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# World War I and the “System of 1896”

**Robert P. Saldin** University of Montana

*Realignment theory has long offered the primary framework for understanding American political history, particularly as it relates to the party system. The “System of 1896” is central to the theory and holds that William McKinley’s victory in that year ushered in a Republican-dominated era lasting until Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt’s election in 1932. The 10 years of partial—and six years of total—Democratic control of Congress and the White House (1910–20) during this 36-year stretch (1896–1932) remains an anomaly among realignment theorists. I conduct content analyses of Democratic and Republican party documents and media commentary and find that World War I played a crucial role in the GOP’s resurgence in 1920. This conclusion highlights realignment theory’s failure to account for the important role of international events and contingency in general.*

The “System of 1896” is a pillar of realignment theory. Yet as Mayhew (2002) has recently argued, there is reason to question this mainstay of the political science literature. The following study builds on Mayhew’s critique by considering international events as causal variables in explaining domestic politics. Specifically, it examines the “System of 1896” and the role World War I played in the 1920 election by conducting content analyses of Republican and Democratic campaign materials and newspaper editorials. It finds that realignment theory leads to the faulty assumption that Republican dominance was somehow natural and inevitable. Three crucial problems emerge with the “System of 1896.” First, the Democrats shared or had total power for 10 years right in the middle of this party system—something counterintuitive for a supposedly Republican-dominated era. Second, the 1920 election brought this period of Democratic control to a dramatic and decisive close. Third, realignment theory parsimoniously deals with the 1920 election, failing to identify it as an important election akin to that of 1896. Realignment theorists may have overlooked the 1920 election because of their tendency to focus exclusively on domestic factors. These findings suggest that a new, more nuanced, and less sweeping theory is needed that can take account of both domestic and international influences.

## War and Realignment Theory

Realignment theory suggests that important “realigning” or “critical elections” produce massive shifts in

the parties’ relative electoral strength and upset the internal composition of each party (e.g., Burnham 1970; Key 1955; Schattschneider 1960; Sundquist 1983). As a result, the dominant party is demoted to minority status while the once-opposition party (or a new party, like the Republicans in 1860) takes the reins in Washington. This change is accompanied by an altered policy agenda reflecting the new majority party’s public philosophy. Widely identified critical elections in the realignment genre include 1800, 1828, 1860, 1896, and 1932. The 1896 election has played a particularly prominent role in the realignment literature since the theory’s inception, and its prominence as a critical election that produced a “sharp and durable” realignment has endured through the literature’s development. Following on the heels of an economic panic in 1893, as Key initially argued, the 1896 election brought the Republican party to power and the “Democratic defeat was so demoralizing and so thorough that the party could make little headway in regrouping its forces until 1916” (1955, 11). Similarly, Sundquist has asserted that this 1896 realignment set the stage for American politics until World War I (1983, 170). Not until 1932 did the “System of 1896” come to a close as Democrats once again became the dominant party, thanks to that year’s critical election (Burnham 1981, 1986). Realignment theorists have generally viewed the Woodrow Wilson years as an anomaly within the “System of 1896,” leading them to minimize the importance of the Republicans’ landslide victory in 1920 (e.g.,

Schattschneider 1960; Sundquist 1983, 180–81; Clubb, Flanigan, and Zingale 1980, 165). They argue that the Republican party, dating back to McKinley's realigning 1896 victory, was still dominant and constituted the day's reigning political order. This connection is important because it suggests the return to Republican rule in 1920 was natural, predictable, and unremarkable given the dominant 1896-based political system.

It should be noted that across the disciplines of history and political science, from the 1920s through today, the realignment interpretation of the 1910s has never been hegemonic. Prominent historians, and the occasional political scientist, have viewed the 1910s as a period of great importance and as a hinge-point in its own right (e.g., Beard and Beard 1921; Hofstadter 1955; Huntington 1981; Schlesinger 1986). Nonetheless, the realignment synthesis has clearly offered the dominant perspective in political science.

Recently, however, realignment theory has come under fire (e.g., Mayhew 2002; Shafer 1991). Most notably, Mayhew's (2002) critique has called realignment theory's key assumptions into serious question. Furthermore, he has suggested that realignment theorists' explanation of the Wilson years during the "System of 1896" is "questionable" and has left the 1920 election "underanalyzed" (Mayhew 2005b, 484).

At the same time, leading scholars have noted the failure of the American politics literature to explain the manner in which international forces have shaped domestic politics (Katznelson 2002; Kersch 2005a; Mayhew 2005b). Katznelson has noted this omission in the American political development literature, arguing that the resulting "loss to intellectual vibrancy has been considerable" (2002, 7–8). Similarly, Mayhew contends:

Wars have been underexamined as causal factors in American political history . . . .In general, the study of elections, parties, issues, programs, ideologies, and policy making has centered on peacetime narratives and causation . . . .American wars have ordinarily been treated as interrupting distractions after which politics could revert to its normal course. (2005b, 473)

While there have been some notable exceptions to these general claims (e.g., Kryder 2000; Mettler 2006; Sparrow 1996), Katznelson and Mayhew identify what has often been a blind spot for political scientists studying American politics. The domestic and international realms are frequently treated as separate entities, existing in total independence from one another.

