy slipped back into recession. A popular program is not likely to win long-term support for the party championing it without delivering palpable success.

While the wartime economy did bring about a full recovery from the Depression, there was widespread fear that the transition to peacetime would thrust the U.S. economy back into it. Instead, after some adjustment pains, happy times were here to stay, with unemployment low and growth brisk in the postwar years. Democrats had proved to the American electorate that they could deliver economic prosperity in peacetime. A surge in voter identification was the electoral reward.

The transformation of party attachments was also aided by the experience of World War II. Even aside from creating helpful economic conditions, the war gave a boost to Democratic partisanship. While most wars in recent memory are not noted for helping incumbent parties, World War II is unique for its popularity and certainty of victory (Cantril 1948; Mueller 1973). The war intruded on electoral politics even before the United States entered it formally. It prompted FDR to run for an unprecedented third term, giving him an issue to win an election that kept control of the federal government in Democratic hands. Likewise, World War II helped Democrats maintain control for a fourth term in 1944. What is more, those who served in the war came home with a more Democratic attachment, especially if they were young. War is no stranger to electoral realignments. The ascendancy of the Republican Party in the nineteenth century was forged in the Civil War, whose partisan legacy endured for decades to come.

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