The costs of the New Deal and the impact of its programs heightened the stakes of the conflict between higher- and lower-income groups and between business and labor.

It is clear from this brief tour of much of party history that the effects of socioeconomic, racial, and regional divisions have waxed and waned, but all have played a major role in shaping the parties' coalitions over time. What is the nature of the two parties' coalitions today?

THE SOCIAL BASES OF PARTY COALITIONS

Socioeconomic Status Divisions

Most democratic party systems reflect divisions along social class lines, even if those divisions may have softened over the years.[9] James Madison, one of the most perceptive observers of human nature among the nation's founders, wrote in the *Federalist Papers* that economic differences are the most common source of factions.[10] The footprints of socioeconomic status (SES) conflict are scattered throughout American history. Social and economic status differences underlay the battle between the wealthy, aristocratic Federalists and the less privileged Democratic-Republicans. These differences were even sharper between the Jacksonian Democrats and the Whigs a few decades later, and again during the fourth and fifth party systems. The connection between SES and partisanship weakened during the 1960s and 1970s but strengthened again beginning with the Reagan years in the 1980s.

SES is still clearly related to people's partisanship, as you can see in Table 7.2. Read across the top row of Section A, for instance. You will find that among survey respondents whose incomes are in the lower third, in 2008, 19 percent called themselves "strong Democrats," 18 percent could be termed "weak Democrats," and 18 percent leaned toward the Democratic Party; but, toward the right side of the row, only 10, 10, and 10 percent, respectively, called themselves leaning, weak, or strong Republicans. The next column, titled "Dem. minus Rep.," shows that Democrats (counting strong and weak identifiers and Democratic "leaners") outnumbered Republicans by 25 percentage points among these lower-income people.

Those with very limited education are even more likely to call themselves Democrats than lower-income people are (Table 7.2, Section B). Here, 24 percent of those who didn't finish high school identified as strong Democrats, 17 percent as weak Democrats, and 22 percent as Democratic leaners. On the Republican side of the table, there are only 7 percent Republican leaners, 7 percent weak Republicans, and 9 percent strong Republicans among those who didn't finish high school, for an overall Democratic edge ("Dem. minus Rep.") of 40 percentage points.

Lower-income voters have become more consistently Democratic in the past two decades as income inequality has increased.[11] Several forces help sustain the relationship between lower SES and Democratic partisanship, including differences between the parties' stands on issues of special concern

TABLE 7.2

Social Characteristics and Party Identification, 2008

	Democrats		Independents			Republicans			
	Strong	Weak	Closer to Dem.	Closer to Neither	Closer to Rep.	Weak	Strong	Dem. Minus Rep.	Cases
A. Income									
Lower third	19%	18	18	14	10	10	10	25	701
Middle third	22%	15	19	10	12	10	12	22	632
Upper third	17%	14	15	10	12	17	16	1	933
B. Education									
No high school diploma	24%	17	22	14	7	7	9	40	261
High school grad	18%	16	17	14	12	10	11	18	704
College	22%	14	14	5	10	18	17	5	581
C. Region									
South	19%	12	15	13	12	12	18	4	974
Nonsouth	19%	18	19	10	11	13	10	22	1292
D. Religion									
Jews	32%	34	15	0	0	11	8	62	30
Catholics	18%	17	16	10	13	13	12	13	437

(continued)

Protestants	20%	15	13	10	11	15	17	5	1233
White Protestants*	12%	12	12	11	13	19	21	−17	937
E. Race									
Blacks	48%	23	15	8	3	1	1	81	270
Whites	14%	14	16	11	13	15	16	0	1797
F. Gender									
Female	20%	17	18	10	11	12	13	19	1251
Male	18%	13	16	13	12	14	14	7	1016

* The survey did not ask how many of these white Protestants consider themselves to be fundamentalist or "born again."

Note: Totals add up to approximately 100 percent reading across (with slight variations due to rounding). Dem. minus Rep. is the party difference calculated by subtracting the percentage of strong, weak, and leaning Republicans from the percentage of strong, weak, and leaning Democrats. Negative numbers indicate a Republican advantage in the group. The number of cases is weighted to account for the oversample of blacks and Latinos in the survey.

Source: 2008 American National Election Study, University of Michigan; data made available by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research.

to lower-income people (such as government-insured health care and social services) and the very high Democratic identification among blacks, who are predominantly lower income.[12] The result is that, especially in congressional elections, Democrats are even more likely to win in lower-income districts now than they were 20 years ago,[13] and in 2008, Barack Obama won a greater percentage of low- and lower-middle-income voters (with incomes up to $50,000) than had other recent Democratic presidential candidates.