## The Failure of the "System of 1896" in Explaining the 1920 Election

Realignment scholars have guided the political science literature with regard to the 1920 election (Burnham 1981, 1986; Key 1955; Schattschneider 1960; Sundquist 1983). They suggest that Republican Warren G. Harding's victory in the presidential contest over Democrat James M. Cox was a return to the status quo ushered in under the "System of 1896." Sundquist, for instance, concludes that "[b]y 1920 the two-party system had essentially returned to the pattern of 1896, with Republican hegemony throughout the North and West and a normal Republican majority nationally. So a decade and a half of great political, social, and institutional change proved, in the end, to be a period of stability in the party system" (1983, 181). Schattschneider, never mentioning Wilson's eight years as president (or the Democrats' eight years of control in the House and six in the Senate), claims "[t]he 1896 party alignment is important . . . because it was remarkably stable and because it was powerful enough to determine the nature of American politics for more than thirty years" (1960, 78). For Schattschneider and the other realignment theorists, the Democrats' electoral success for roughly a quarter of this period is either ignored completely or mentioned only in passing. Burnham, for instance, refers to it as a "special case" (1967, 300), and Sundquist calls it an "accident" and, in a footnote, "a temporary interruption" (1983, 177, 181). Mayhew succinctly summarizes the thrust of the literature: "the leading interpretation is a questionable teleological case that the Democrats, that era's natural minority party, *had* to fall from power somehow once the fluky Wilson presidency, the product of an unusual four-way election contest in 1912, was out of the way" (2005b, 484). The prevailing strain within the political science literature views Harding's victory as not only a "return to normalcy," but also a return to the "System of 1896."

Yet as Mayhew (2005b) indicates, Wilson's 1912 victory was not just a bizarre historical fluke. There is certainly some truth to the point that Wilson's election was helped by Theodore Roosevelt's run as a Progressive (or Bull Moose) after a bitter split in the Republican party. But Democrats were also faring well in congressional elections. Beginning in the 1910 midterm, Democrats made big gains in both chambers of Congress. In the House, the Democrats picked up 56 seats and became the majority. In the Senate, they gained 10 seats (see Table 1). The Republican's

internal strife clearly played a role in these results as well, but Democrats were nonetheless making major gains prior to 1912. In sum, the Democrats did much more than haphazardly enter Washington in 1912 through the backdoor and on the coattails of a lucky presidential candidate who merely happened to be in the right place at the right time to take advantage of an unusual four-way race for the White House. Rather, Wilson's election came two years after his party made stunning advances in Congress. Additionally, the fact that Republicans were plagued by bitter and crippling internal strife to the point that it played a significant role in their loss of the presidency and Congress for several election cycles, undermines realignment assertions that the decades following 1896 constitute an "era of Republican dominance" (Sundquist 1983, 181).

Further diminishing the "fluky Wilson presidency" view is the fact that Democrats maintained their edge for several election cycles. Though the presidential election garnered the most attention in 1912, the congressional Democrats made even more dramatic advances that year than they had in 1910, with gains of 62 House seats and 9 Senate seats. Like

the House, the Senate was now under Democratic control. For the next six years, both chambers were managed by Democrats, often with large majorities. In the House, Democrats peaked at an overwhelming 291–127 (70%) seat advantage, while their Senate counterparts, after another round of impressive gains in 1914, enjoyed a 56–40 (58%) seat majority for two of those years. Finally, Wilson, this time in a typical two-way race involving a unified Republican opposition, was reelected in 1916 (see Table 2). The key point here is that the Democrats controlled the presidency and both houses of Congress for an extended period. This success cannot be simply attributed to an electoral aberration and a quirky presidential election that robbed the Republicans of their natural position atop Capitol Hill and in the White House. Rather, the 1912 presidential election was only one of many races, in only one of several election cycles, in which the Democrats fared quite well and gained or maintained majority status.

Not only were Democrats winning at the ballot box, but there is reason to believe their policies were popular with the public. This point also proves problematic for proponents of realignment theory and advocates of the "System of 1896." The progressives were a major force in the Democratic party and championed a different set of policy initiatives than the supposedly dominant Republican party. President Wilson and congressional Democrats pursued a strong progressive agenda that differed markedly from the Republicans—even the GOP's progressive wing (Sarasohn 1989). Specifically, the "New Freedom" agenda conceived by Wilson and liberal attorney Louis Brandeis, went much further than Republicans in promoting a governmental role in regulating the economy. New Freedom initiatives sought to break up industrial trusts and promote the interests of small business owners and farmers. Roosevelt, with strong progressive credentials of his own, denounced the plan as "rural Toryism" (Witcover 2003, 308–309). A progressive-style law-making binge in 1916 included popular measures such as the Federal Farm Loan Act, workmen's compensation for federal employees, a ban on the interstate sale of goods produced by child labor, the Adamson Act (mandating an eight-hour workday for railroad employees), and the Revenue Act of 1916 with its progressive income tax. That year also saw Brandeis elevated to the Supreme Court. The bottom line is that there was a significant gulf between the parties. If the Republican party was truly dominant during these years, it is unclear why voters continually supported the Democrats and their different policies.

**TABLE 1 Congressional Seats Held by Party, 1894–1928**

	House		Senate	
	Rep	Dem	Rep	Dem
1894	246	104	44	39
1896	206	134	46	34
1898	185	163	53	26
1900	198	153	56	29
1902	207	178	58	32
1904	250	136	58	32
1906	222	164	61	29
1908	219	172	59	32
1910*	162	228	49	42
1912**	127	290	44	51
1914**	193	231	39	56
1916**	210	216	42	53
1918	237	191	48	47
1920	300	132	59	37
1922	225	207	51	43
1924	247	183	54	40
1926	237	195	48	47
1928	267	163	56	39

\*Indicates Democratic control of the House.

