Political Alignment and Realignment

Voters who consistently identify themselves with one political party and vote for its candidates from one election to the next are called partisan voters. Sometimes certain identifiable groups in society, such as various socioeconomic classes, religious groups, or ethnic groups, have a general tendency to support a favorite party over long periods of time. This phenomenon is called stable partisan alignment: the same social groups vote for the same party time after time. But when large numbers of voters disengage their established loyalties to their favorite party and become less partisan and more independent, partisan dealignment is said to occur. Partisan dealignment means that once-solid supports of a particular party no longer vote for that party’s candidates automatically. They may vote for certain of its candidates depending on the stance they take on various issues, or they may gravitate to another party, or they may switch back and forth between parties from one election to the next. Voters who move back and forth in this way are called swing voters.

Under conditions of partisan dealignment, it becomes more difficult for parties to produce long-term programs that will attract a long-term following. By having to make frequent shifts and revisions in their programs to attract increasingly fickle and unpredictable voters, parties find it harder to represent their constituents’ views in a stable fashion and support policy initiatives that may take many years to translate into effective governmental action. In short, party dealignments further complicate the task of establishing responsible party government.

Sometimes the voters may change their habits even more radically. When a large bloc of voters that traditionally votes for one party massively shifts its support to a rival party and sticks with that party over prolonged periods, party realignment takes place. In the United States, Southern white Protestant males were once solid Democrats. Since the 1970s, however, they have moved in large numbers to the Republicans. Whereas partisan dealignment means simply a loosening of traditional party loyalties on the part of individuals, realignment means an enduring shift from one party to another on the part of large social groups. Realignments represent major changes in a society’s electoral patterns, in some cases placing new obstacles in the path of responsible party government.