Table 7.2 also shows that the current relationship between *higher* SES and party differs in some interesting ways from that of the New Deal coalition. As a larger proportion of Americans from a wider variety of backgrounds has attended college, voters with a college degree have become somewhat less Republican. In 2008, exit polls showed that a slight majority of college-educated voters supported Obama, as did an even larger majority of those with advanced degrees. Similarly, upper-income people are no longer as distinctively Republican as they used to be—perhaps because this group now contains a larger proportion of professionals, such as teachers and health care specialists, many of whom are concerned with quality-of-life issues such as the environment and women's rights. The identification of many professionals with the Democratic Party is reflected in the support Democratic candidates receive from teachers' unions and trial lawyers.[14] Consistent with this, in 2008, voters with incomes over $100,000 split their votes between Obama and McCain.

The impact of SES should not be overstated. Although American voting behavior is more strongly associated with income than is voting in Canada and Australia, several other democracies, including Britain, are even more polarized by SES.[15] And even at the height of the New Deal, the SES differences between the parties were less clear than the parties' rhetoric would suggest. Some groups locate themselves in the "wrong" party from an SES point of view; for example, white fundamentalist Protestants have voted Republican in recent years even though their average income is closer to that of the typical Democrat than to the average Republican.[16] Because SES divisions between the Republicans and Democrats can be fuzzy, the parties do not usually promote explicitly class-based appeals; they try to attract votes from a variety of socioeconomic groups.

Regional Divisions

Historically, geographical location has divided Americans almost as much as SES. Different sections of the country have often had differing political interests. When a political party has championed these distinct interests, it has sometimes united large numbers of voters who may disagree about other issues.

The most enduring sectionalism in American party history was the one-party Democratic control of the South. Well before the Civil War, white southerners shared an interest in slavery and an agricultural system geared to export markets. The searing experience of that war and the Reconstruction that followed made the South into the "Solid South" and delivered it to the Democrats for most of the next century. The 11 states of the former Confederacy cast all their electoral votes for Democratic presidential candidates in every

election from 1880 through 1924, except for Tennessee's defection in 1920. Al Smith's Catholicism frightened five of these largely Protestant states into the Republican column in 1928, but the New Deal economic programs and the South's relative poverty brought it back to the Democratic Party from 1932 through 1944.

As we will see later in the chapter, however, the civil rights movement was the opening wedge in the slow process that separated the South from its Democratic loyalties. Even now (Table 7.2, Section C), southerners on average are still slightly more Democratic than Republican in their basic partisan leanings, thanks largely to the overwhelming Democratic partisanship of southern blacks. But this Democratic edge is much less pronounced than it had been until the 1960s, and in voting behavior, southern states are now predominantly Republican.

At times, the party system has also reflected the competition between the East, which used to dominate the nation's economy, and the South and West. In the first years of the American republic, the Federalists held on to an ever-narrowing base of eastern financial interests, while the Democratic-Republicans expanded westward with the new settlers. Northeasterners remained largely Republican—though moderate Republican—until recent decades, when the party's platform began to shift away from their policy stands.

The Mountain West has sometimes acted as a unified bloc in national politics on concerns that these states share, such as protecting western coal deposits and ranchers against federal environmental laws. But as these states become more urban and suburban, there has been some movement back toward the Democrats. Colorado in particular has experienced a swing from Republican control to close party competition.

Age

Democrats typically have more support among young adults than Republicans do, especially in recent years. Although the Democratic advantage in party ID appears in all age groups, the party now has its greatest advantage among those who are in their 20s and among "baby boomers" aged 49–60. Those in between, especially those ages 34–46, trend Democratic by a smaller margin. These age-related trends in party ID reflect both the greater enthusiasm for Democratic candidates and policies among younger people and also the special circumstances of the era in which each age cohort first experienced politics. For those currently in their 40s, that was roughly the time of the Ronald Reagan presidency, when Republican identification was on the rise.[17]

Race

A century ago, the Republican Party, which was founded to oppose slavery, was associated with racial equality in the minds of both black and white Americans. When the New Deal's social welfare programs began to help lift blacks and other disadvantaged groups out of poverty, however, the partisan

direction of racial politics changed. Especially since the civil rights revolution in the 1960s, it is now the Democratic Party that is viewed as standing for racial equality. As a result, blacks identify as Democrats in overwhelming numbers today, as they have since 1964, regardless of their SES, region, or other social characteristics. Look at the stark contrast in Section E of Table 7.2: Democrats outnumber Republicans by 81 percentage points among blacks, but there is no Democratic advantage among whites. No Democratic presidential candidate has won a majority of whites' votes in almost 50 years. Interestingly, this is true even though blacks tend to be much more conservative than other Democrats on issues such as same-sex marriage and abortion.[18] The vital importance of civil rights to black Americans has outweighed the impact of these other issues. There is no closer tie between a social group and a party than that between blacks and the Democrats.