\*\*Indicates Democratic control of the House and the Senate.

Source: Harold W. Stanley and Richard G. Niemi, *Vital Statistics on American Politics 2003-2004* (Washington: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2003), 37-8.

TABLE 2 Presidential Elections, 1896–1928

Year	Candidates	Electoral Vote*	Popular Vote**
1896	McKinley, R	271 (60.6%)	51.0% (+4.3)
	Bryan, D	176	46.7%
1900	McKinley, R	292 (65.3%)	51.6% (+6.1)
	Bryan, D	155	45.5%
1904	T. Roosevelt, R	336 (70.6%)	56.4% (+18.8)
	Parker, D	140	37.6%
1908	Taft, R	321 (66.5%)	51.6% (+8.6)
	Bryan, D	162	43.0%
1912	Wilson, D	435 (81.9%)	41.8%
	T. Roosevelt, Prog.	88	27.4%
	Taft, R	8	23.2%
1916	Wilson, D	277 (52.2%)	49.2% (-3.1)
	Hughes, R	254	46.1%
1920	Harding, R	404 (76.1%)	60.3% (+26.2)
	Cox, D	127	34.1%
1924	Coolidge, R	382 (71.9%)	54.0%
	David, D	136	28.8%
	LaFollette, Prog.	13	16.6%
1928	Hoover, R	444 (83.6%)	58.2% (+17.4)
	Smith, D	87	40.8%

\*Each candidate's electoral votes are displayed. The winner's percent of the total electoral votes is displayed in parentheses.

\*\*Each candidate's share of the popular vote is displayed as a percentage. The Republican margin is displayed in parentheses. The Republican margin is not displayed in 1912 and 1924 because prominent third party candidates skew the comparison.

Another difficulty for “System of 1896” adherents appears in elections during the 1920s. The results of the 1920 presidential election and those that follow are more dramatic than their counterparts some two decades before. The presidential popular vote margins (Table 2) for the three elections in the 1920s (60.3%, 54.0%, and 58.2%; average: 57.5%) are more impressive than those for 1896 and its three ensuing elections (51.0%, 51.6%, 56.4%, and 51.6%; average: 52.7%). Similarly, the 1920s Republicans took larger shares of the available electoral votes (76.1%, 71.9%, and 83.6%; average: 77.2%) than did their fellow partisans a generation before (60.6%, 65.3%, 70.6%, and 66.5%; average: 65.8%). Statistical analyses by Bartels (1998) and Clubb, Flanigan, and Zingale (1980, 90–102) demonstrate that the 1920 presidential contest produced an electoral change similar to those trumpeted by realignment theorists and a more dramatic change than did the 1896 realignment. Given that these two periods (1896–1910 and 1920–28) were buffered by 10 years of Democratic control of at least one congressional chamber or the White House—and six years of holding all three—the argument that the 1920 election is linked to the “System of 1896” is unpersuasive.

## World War I's Influence on the 1920 Election

In November of 1920, President Wilson was bed-ridden following a debilitating stroke, and Roosevelt had recently died. Over 100,000 soldiers had not returned from World War I. The League of Nations—the Treaty of Versailles' centerpiece—was unpopular and clearly not going to be ratified. The economy had settled into a postwar slump. Race riots and extremist groups dominated newspaper headlines. Against this backdrop, the 1920 election was held. Given these factors, it should probably not be a surprise that the Republicans were swept into power in one of the great landslides in American electoral history. The war itself was no longer a primary political issue; after all, fighting had been over for two years. Nonetheless, the war loomed large in that its direct effects played a crucial role in the election.

The war had a significant influence on the American population. For the first time in the nation's history, millions of men were sent abroad to fight. Over 126,000 of them were killed in action, and many others returned scarred, be it physically or emotionally,

for life. The war also sent many citizens, including women, into cities to work new jobs in industrial positions. Part of this urban migration included an African American exodus out of the South to the Northern industrial centers (Cooper 1990, 78–79).

While the war created an economic boom, its conclusion created the opposite. The 1916–21 economic slump associated with World War I was the second worst U.S. downturn of the twentieth century (behind the Great Depression; Barro and Ursua 2009, 26). Once the war crisis ended, there was a consensus that the budget needed to be balanced as soon as possible and that the debt should be paid down. As a result, government borrowing ceased and taxes were increased. These changes occurred during a period of extensive speculative investing based on credit that drove prices higher. This realization led federal reserve officials to raise interest rates and urge a halt to loan renewals. As historian George Soule suggests, "[m]erchants and manufacturers who could no longer carry their inventories by means of bank credit were forced to sell at reduced prices. The fall of prices in turn endangered more loans and induced further credit restrictions. The downward spiral of deflation was in process" (1947, 98, 96–106). By 1921, for example, the index of wholesale prices for commodities dropped from a high of 227.9 to 150.6. Retail prices fell approximately 13%. This economic downturn hit agriculture particularly hard, with 453,000 farmers losing their land. Industry also suffered and bankruptcies were common. In total, approximately 4,754,000 Americans were unemployed (Soule 1947, 96).

