POLITICAL ISSUES AND PARTY ALIGNMENTS:
Assessing the Issue Evolution Perspective

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■ **Abstract**   Although the study of realignment is an essential component of the rich and fruitful tradition of examining long-term partisan change, questions about the usefulness of the concept persist. We seek to redirect and reinvigorate the study of lasting political change by evaluating the critiques of classic realignment theory, examining the issue evolution perspective, and assessing whether the theory of issue evolution can be used to explain recent research on the relationship between political issues and partisan change. Our review of the theoretical and empirical literature investigating political issues and party alignments sheds light on both the utility of the issue evolution perspective and the conditions under which durable changes in party alignments are most likely to occur.

INTRODUCTION

Scholars, pundits, and politicians alike have long been infatuated with the prediction and explanation of enduring political change. For example, presidential hopeful General Wesley Clark told CNN on October 27, 2003, that the 2004 election could lead to "a major realignment in American politics." Whatever the next interpretation of the 2004 election reveals, there will be political scientists who will ask: Was there a realignment? Indeed, this has become one of the "large questions concerning the what, when and why of American history" (Mayhew 2002, p. 1), and its exploration has amounted to a rich and fruitful intellectual tradition.

Although realignment theory has been called a great success story of social science (Silbey 1991), the debate has, if anything, intensified in recent years over whether realignment is useful as a concept (Mayhew 2002), has disappeared as a phenomenon (Ladd 1991), inherently involves a "critical election" (Key 1955, Nardulli 1995), takes place slowly in a "secular" fashion instead (Key 1959,

Carmines & Stimson 1989), or is best understood as issue-based[1] (Sundquist 1983). Perhaps the most forceful critical summary asserts that realignment theory has "evolved from a source of vibrant ideas into an impediment to understanding" (Mayhew 2002, p. 5). That perspective guided an earlier summary in the *Annual Review of Political Science* (Mayhew 2000).

We take a different view. Despite the limitations of several facets of realignment theory, we believe that a focused understanding of the realignment literature, its critiques, and its extensions will illuminate the interplay between political elites and the mass public involving dimensions of issue conflict that lead to partisan change. In this paper, we seek to redirect and reinvigorate the study of lasting political change by evaluating the critiques of classic realignment theory, examining the issue evolution perspective, and assessing whether the theory of issue evolution can be used to explain recent research on the relationship between political issues and partisan change.

Broadly, recent studies of partisan transformations in American politics seek to explain how issue conflict has extended beyond the New Deal's social welfare dimension to include a racial dimension and an emerging religious/cultural dimension (Carmines & Layman 1997, Layman 2001, Leege et al. 2002). These newer dimensions cannot be satisfactorily accounted for within a single stable equilibrium akin to the social welfare equilibrium of the New Deal coalition. The "either or" nature of the classic realignment perspective limits our ability to uncover meaningful political change. We believe that focusing on the potentially transforming sources and outcomes of issue competition can clarify the impact of issue evolution on the American party system.

WHERE WE HAVE BEEN: FROM CLASSIC REALIGNMENT CRITIQUES TO ISSUE EVOLUTION

The classic realignment perspective finds its roots in V.O. Key's 1955 analysis of critical elections and the Michigan school's typology of elections (Campbell et al. 1960). To the typology of realigning, maintaining, and deviating elections, Pomper (1967) adds converting to the mix. Regardless of label, the critical realignment perspective's essential requirements include an election that produces a quick, durable change that is wide in scope and characterized by a cross-cutting issue. This perspective has faced numerous challenges, most recently from Mayhew (2000, 2002). Mayhew's seemingly devastating critique of electoral realignments not only calls into question the utility of the entire realignment perspective but also claims that it cannot be usefully stripped back to highlight more promising lines of inquiry.

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[1]Specifically, racial issues (Carmines & Stimson 1989); abortion (Adams 1997); religious issues (Layman 2001); cultural issues (Leege et al. 2002); or women's issues (Wolbrecht 2000 and Sanbonmatsu 2002).