Religion and Religiosity

There have always been religious differences between the American party coalitions, as there are in many other democracies. The relationship between religion and party loyalty can be traced in part to SES differences among religious groups but also to religious conviction and group identification. In the early days of the New Deal, Catholics and Jews were among the most loyal supporters of the Democratic Party, although Catholic support for Democrats has declined in recent years (Table 7.2, Section D).

Currently, the most notable such relationship is the close tie between white evangelical Protestants and the GOP. Although white evangelicals split evenly between the two parties as recently as the late 1980s, they have since become a substantial part of the Republican base. In 2010, for instance, 77 percent of white evangelicals, comprising about a quarter of the electorate, reported in CNN's exit poll that they voted for Republican candidates. This tie is now so strong that most Americans see evangelical Christians as a largely Republican constituency.[19] More generally, almost half of Republican identifiers can be classified as "highly religious," in that they say they attend religious services weekly or almost weekly and that religion is important in their daily lives. That is true of only 19 percent of Democrats.[20] These changes reflect (and have encouraged) the Republican Party's movement since 1980 to a stand against abortion and same-sex marriage and to the emphasis of many Republican leaders on traditional values and social conservatism.[21]

Ethnicity

Latinos, who are now about one in every six U.S. residents, have surpassed non-Hispanic blacks as the nation's largest minority group. Although Latinos have long exercised voting strength in states such as California, New Mexico, and Texas, they cast only 8 percent of the votes nationwide in the 2010 election. But because they are the fastest-growing segment of the population, both parties have made serious efforts to attract Latino voter support.

Most Latino voters identify as Democrats, but their diverse ethnic roots produce a more varied voting pattern than that of blacks. The wealthy Cuban émigrés who settled in Miami after Fidel Castro took power in the 1950s tend to be conservative, strongly anti-Communist, and inclined to vote Republican, whereas the much larger Mexican American population in California leans Democratic. In 2004, President Bush's proposal to give temporary legal status to undocumented (largely Mexican and Central American) workers met with some success among Latinos, as did the party's advertising in Spanish-language media. However, in elections since then, the economic downturn and the hard-line stand taken by many conservative Republicans against illegal immigrants undermined these Republican gains.[22] In 2010, for instance, Republicans won only 38 percent of the Latino vote.

Gender

For more than three decades, women have supported Democrats to a greater extent than men have (see Table 7.2, Section F). Similar findings were seen in 2008 exit polls, where 56 percent of women said they voted for Barack Obama for president and 43 percent voted for Republican John McCain—a 13-percent Democratic margin—compared with a 1-percent Democratic edge among men.[23] Although there has been a leftward shift in women's political preferences in many Western democracies,[24] the gender gap in American politics has shown a somewhat different pattern. During the 1980s and 1990s, both men and women became more Republican, but men did so at a faster pace and to a greater degree.[25] After 2000, women returned to the Democratic Party more quickly than men did.

Why should gender be related to partisanship? Men's and women's attitudes differ on some major issues. On average, women express greater support for social programs and less support for defense spending than men do. These differences correspond with the two parties' issue agendas; the Democratic Party emphasizes health care, education, and other social programs, whereas the Republicans put a priority on tax cuts and military strength. People's attitudes toward gender equality and abortion, in particular, have become more closely correlated with their party identification during the past three decades, and when these and other "women's issues" are stressed by candidates, a gender gap is more likely to appear.[26] The national parties also project some lifestyle differences that may affect men's and women's partisanship. Among members of the U.S. House and Senate first elected in 2010, for instance, all but 4 of the 93 married Republicans list their spouse as sharing their last name, but 4 of the 7 married Democrats had a spouse with a different or a hyphenated last name.[27]

Black women and single women have become particularly distinctive Democratic constituencies. According to CNN's exit poll in 2008, 70 percent of single women (comprising more than one in five voters) supported Obama, compared with only 47 percent of married women.[28] Single women, especially single mothers, are more economically insecure on average than married women are, and thus could be more likely to see government social programs as an ally.

THE CENTRAL ROLE OF ISSUES IN THE GROUP–PARTY LINKAGE

As this discussion of the gender gap suggests, there is a close relationship between the alignment of social groups with parties and the parties' stands on issues. A group's presence in a party coalition indicates that many of the group's members—white evangelical Christians, for instance—have some shared reactions to major issues and candidates, which have drawn them to one party rather than the other. To keep their support, the party is likely to express solidarity with the group's concerns, to speak its language, and to feature some of the group's leaders in its conventions and campaigns.