These demographic and economic changes associated with World War I and its aftermath—coupled with the social dislocations commonly associated with wars—had profound effects on U.S. society (Kennedy 1982). New tensions and sources of conflict emerged, resulting in periodic race riots and the rise of right-wing groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. Meanwhile, unions conducted high profile strikes and were increasingly associated with leftist groups which contributed to the Red Scare. Anarchists were suspected in a bombing campaign aimed at, among others, John Rockefeller, J.P. Morgan, a U.S. senator, the Seattle mayor, and most notoriously, Wall Street, where 40 people were killed on September 16, 1920. The Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918 led to the infamous Palmer raids and Eugene V. Debs' imprisonment. Anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were convicted in 1921 of murder and robbery in a highly controversial case and (seven years later) were executed.

The Democrats had also stoked ethnic tensions during and after the war. Various wartime policies offended German-Americans, causing a backlash in that community which favored Republicans in the 1918 and 1920 elections (Luebke 1974, xiii, 323). Democrats alienated other ethnic groups too. Scandinavians tended to oppose the war and sympathized with German-Americans. Irish Catholics were unhappy about U.S. support for England and thought their newly independent homeland was shortchanged at Versailles. Similarly, Italian-Americans felt the World War I treaty was not fair to their country of origin (Bagby 1962, 21–23). President Wilson, frustrated with what he called the "hyphenated Americans" during his efforts on behalf of the Versailles Treaty, charged that "[h]yphens are the knives that are being stuck in this document" (Leuchtenburg 1958, 206). In short, numerous ethnic groups were upset with the dominant Democratic party as a result of World War I.

In addition to these challenges, Wilson's campaign on behalf of the League of Nations was unpopular and unsuccessful. Faced with Congressional skepticism, Wilson decided to take his message to the public in the fall of 1919 and initiated a speaking tour in the West. This effort, undermined by the President's failing health, was not effective and again highlighted Wilson's sagging influence (Tulis 1987, 147–61). The Senate never ratified the Treaty of Versailles or its provision for the League of Nations.

In the midst of these converging forces, Republicans made a triumphant return to power. The 1920 presidential election saw Harding defeat Cox 404 to 127 in the Electoral College while taking over 60% of the popular vote. Congressional results were also dramatic. After gaining small majorities in 1918, Republicans picked up 61 seats in the House and 10 in the Senate for overwhelming margins of 300–132 and 59–37, respectively.

## Content Analyses of 1920 Campaign Materials

Content analyses of campaign material from the 1920 election were conducted in an effort to determine the extent to which World War I and its surrounding issues influenced the campaign and its outcome. The content analysis included two sets of data: party campaign material and newspaper commentary. Coding categories and processes were selected based on the project's theoretical concerns and the nature of the data being subjected to content analysis.

## Data Set and Coding

The first set of data encompassed three kinds of campaign material issued directly from the Democratic and Republican parties. The first of these were the 1920 party platforms (Democratic Platform [1920] 1971; Republican Platform [1920] 1971). Platforms are widely used by scholars to assess parties' principles, attitudes, and concerns (e.g., Key 1964; Gerring 1998; Ginsberg 1972). The 1920 platforms were divided by the parties into numerous topics ranging in length from one sentence to several paragraphs. For this part of the study, these topics are the unit of measure. Platforms usually take a laundry-list approach and speak to a variety of issues, some of which are central to the campaign and others that are tangentially included primarily to woo or appease particular constituencies. However, the number of lines of text dedicated to a particular topic and the order in which topics are discussed offer reasonable indications of which were perceived to be most important. Thus, the number of lines dedicated to each topic in each platform was tabulated. Each topic was also assessed as falling into one of three categories: "directly war-related," "partially war-related," or "nonwar-related." The directly war-related code was used when a section focused explicitly on the war or the League of Nations.<sup>1</sup> References to the economic downturn or other arguably war-induced effects were not counted as such unless the war was specifically cited in the document as a contributing force. The partially war-related code was used when a section referenced the war but did not focus directly and exclusively upon it. A topic was categorized as nonwar-related if it had little to nothing to do with the war.

The second kind of partisan campaign material consisted of the candidates' acceptance speeches. Like party platforms, the 1920 acceptance speeches were broken up into numerous topics, which again constitute the unit of measure. However, different sources included variations on the topical headings (Cox 1920a–b; Harding 1920a–b). That is, while the available sources included the same transcript and arranged the speeches into topic-based categories, they were not consistent with regard to topic titles or, in some cases, where in the larger text topic breaks occurred. In the face of these discrepancies, this study

<sup>1</sup>Topics meeting this standard in the Democratic Platform: "League of Nations," "Conduct of the War," "Disabled Soldiers." In the GOP Platform: "Unpreparedness for War," "Unpreparedness for Peace," "League of Nations," "War Powers of the President," "The Service Men."

relied on those sources put out by each party's national committee as part of the campaign effort (Cox 1920a; Harding 1920b). The number of lines dedicated to each topic as identified in the parties' official transcripts was tabulated and each topic was coded as falling into one of the three categories described above.