Mayhew examines both the empirical validity of realignment scholarship and the value of this literature for the study of politics. He constructs a complex, maximalist definition of realignment that requires the existence of 15 properties, such as: some realigning elections and many other nonrealigning ones (Key 1955, Burnham 1970), periodic realignments in 30-or-so-year increments (Burnham 1970), turmoil in presidential nominating conventions (Burnham 1970), insurgent third-party candidates (Sundquist 1983), the emergence of "redistributive" policies (Burnham 1967), and the existence of a "system of 1896" (Burnham 1970, Schattschneider 1956).

Powerfully, Mayhew shows that together, the "big three" realigning elections (1860, 1896, and 1932) never perform at a higher level than other elections in regard to each of the 15 claims he argues are part of the realignment perspective. He also provides evidence that several other elections, such as those in 1876, 1912, and 1940, have characteristics similar to those of elections traditionally placed in the "critical elections" canon.

Although we critique the classic realignment perspective, we find great potential for future study under the realignment tent. The reason is that, in our view, Mayhew is attacking an amalgam. He develops his 15 assertions of the realignment literature from Sundquist, Burnham, Key, and Schattschneider, treating all 15 claims as if they have equally central standing in the realignment literature. Many of the 15 are not *properties* of realignment, but correlates, indicators, or events associated with realignment. Regarding the periodicity claim, Rosenof (2003) argues that "the process by which realignment theory became linked to cycles is replete with irony" (p. 163) because realignment theory developed, in part, as a reaction to theories of short cycles developed by Louis Bean. Geer (1991) argues that the critical realignment perspective should be relegated to history because the explosion in the use of public opinion polling should prevent parties from polarizing on highly salient political issues. This way of looking at political change is consistent with Key's (1959) "secular realignment" perspective and Carmines & Stimson's "issue evolution." Thus, we are not advocating the resurrection of realignment theory per se. Our own trouble with the concept is articulated in *Issue Evolution* (Carmines & Stimson 1989, p. 20):

> [R]ealignment is not a satisfactory concept for any political transformation.... Realignment is a dichotomous notion.... The prominent escape from this intellectual trap is amending the theory to make it speak to the evidence. Because those amendments are also complex and confusing, further additions to the list are unlikely to produce scientific progress.

Most crucially, Mayhew's persuasive critique is only of the critical election model, not of a more fundamental conception of realignment. We argue that electoral change and partisan transformation can be usefully explained by defining realignment as simply "the transformation of an existing alignment caused by the introduction of a new dimension of conflict" (Carmines 1994, p. 77). One

perspective that develops this idea while including the presence of a cross-cutting issue is "issue evolution."

The issue evolution model of partisan dynamics argues that most partisan change occurs incrementally over long periods of time, after which "an indelible imprint" is left on the party system (Carmines 2001, p. 7938; Carmines & Stimson 1989). Most issues never achieve the high level of salience needed to power significant party change. Issue evolution is structured by the actions of partisan elites and the responses of the mass electorate (Carmines & Stimson 1989); partisan elites can be understood to be members of Congress, the president, and candidates for major political office. The reputation a party develops on an issue is a partisan cue to the public.

Of course, elites of different parties often adopt competing issue positions in order to increase their chances of winning elections. Members of a minority party have the incentive to try to defeat the majority coalition[2] (Riker 1982), and political issues can be used for this purpose. The important role of the mass electorate is to decide whether to respond to the partisan issue cues of elites and activists. Typically, the electorate fails to respond to these cues. During times when the electorate does respond, however, the reaction occurs at a gradual pace rather than abruptly, as one might suspect with a "critical election."

Even if partisan elites bring up new issues, changes in the mass electorate are not automatic. Carmines & Stimson's (1989) model of issue evolution requires two intervening steps (p. 161):

> First, the mass public must alter its perceptions of the parties with respect to the new issue dimension.... But even changed perceptions, by themselves, are not likely to induce changes in mass issue alignment. For issues to move voters to change their partisan identification (at the "critical moment") and bias the recruitment of identifiers (thereafter), the issue must evoke a strong emotional response.

