

THE BIG SHIFT IN PARTY STRENGTH IN THE '80S

By Everett C. Ladd

The books are about to close on the party competition of the 1980s, the Reagan era. This decade has seen extraordinary changes in the parties' standing-- more, in fact, than has any other period since the Great Depression. The Democrats were the big winners in the '30s, capturing not only most elections but the minds and hearts of a new political generation. But it is the Republicans who have won handily the battle of the '80s.

To be sure, the present outcome is from one perspective less decisive than the earlier one. The GOP has dominated the presidency, and it has for the most part prevailed on national policy. Its latter success has never been more evident than now in the debate over capital gains. Here the Democrats have struggled to establish their position even on an issue—a Republican proposal for a tax cut going disproportionately to the rich and near-rich—that in the New Deal era would have looked to them much like a hanging curve ball looked to Henry Aaron. Yet in the sweep of elections where national issues have not held sway, the Democrats have continued to win more than their share. The striking political tension contained in these “split-level” results sets the present party system apart from all of its predecessors.

Looking, however, at how Americans assess the two parties, we see Republican gains over the past decade as impressive as the Democratic gains of the '30s. In 1980 Jimmy Carter was an unpopular Democratic president, and his party's stock had fallen sharply from its New Deal and Great Society heights. Still, the Republicans were struggling to establish themselves. This is evident from data on party identification—where the GOP trailed by margins of 20 percentage points and more. For example, a Gallup poll of late January 1980 recorded 46% as Democrats, just 20% as Republicans; another Gallup poll in early October had it 45% Democratic, 26% Republican.

At the end of the 1980s, though, the GOP has pulled even in party identification and ahead on other ratings. Measuring party preference isn't something akin to lowering a thermometer

into a pool of water; for a number of reasons the readings just aren't that precise, and two perfectly good surveys taken at the same time may get appreciably different results. All major national polls, however, show impressive movement over the decade: The net shift to the Republicans in identification has been in the 15 to 20 percentage point range in surveys taken by Gallup, CBS News and the *New York Times*, the National Opinion Research Center, and the Roper Organization. The readings fluctuate—reflecting both their inherent imprecision and the flow of political events—but a clear, gradually intensifying swing is evident.

Studies of the Democrats' lasting gains of the New Deal years show they were achieved less by converting persons who had been in the electorate prior to the Depression than by attracting a disproportionate share of new voters—less anchored by past experience. Even today the Democrats' best age groups are those who came of age politically in the 1930s. This suggests, of course, that the scope of the GOP's advance in the Reagan-Bush years is best gauged by the response of this era's new generation.

Recent work by political scientists Helmut Norpoth and Michael Kagay provides dramatic evidence of Republican success in attracting the young. Norpoth and Kagay combined large numbers of CBS News/*New York Times* polls each year, to get larger, more reliable samples. (See Table below.) They found that in 1980 54% of those 18 to 29 years old identified as Democrats, 33% as Republicans—a net Democratic advantage of 21 points. By the first quarter of 1989, however—the latest period Norpoth and Kagay covered—52% of the 18-29 year olds were Republicans, 38% Democrats, a GOP margin of 14 points. The year-to-year data make clear that this huge generational transformation resulted from gradually accumulating experience, rather than from a sudden response to one set of events.

Other measures of partisan standing show the Republicans having progressed even further. Throughout the New Deal years the Democrats gained much from being seen as the

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"party of prosperity." But in a July 1989 poll taken by Gallup, 51% described the Republicans as the party likely to do "a better job of keeping the country prosperous," while only 30% picked the Democrats. Among the young, the GOP's margin was still larger: 63% of those 18-29 saw the Republicans as best on the economy, compared to 23% picking the Democrats. In contrast, among people 50 years and older, the Republican edge was just 43% to 32%.

What's more, Norpoth and Kagay point out, nothing like the current swing occurred among young voters in earlier periods when Republicans seemed to be making a run. The GOP improved its position somewhat among those who came of age politically in the Eisenhower years, for example, but not nearly so much as it has among new voters of the '80s. The 1930s and the 1980s—with different partisan beneficiaries—stand out in 20th century US experience as periods of uniquely intense generational shifts.

What's the essential political message here? Not, surely, that Republican gains are certain in the next decade, or that the party's victory in future elections is ordained. But the books are being closed on the '80s with the GOP having strengthened its underlying base and built it to a level not seen since the first quarter of this century.

SHIFTS IN PARTY IDENTIFICATION IN THE 1980s: THE 18-29 YEAR OLD AGE GROUP

Percent of 18-29 year olds Identifying with each party

<u>Year</u>	<u>Republican or Leaning Republican</u>	<u>Democratic or Leaning Democratic</u>	<u>%D (-) %R</u>
1980	33	54	+21
1981	42	47	+5
1982	39	49	+10
1983	37	50	+13
1984	45	44	-1
1985	48	42	-6
1986	47	41	-6
1987	47	43	-4
1988	44	43	-1
1989 (first quarter)	52	38	-14

NOTE: Based on 76 *New York Times*/CBS News polls and *New York Times* polls, which have been pooled for each year. They include 9,908 respondents in 1980; 7,330 in 1981; 7,749 in 1982; 7,183 in 1983; 19,427 in 1984; 9,639 in 1985; 11,824 in 1986; 14,152 in 1987; 18,979 in 1988; and 4,178 in the first quarter of 1989.

Question: "Generally speaking, do you usually consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, an independent, or what?" (IF INDEPENDENT OR DON'T KNOW: "Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican party or to the Democratic party?")