The third and final kind of partisan campaign material subjected to content analysis was the 1920 campaign book produced by the Democrats. The Republicans did not issue a campaign book that year.<sup>2</sup> In this era, it was somewhat common for parties to release books as part of their campaigns. Frequently called "textbooks," they generally contained biographies of the party's candidates, accounts of the national convention, discussions of policy issues, or other materials deemed to be relevant to the election and effective at influencing the public (Gerring 1998, 295).<sup>3</sup> Like the platforms and acceptance speeches, the 1920 *Democratic Textbook* was divided into numerous topics. However, because the book was much longer than the other partisan documents, the number of pages dedicated to each topic (the unit of measure) was tabulated rather than the lines of text. Each topic was classified as either "directly war-related" or "other."<sup>4</sup>

The second set of data consisted of 22 newspaper editorials addressing the election's key issues. The editorials were the unit of measure, and they were drawn from the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*. These four papers were selected because they are easily accessible through the ProQuest Historical Newspaper Database. All editorials from November 2 (Election Day) to November 8 addressing the election and its key issues were included in the study. This date range was selected because it allowed all of the editorials addressing the election's key issues to be included.

<sup>2</sup>The RNC released a collection of Harding's speeches, but this book was a departure from the era's norm and was not comparable to the Democrats' book. The Harding speeches are also repetitive, touching on the themes he addressed in the acceptance speech included in this study.

<sup>3</sup>As in other election cycles, the 1920 books did not follow a consistent pattern. *The Democratic Textbook* was more typical and included candidate biographies, speeches, and policy statements. The Republican book was limited to Harding's speeches from his nomination until October 1.

<sup>4</sup>Classification criteria for "directly war-related" was the same as that used for party platforms.

## Findings

The content analysis of the Democratic and Republican campaign materials shows that World War I and the League of Nations dominated the election and was the key issue for both parties (see Figures 1 and 2). In the Democrats' platform, seven of the top eight topics in terms of allotted number of lines were directly or partially war-related. Seven of the first eight topics addressed were also directly or partially war-related (Democratic Platform 1971). Similarly, the Republican platform's top two lines-per-issue categories were war-related as were seven of the first eight issues discussed. Specifically, the 1920 GOP platform opened with an introduction that touched on the war and was then followed by discussions of the Democrats' alleged "Unpreparedness for War," "Unpreparedness for Peace," the nonwar-related issue of "Constitutional Government," and "Foreign Relations" (Republican Platform 1971).

The candidates' acceptance speeches also show a preoccupation with the war, as indicated by the number of lines dedicated to each topic in the addresses. Twenty-five percent of Harding's address, delivered in his hometown of Marion, Ohio, was dedicated to addressing the war directly, and another 17% focused on partially war-related topics (see Figure 3). The remaining 58% dealt with other issues (Harding 1920b). Notably, 15 of the first 17 topics were fully or partially war-related. Cox, meanwhile, spent 39% of his acceptance speech directly addressing war-related topics and another 32% on partially war-related issues (see Figure 4). Only 29% of the Ohio Governor's speech dealt with nonwar-related issues (Cox 1920a).

The 1920 *Democratic Textbook* also focused significant attention on war-related issues (see Figures 5). Of the 22 topics discussed in the book, accounting for 326 pages of text, the three war-related topics of "League of Nations," "Winning the War," and "Financing the War"—the first three addressed—accounted for 46% of the total pages. Remarkably, "Winning the War" tallied 110 pages all by itself (Democratic National Committee/Democratic Congressional Committee 1920).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>The Democrats' 1920 book contained candidate biographies, descriptions of their convention, and policy commentary. It was propagandistic in tone. The "Winning the War" section contained sub-topics such as: "Republicans Besmirch America's War Record Hoping to Aid Party: Had Fifty 'Smelling Committees' at Work Attempting Unsuccessfully to Discredit Nation's Glorious Effort to Preserve Human Liberty," and "Harding's Evasive Stand on the League of Nations."