In other words, the electorate's new perception of the parties' stances on the issue must be accompanied by strong feelings for or against the parties in order to overcome the general immovability of party identification (Campbell et al. 1960). Temporal ordering is critical to issue evolution; elite reorientation on the issue precedes changes in the "cognitive and affective images of the parties," which comes before mass partisan response (Carmines 2001, p. 7938).

In addition to party elites and the electorate, a third set of political actors plays an important role in the issue evolution process. Party activists serve as a link between major office holders and the largely inactive mass public (Carmines & Woods 2002). Party activists do not represent a single identifiable group but instead are a heterogeneous set of overlapping groups that include delegates to national and state nominating conventions, major financial contributors to parties and candidates, and the thousands of state and local officeholders and party officials. Their common

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[2]The same could be true for a minority coalition in the majority party (Layman 2001).

identity comes from the fact that they pay substantially more attention to politics and are more heavily involved in political activities than the millions of citizens who only show up at the voting booth every four years.

Party elites communicate their issue preferences to the mass public mainly through national media coverage. Party activists, on the other hand, gain access to the public through their vast and deeply embedded social networks, supplemented by the local media. Party activists reinforce the issue cues of party elites and provide an additional mechanism through which the mass public can become aware of the policy preferences of the political parties (Miller & Schofield 2003). The recent movement of the Republican Party to the ideological right, illustrated by the nomination of Barry Goldwater in 1964 and the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, was signaled by the recruitment of literally thousands of conservative activists who joined the Republican ranks during this period. A similar argument, though it holds onto the critical election perspective, comes from Weatherford (2002). He argues that after a critical election, elites and activists define key issues and social cleavages while voters continue to learn about the parties through an "experiential search" (Weatherford 2002, p. 253) that depends on party competition and information about the parties' opposing viewpoints.

A FOCUS ON POST–NEW DEAL ISSUES

The New Deal party system's demise is one of several major changes that have taken place in American politics since World War II. This change is closely tied to another that has received comparatively little scholarly attention until recent years: the expansion of the nation's issue agenda (Carmines & Layman 1997). First, the emergence of racial issues onto the national scene transformed party politics during the middle of the twentieth century (Carmines & Stimson 1989). Additionally, the more recent emergence of social and cultural issues has affected the post–New Deal period (Layman 2001, Carmines & Layman 1997, Leege et al. 2002, Lindaman & Haider-Markel 2002).

The emergence of racial issues onto the national political scene redefined the conventional New Deal grounds of political debate. Political elites shifted from heterogeneous voting to homogeneous voting on racial issues. What is more, the mass public followed. The result was that the Democratic Party became the home of racial liberalism whereas the Republican Party became dominated by racial conservatives. Carmines & Stimson (1989) show that "racial issues have become an integral part of the normal struggle for power" (p. 138).

Carmines & Stanley (1990) show that "partisan movement in the white South has not been confined to ideological conservatives. . . it has been extended beyond ideology and race to include social welfare, defense, and foreign policy, and now moral and social concerns" (p. 29). Cowden (2001) also fruitfully explores this point with a unique blend of data and complex methodology. Carmines & Stanley stress that white southerners changed parties to better fit their ideology. In other

words, the authors show that white southerners did not become more conservative as a group, but rather switched their partisan identifications to better fit their political beliefs.

This argument has not gone uncountered. Schreckhise & Shields (2003) argue that from 1978 to 1994, the impact of ideology on people's party identification intensified while the importance of their parents' party identification decreased. The changes Schreckhise and Shields found, though, are not uniform across the nation. They find that the pull of ideology was strongest for southern white males whereas non-southern white females exhibited movement toward the Democratic Party based on ideology and parental party identification.

Additionally, Abramowitz (1994, p. 22) argues that by the 1980s, "there was only a weak relationship between racial attitudes and party identification among whites." He further notes that the weak relationship he identifies is merely the "by-product of the association of racial attitudes and attitudes towards other types of issues (Abramowitz 1994, p. 22). It is worth noting, though, that in examining how the public perceived questions about race and the welfare state, Kellstedt (2003) forcefully shows how the racial issue dimension in the public "fused onto" the social-welfare issue dimension by the mid-1970s, a decade before Abramowitz's analysis.

Moreover, generational replacement is of the utmost importance to Carmines & Stimson's (1989) account of racial issue evolution. This corroborates Stanley's (1988) argument that although older white southern natives have played an important role in partisan change, the largest role belongs to younger generations. What issues have been most salient to the most recent generations? Several scholars argue that religious and cultural politics will dominate the first part of the new millennium.

Stimson (2004) both reviews and provides new evidence for three instances of issue evolution that have occurred since the 1960s: race, abortion, and women's rights. At the time of each issue's "critical moment," there was either a negative or nonexistent correlation between the public's preferences on the three issues and their party identification. Indeed, prior to Goldwater's candidacy for president in 1964, it was not obvious which political party was more consistently in favor of civil rights. Moreover, after the *Roe v. Wade* decision from the Supreme Court in 1973, Democrats and Republicans (in Congress and in the public) were equally likely to support abortion rights. Finally, public attitudes toward women's role in society were not at all correlated with partisanship in 1972, but by the mid 1980s, there was a steady, positive correlation between public preferences about women's role in society and political partisanship. In all three cases, the correlations between issue preference and party identification gradually became positive and remained consistent over several more years, suggesting that the issue evolution processes on these issues are complete.

Critical to this perspective is the assertion that public issue preferences cannot be reduced to a single ideological dimension (Shafer & Claggett 1995; Layman & Carsey 2002a,b; Layman et al. 2006). In their comprehensive analysis, Shafer

& Claggett (1995) show that two "deep" issue dimensions exist in the American public. The first dimension focuses on the economic and social welfare issues that became salient during the New Deal. These are issues related to the government's involvement in the economy, such as taxes, health care spending, social security, and welfare. The common thread uniting these issues is that they deal with distribution, "tapping arguments over the appropriate (re)distribution of economic benefits to the less fortunate" (Shafer & Claggett 1995, p. 24). Kellstedt's (2003) recent study analyzes media framing of racial issues dealing with aid to minorities and affirmative action to show how racial issues fused with the social welfare dimension (Kellstedt 2003).

The second dimension, which developed during the period from the late 1960s to the 1990s, deals with cultural values, including such issues as abortion, gay rights, and prayer in public schools. These issues are connected by their common concern for "the implementation of American values—values that define appropriate social behavior" (Shafer & Claggett 1995, p. 23).

These two issue dimensions have become incorporated into a single broad ideological dimension for party elites, but they remain largely separate for the mass electorate. Indeed, people's preferences along both dimensions have implications for their partisan identification. Carmines et al. (2005) demonstrate that citizens who have consistently liberal or conservative preferences, that is, preferences that are either liberal or conservative along both issue dimensions, are much more likely to identify as partisan than those with heterodox, or inconsistent, preferences along the two issue dimensions[3] (see also the review by Layman et al. in this volume).

WHERE WE ARE: RELIGION AND THE CULTURE WARS

In recent years, scholars using the issue evolution framework, extensions of it, or similar perspectives (Layman et al. 2006) have examined the roles that abortion (Adams 1997), women's issues in general (Sanbonmatsu 2002, Wolbrecht 2000), religion (Layman 2001), and other cultural issues (Leege et al. 2002, Lindaman & Haider-Markel 2002) have played in determining current conflict in party politics. In the main, research regarding "the culture wars" focuses on what Mooney calls morality issues (Mooney 2001, Mooney & Lee 2001). Focusing on these issues as potential engines of partisan transformation is useful because morality issues tend to have a stronger correspondence between citizen values and public policy (Mooney 2001) than nonsalient technical issues do (Erickson et al. 1993).