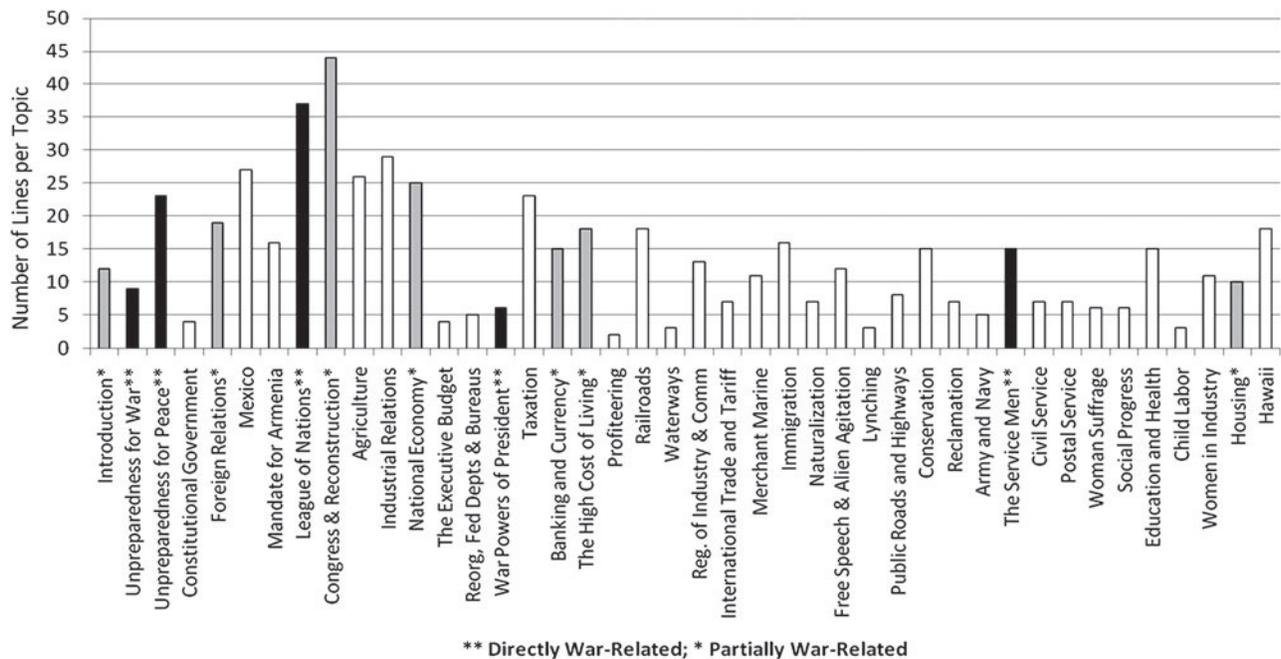
The content analysis of newspaper editorials addressing the election's key issues also demonstrated that World War I and the issue most directly linked to it, the League of Nations, dominated major newspapers' explanations of the election's outcome. Five *Chicago Daily Tribune* editorials overwhelmingly emphasized the League and the war. Four only discussed these issues (*Chicago Daily Tribune* 1920a–c, e), while one addressed them while also mentioning budget reform (1920d). Unique among the four papers examined here, the *Los Angeles Times* focused relatively little attention on the League and the war, though this omission may have been the result of the paper's heavy focus on California elections. Nonetheless, what attention the *LA Times* did give to the national election, pointed to the League and the war, along with the budget, trade, and good government as critical factors (*Los Angeles Times* 1920a–e). In the *New York Times*, five of eight editorials exclusively mentioned the League and the war (*New York Times* 1920a, b, d, f, h), while the others cited those causes as well as an assortment of others including taxes, desire for a free Ireland, high prices, "unrest," and "harassments that were the progeny of the war" (1920c, e, g). Finally, four *Washington Post* editorials focused primarily on the League and the war. Two exclusively mentioned these issues (*Washington Post* 1920b, d), while the other two mentioned them along with "economic and industrial questions," taxes, "oppressive war laws," and immigration (1920a, c). What is clear is that these editorials from four of the nation's leading newspapers point directly to dissatisfaction over the war and the directly related issue of the League of Nations as being the pivotal issues in the 1920 election. In addition, even some of the other issues mentioned—such as government harassment, high taxes, and the economic downturn—were indirectly linked to the war.

## The 1920 Election and Realignment Theory

This analysis of World War I's influence on the 1920 election and the suggestion that it is a serious problem for the "System of 1896," in particular, and realignment theory, in general, is open to at least three potential challenges.

First, it might be said that the 1920 contest is appropriately excluded from the realignment canon because it fails to meet key criteria that the 1896 election and other commonly identified critical

FIGURE 1 1920 Republican Platform



\*\* Directly War-Related; \* Partially War-Related

elections satisfy. For instance, Key (1955, 4) and Burnham (1970, 7–8) assert that critical elections are marked by high turnout. According to conventional eligibility-based calculations of voter turnout, 1920 marked a relative low point, registering at only 44% (Nardulli, Dalager, and Greco 1996, 482).<sup>6</sup> But an alternative way of measuring voter activity yields a much different picture. When participation is measured by calculating the number of people voting as a percentage of the total population (regardless of citizenship, age, gender, etc.), 1920 registered one of the largest upticks in U.S. history (Engerman and Sokoloff 2005; Kromkowski 2001, 11; Lane 1959).<sup>7</sup> Of course, most of this increase was due to the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment—which provided for women’s suffrage—on August 18, 1920, less than three months before the election. (This development also owed much to World War I as well as the Progressive Movement.)<sup>8</sup> Yet this new swath of qualified citizens also helps explain the low turnout figure generated in the more traditional eligibility-based measure. Such a measure can be misleading in the years (not to mention weeks) following massive

<sup>6</sup>By way of comparison, 1896 had a strong 72% turnout as measured in conventional eligibility-based calculations. Notably, 1932’s turnout, at 53%, was not particularly impressive.

<sup>7</sup>Restrictions on voting at this time, particularly in the South, also limited turnout.