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[3]Here, consistently "liberal" preferences are defined as preferences consistent with the issue positions taken by Democratic Party elites and consistently "conservative" preferences are defined as preferences consistent with the issue positions taken by Republican Party elites. Stonecash's (2006) demonstration that the two major political parties have gone through a gradual resorting of their own electoral bases that eventually led to the reemergence of strong partisanship provides evidence consistent with our view.

Adams (1997) examines roll call votes in Congress to show how abortion has changed the electorate. He shows that the congressional parties, over a long period of time, developed consistent, competing opinions on abortion. Consistent with Stimson's (2004) analysis of the abortion issue, Adams demonstrates that the mass public gradually changed their party identifications in a manner consistent with their attitudes on abortion and in response to elite position-taking.

Layman (2001) argues that the religious cleavage between traditionalists and modernists has influenced party politics. He notes the important role of party activists, who sustained and extended the elite polarization on religious and cultural issues by cueing the public about the nature of the issue change at the elite level of party politics. Also important here are young voters. Campbell (2002) finds that religiosity substantially impacts young voters' likelihood of identifying themselves as Republican. This finding did not generalize to African-Americans, a group with high religiosity, nor was it wholly consistent among Jewish, Catholic, or Protestant voters. Still, in the main, "religious dedication corresponds with Republican Party ID" (Campbell 2002, p. 217), a connection that is stronger for younger than for older voters.

So what, if anything, has replaced the New Deal Coalition? Moreover, what explains the changes in the New Deal Coalition? Carmines (1994) observes that a stable alignment is guaranteed only when one issue dimension dominates politics. The introduction of new issues has not resulted in the disappearance of the cleavage that had divided the parties since the 1930s: the social welfare cleavage (Carmines & Layman 1997). On social welfare and racial issues, however, there are substantial disparities in the positions of two traditionally Democratic group identifiers: African-Americans and southern whites. African-Americans are far to the left of southern whites on both issue dimensions. At the same time, on social and cultural issues, tension exists between upper-income citizens and religious conservatives, which are both traditionally Republican groups. The former have much more moderate views on most social issues than the latter. Thus, just as racial issues were rough on Democrats, Carmines & Layman (1997) argue that social and cultural issues have the potential to hurt Republicans. Overall, the parties do differ across the full domestic spectrum, though Carmines & Layman claim that no new stable alignment has yet emerged.

Layman (2001) finds that those who pay attention to politics and understand the political information they take in have a stronger link between their religious and political orientations. He suggests that if cultural issues remain salient and if the chasm between Democratic and Republican elites and activists remains wide, the impact of religious orthodoxy and commitment will remain strong. Layman argues, as did Carmines & Stimson (1989), that

> to reshape the parties' electoral coalitions, a cleavage must be associated with political issues that a large number of people feel strongly about, that are on the political agenda for a relatively long period of time, that provoke resistance (a large number of people on both sides of the issue), and that cut across existing lines of partisan cleavage. (Layman 2001, p. 292)

The religious cleavage between traditionalists and modernists is associated with a large set of these issues: abortion, homosexual rights, prayer in schools, and the role of women (Layman 2001). As the theory of issue evolution would predict, increasing polarization in elite activity (roll call votes in Congress) paved the way for religion-based mass-level changes in the political parties.

Wolbrecht's (2000) analysis of women's issues draws on theories of critical realignment, issue evolution, agenda setting, and congressional behavior to suggest that the two major political parties' relative positions on any issue are determined by three factors: the issue itself, the party coalitions, and the party elite. She then incorporates a discussion of issue equilibrium and disruption, through which we can find changes in overall party position.

Kaufmann's examination of secular realignment, culture wars, and the gender gap in party identification suggests that, consistent with the issue evolution model, "increases in Democratic identification among women may be tied, in part, to the party's cultural liberalism and the growing salience of these issues to women" (Kaufmann 2002, p. 296). As such, the issues of reproductive rights, equality for women, and homosexual rights have all gradually become important predictors of women's party identification. Kaufmann also finds that it is not just the issue but the issue's salience that plays a key role in party identification. Social welfare issues, for instance, are found to be more salient to men than women; social welfare issues are the issues that shape men's partisan choices. Thus, the culture wars have an important but indirect role on male party identification.

And what about realignment theory? Layman finds little use for the critical election perspective, arguing that "a model of partisan change in which citizens progressively respond to the polarization of party elites on new issues appears superior. . .not only for explaining the religious and cultural shifts in party politics, but also for explaining party change within the context of contemporary campaign politics" (Layman 2001, p. 305).

CULTURAL THEORY AS AN EXPLANATION FOR CHANGE

Campaign politics, especially the race for president, is where Leege and colleagues begin their analysis of the transformation of the New Deal equilibrium from a social welfare dimension to what they claim is a cultural dimension. The authors include both turnout and defection into their measure of voter choice, which leads them to argue that the politics of the post–New Deal era is cultural. For Leege et al. (2002), "the nature of electoral alignments depends heavily on voter preferences that are, in turn, largely the products of ambitious politicians seeking issues that will carry them to victory" (p. 252).

At first blush, Leege and colleagues offer a definition of cultural politics that deviates from the version used in work with an affinity for the issue evolution model. They argue that "*cultural politics is less a set of issues than a style of argumentation*

that invokes fundamental social values and emphasizes group differences" (Leege et al. 2002, authors' italics, p. 27–28). Leege et al. contend that political elites frame issues in a way that mobilizes strategic portions of the electorate and demobilizes other portions of it. Cultural conflict is defined as an "argument about how we as a people should structure our lives" (Leege et al. 2002, p. 254).

In our view, it is difficult or impossible to distinguish intrinsically cultural issues from issues that are traditionally considered to be cultural. This is true even for Leege and colleagues. As with Carmines & Stimson's (1980, 1989) work on issues, the cultural style of politics does not involve technical issues. The authors claim to extend the "easy issue/hard issue" perspective by noting that cultural questions are more likely to be framed as position issues (where disagreement between elites is likely) than as valence issues (where elites can agree on the ends and disagree over the means), but they note that this requirement seems implicit in Carmines & Stimson's analysis.

The authors do not provide systematic evidence that cultural frames have dominated political discourse during the post–New Deal period. For instance, in justifying their claim that cultural politics may impact any issue to a greater or lesser degree, they note that Carmines & Stimson's view of the Vietnam War as an example of a hard issue "did not grow out of the issue so much as the manner in which political elites framed the controversy for the mass public" (Leege et al. 2002, p. 258). However, they offer no evidence to support this point, leaving open the question of whether cultural framing was absent in elite characterizations of the Vietnam War.

Although Leege et al. admittedly provide no direct test that links elite cultural rhetoric and voting behavior, they argue that in addition to the racial transformation of the New Deal Coalition, southerners also defected to the Republican Party in response to foreign policy appeals that were cultural as they dealt with the Cold War. By the time of the 1988 presidential election campaign, according to these authors, "explicit racial concerns no longer seemed to enter the white Southern Democrats' voting calculus. . .now [those concerns were] pushed aside by concern over moral decadence" (Leege et al. 2002, p. 258). This fits into the notion of Leege and colleagues that political parties, while maintaining core values, can be thought of as moving value coalitions that shift value priorities in order to win elections.

WHERE WE ARE HEADED: PARTY POLITICS, SALIENCE, AND THE MASS MEDIA

Lindaman & Haider-Markel (2002) argue that some culture war issues may not be as likely to evolve as previous research indicates, because not all issues are equally salient to the public. The fundamental question remains, however, how do elites transmit their competing partisan messages, whether issue-based or cultural, to the mass public? What makes an issue salient? What is the role of political parties in structuring conflict over potentially transforming issues? And how does the public pick issues that are ripe for an issue evolution? Before these questions

can be answered, it is essential to discuss the role of party politics, issue salience, and the mass media in electoral change and partisan transformation.