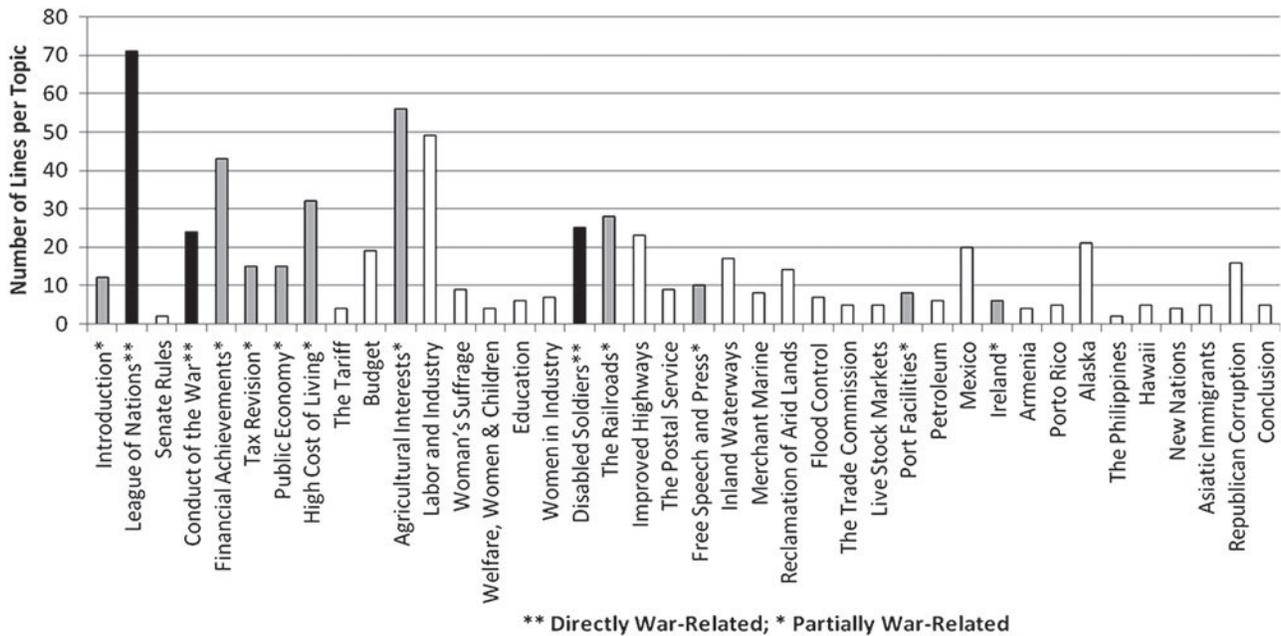
<sup>8</sup>Keyssar (2000) and Kyvig (1996) emphasize the war as a cause in passage of the amendment.

additions to the voting eligible population because the newly qualified citizens are not accustomed to voting. In the case of 1920, it should not be a surprise that some women failed to immediately adopt the voting behavior of men who had long experience casting ballots and living in a society that looked favorably upon what, only several weeks before, had been a gender-restricted act of citizenship. This consideration undercuts assertions of low voter turnout in 1920.

It might also be said that 1920 failed to produce a sufficiently dominant new voter cleavage like the Schattschneider-identified (1960, 78–82) shift in regional alliances or the Sundquist-emphasized (1983, 298–9) wedge issue of wealth inequality and distribution did in 1896. Realignment theorists may suggest that any World War I-era voter repositioning like the shift in immigrant populations in 1918 and 1920 do not satisfy the realignment standard. Such an argument is valid as far as it goes. However, and as discussed earlier, the 1920 election outperformed 1896 according to other standards—such as popular and electoral vote margins and voter participation—that are at least as reasonable as those established by realignment theorists. The selection process that admits the 1896 election and excludes that of 1920, then, begins to appear arbitrary and rooted in questionable criteria.

Conversely, it might be argued that 1920 is a previously unrecognized critical election that merely

FIGURE 2 1920 Democratic Platform



needs to be incorporated into realignment theory. World War I certainly satisfies Burnham's "triggering event" criteria (1970, 181). The strong showing by Roosevelt's Progressive (Bull Moose) party in 1912 also coincides nicely with the Burnham (1970, 27-28) and Sundquist (1983, 28-32, 312-13) assertions that strong third-party movements frequently occur prior to realignments. However, realignment status cannot be conferred on the 1920 election because it fails to meet many of the theory's most emphasized standards. In addition to those addressed above, the 1920 election is impossible to place into the periodicity scheme Burnham and Sundquist emphasize. Burnham argues that "[h]istorically speaking, at least, national critical realignments have not occurred at

random. Instead, there has been a remarkably uniform periodicity in their appearance . . . [in that they occur] approximately once a generation, or every thirty to thirty-eight years" (1970, 8, 26). If 1896 and 1932—perfectly spaced at 36 years apart—are critical elections, there is no room for another in 1920. Furthermore, 1920 did not witness the kind of traumatic party conventions Burnham (1970, 6-7) associates with critical elections. Moreover, a possible 1920 Republican realignment replacing the 1896 Republican realignment would be awkward for a theory purporting to explain party change. The oddity of back-to-back critical elections favoring Republicans would be further compounded because 1896 is already the canon's second consecutive realignment in favor of the GOP (the first being in 1860).

FIGURE 3 Harding's Acceptance Speech

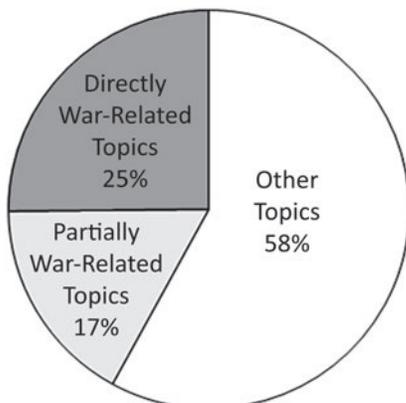


FIGURE 4 Cox's Acceptance Speech

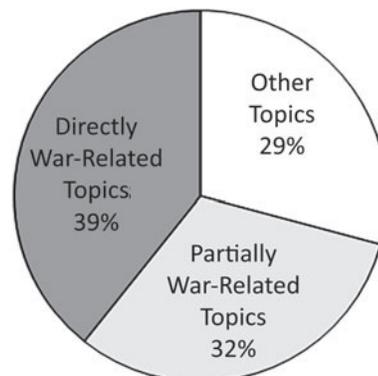
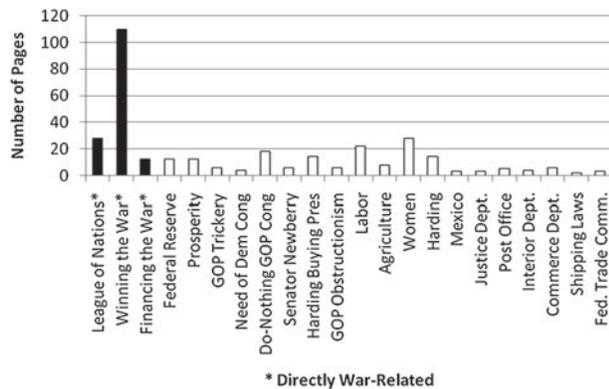