The purpose of a political party is to win elections in order to control the government (Downs 1957). For a political issue to lead to a transformation in the party system, it must exist for a long period of time, be important to a large number of people, result in major political conflict, and cross-cut the existing partisan cleavage. Sniderman (2000) argues that people can reason because they have fixed, coherent choices that are structured by the party system. Many scholars are in agreement that the salience of an issue or set of issues is crucial in determining whether it can be a "realigning issue" (Carmines & Stimson 1989, Leege et al. 2002, Lindaman & Haider-Markel 2002), affecting long-term electoral change and partisan transformation. If the issue evolution perspective is correct, elites should work to make a potentially transforming issue salient to the public so that the issue can help those elites win elections.

But how does partisan issue framing fit into the equation? As Plotke (1996) notes, realignment theory downplayed "the role of active political leadership". The issue evolution perspective places political elites at center stage, arguing that elite transformation leads to mass transformation. Others argue that elites strategically frame position issues as cultural in order to mobilize, convert, or demobilize certain portions of the electorate (Leege et al. 2002). We take a more general view. Lupia & McCubbins (1998) remind us that institutions matter in politics because they shape incentives and impact who can learn from whom. To win public power, the parties must compete, and a central aspect of competition is their effort to define political choices (Sniderman 2000). The issue evolution model, as well as focusing on partisan elites' framing of issues, gives the role of political leadership its proper due.

Thus, any consistent, partisan framing of an issue, cultural or not, might be expected to help voters (under some conditions) do the following things: (*a*) believe an issue is important, (*b*) form an opinion on an issue, (*c*) change their opinion on an issue, or even occasionally (*d*) change their partisan orientation because of that issue. How does this happen? As we hinted above, Kellstedt (2003) provides an interesting answer; his theoretically insightful examination of the mass media's role in the electorate's development of racial attitudes provides evidence that the differing racial and social welfare dimensions that previously have transformed party politics eventually merged into a single broad issue dimension.

What issues might we consider to be a part of the next wave of partisan change? We proceed here with great caution. One recent inquiry finds that gay rights issues are not salient enough to engineer an issue evolution (Lindaman & Haider-Markel 2002). However, if the issue evolution perspective is correct, the evidence the authors present of increasing elite differences in the support of gay rights should gradually find its way into the mass public. Because gay issues have been on the nation's radar screen for a long time, and because the recent court decisions and presidential campaign rhetoric opened the door to a national conversation on the issue of gay marriage, political elites may choose to highlight their differences with each other on the issue, perhaps triggering an increase in salience. Of course, if political leaders of one or both major parties choose to avoid providing consistent

and competing positions on issues of gay rights, we should not expect the issue to engineer long-term partisan change any time soon. Other religious issues also seem to continue to be important in the current political landscape (Layman 2001). And racial issues such as affirmative action may always re-enter the mass public's collective consciousness.

Of course, we do not submit that the application of framing and the media to the study of issue evolution completes the scholarly puzzle. Many other fruitful avenues of research persist. Concurring with Erikson et al. (2002) that public opinion is often moved, not by the mass public in its entirety, but by a portion of the public that is knowledgeable and attentive to politics, Layman & Carsey (2002a,b) assert that party polarization in the electorate is best explained by "conflict extension" (see Layman et al., this volume). The authors claim that a limited subset of the public, largely made up of party identifiers who are aware of party differences on social welfare, racial, and cultural issue dimensions, will respond to developments observed among party elites. Of course, it is possible to conceive of conflict extension as fitting into the issue evolution model, where elites change, then attentive mass partisans change, and then the rest of the electorate follow, thus completing the gradual but durable shift in mass partisanship.

CONCLUSION

Rosenof (2003, pp. 166–67) concludes his historical analysis of realignment theory by claiming that focusing on durable changes in electoral patterns is useful in the retrospective study of American politics. We would add that realignment theory, when one conceives of partisan realignment as the transformation of an existing alignment via the introduction of a new dimension of conflict, can help us understand the circumstances under which issues become salient enough to foster gradual political change. Realignment theory has had a long, turbulent history marred by complex caveats that have become unnecessary parts of the theory itself. With an eye to the past and an eye to the future, we believe the study of electoral change and partisan transformation should continue with a focus on how political issues can lead to partisan changes.

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