FIGURE 5 Pages/Topic in 1920 Democratic Textbook



Finally, it might be said that this analysis has failed to articulate an alternative vision to counter realignment theory. This claim is, like the first, sound as far as it goes. However, it may simply be the case that the interaction between parties and elections throughout American history is too complicated for a grand theory as ambitious as that of the realignment genre. The failure to identify an equally all-encompassing theory does not mean one must accept a seriously flawed counterpart.

## Realignment Theory Reconsidered

Like much of the American politics field, the realignment literature has frequently downplayed the significance of international events in explaining domestic politics. To the extent scholars of American politics recognize that international factors play a role in domestic politics, such international effects are often considered extraneous side issues that temporarily help or hurt a rigid, preexisting domestic agenda. Yet international events, and particularly wars, have the ability to alter or upset domestic politics in a meaningful and lasting manner, either by bringing new and previously unforeseen issues onto the agenda or casting old issues in a new light. World War I played just such a role with regard to the 1920 election.<sup>9</sup> Further research might find that other foreign ventures exerted a similar influence in

<sup>9</sup>Draftees were used in World War I. This fact intensifies the unpopularity of wars perceived as failures. A literature explores public opinion's relationship to wars' success (e.g., Mueller 1973).

domestic partisan politics. The Spanish-American War, for instance, may have helped solidify the mid-1890s Republican gains. Additionally, the Cold War and its subsidiary conflicts in Korea and Vietnam may have bolstered the GOP at various points. And while it may be too early to draw definitive conclusions about the on-going war in Iraq, it certainly seems possible that this conflict played an important role in the Democratic ascendancy that began in 2006 (Saldin 2008).

These events, however, are certainly not timed every 30 to 38 years. The argument by some of realignment theory's most fervent practitioners that the party system experiences a critical election on a generational basis omits any role for contingent events that do not operate according to a fixed schedule. Realignment theory appears to have been born of an effort in political science to try to escape the political reality of contingent events. Even the theory's less ardent advocates endorse a relatively rigid framework that risks reducing American political history to multi-decade units that obscure as much as they enlighten. Periodization schemes like that proposed by realignment theory are a natural pursuit,<sup>10</sup> but deterministic claims that ignore foreign affairs and the political reality of contingent events must be avoided. One reason partisan regimes have difficulty dominating for very long is because of random, unforeseen events. Luck plays an important role in political fortunes. This reality is one reason why efforts to periodize are difficult. In the case of the classic realignment genre, the problems identified here, when combined with those cited by other critics, fatally undermine the theory. A new theory to replace the realignment paradigm would need to make room for the profound influence of international events and contingency in general. Any such theory would, like realignment theory, necessitate identifying those elections that achieve a certain level of significance. A more nuanced and qualified theory would likely yield a wider set of "critical" elections. Such demarcations are inevitably controversial and subject to some of the same kinds of objections that plague the realignment model. But a more humble, less deterministic, and contextual theory would at least carry the virtue of not attempting to explain or account for more than it can. A new theory on this order would have to sacrifice the realignment genre's most grandiose assertions, but it would benefit from increased potency and accuracy.

<sup>10</sup>For a recent exchange on periodization, see Kersch (2005b); Mayhew (2005a); Polsky (2005); Sanders (2005); Shafer (2005).

## Conclusion

Few political science concepts have been inserted into the public arena as widely and successfully as realignment theory. The "System of 1896" plays a central role in realignment theory, but it offers an inadequate explanation of the period from 1910 until 1932. While the Republican party experienced a prolonged period of electoral success in the 12 years following 1896, the Democrats had a 10-year surge of their own beginning in 1910. This period of Democratic dominance cannot be casually explained away, as has often been the case in the political science literature, with reference to Theodore Roosevelt's 1912 third-party candidacy because the Democrats began their surge two years before that. Equally troubling for realignment theory, 1912 was not a one-off anomaly—Democrats maintained their hold on Congress until 1919, and Woodrow Wilson was reelected in 1916 despite facing a respectable opponent backed by a unified GOP.

In addition, and as the content analysis of 1920 campaign material and media coverage indicates, World War I makes much more sense as an explanatory variable for the 1920 election than does the conventional explanation offered by the realignment literature—namely, that that election was merely the natural reemergence of the "System of 1896." Furthermore, 1920 was arguably more important than the 1896 election. Warren Harding won in 1920 by a far wider margin than did William McKinley in 1896. The 1920 contest also seems to have set a stronger precedent than that of 1896 in that the three presidential elections that followed were won by larger margins. These findings provide further evidence that realignment theory needs to be permanently set aside. A new theory to replace it would need to take both international and domestic factors into consideration and make more nuanced and less deterministic claims.

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