This relationship between social groups and parties' stands is dynamic; it can change over time, as a party adapts its stands on issues to pick up new sources of support, or as a group senses that another party is becoming more sensitive to its concerns.[29] Consider, for example, the fact that as recently as 1988, there was no relationship between the abortion issue and party ID; attitudes toward abortion cut across party lines, dividing Democrats from Democrats and Republicans from Republicans.[30] By that time, however, pro-choice activists had gained strength in Democratic ranks and had committed the party to policy stands that left many conservative Democrats, including white evangelical Christians and southerners, feeling alienated from their national party.

Some of these conservatives, many of them pro-life on abortion, saw an opportunity to be heard within the Republican Party and were welcomed as a new source of Republican support. As they became a larger proportion of the voters in Republican primaries, they encouraged their new party's candidates to take stronger and clearer pro-life stands. Over time, Republican Party leaders and activists responded to these new Republican enthusiasts by incorporating stands against abortion, same-sex marriage, and embryonic stem cell research into their platform and faith-based initiatives into their rhetoric.

As a result, abortion has become a partisan issue. As Table 7.3 shows (see Section A), more than 60 percent of those who feel that abortion should be the woman's own choice now consider themselves Democrats (strong and weak Democrats plus Democratic "leaners"). On the right side of the table, you can see in the "Dem. minus Rep." column that Democrats greatly outnumber Republicans among those who favor abortion rights, and among those who feel abortion should be illegal, there are 12 percent more Republicans than Democrats. This issue shows a clear evolution in the relationship between the parties' issue stands and their coalitional bases. On other issues, such as attitudes toward labor unions, both parties' stands and coalitions have been very stable for many decades.

Clearer Differences Between the Two Parties' Coalitions on Issues

The data in Table 7.3 show that the two parties in the electorate differ clearly from one another in their attitudes toward some major issues. These party differences in attitudes closely track the issue preferences of key groups in the

TABLE 7.3

Issue Attitudes and Party Identification, 2008

	Democrats		Independents			Republicans			
	Strong	Weak	Closer to Dem.	Closer to Neither	Closer to Rep.	Weak	Strong	Dem. Minus Rep.	Cases
A. Abortion									
Own choice	28%	14	21	9	11	11	6	35	410
In between	14%	15	15	12	14	17	14	–1	463
Illegal	12%	14	9	19	12	9	26	–12	145
B. Government spending on services									
More	28%	17	22	11	8	8	5	46	473
Same	16%	14	20	13	14	12	13	11	226
Less	6%	7	7	5	19	26	30	–55	263
C. Government role in providing jobs and a good standard of living									
Gov. help	36%	17	19	10	9	4	5	54	312
In between	23%	15	18	16	12	10	6	28	200
Help self	6%	11	16	10	16	20	21	–24	497
D. Government role in improving position of blacks									
Gov. help	39%	17	22	7	5	6	4	63	409
In between	21%	19	19	11	11	9	9	30	438
Help self	11%	11	14	11	15	18	20	–17	1076

(continued)

TABLE 7.3 (CONTINUED)

	Democrats		Independents			Republicans			
	Strong	Weak	Closer to Dem.	Closer to Neither	Closer to Rep.	Weak	Strong	Dem. Minus Rep.	Cases
E. Government spending on defense									
Decrease	30%	18	22	9	8	10	4	48	327
Same	14%	16	16	12	11	15	16	4	544
Increase	14%	15	10	10	15	12	25	−13	226
F. Ideological self-identification									
Liberal	40%	24	22	5	3	4	1	78	444
Moderate	16%	18	25	17	12	9	4	34	486
Conservative	7%	6	5	5	17	26	34	−59	716

Note: Totals add up to approximately 100 percent reading across (with slight variations due to rounding). Dem. minus Rep. is the party difference calculated by subtracting the percentage of strong, weak, and leaning Republicans from the percentage of strong, weak, and leaning Democrats. Negative numbers indicate a Republican advantage in the group. The number of cases is weighted to account for the oversample of blacks and Latinos in the survey.

Source: 2008 American National Election Study, University of Michigan; data made available by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research.

parties' coalitions. Democrats, for instance, are much more favorable than are Republicans (see Table 7.3, Sections B and C) to welfare state programs: maintaining government spending on services and a government role in providing jobs for the unemployed. Blacks, lower-income people, those with only a high school education, and those in blue-collar or unskilled jobs—all important groups in the Democratic coalition—are especially likely to favor government provision of these services. The recipients of these services and jobs tend to be lower SES people, whose Democratic leanings can be seen in Table 7.2.

People also differ markedly by party on issues such as civil rights and defense spending (see Table 7.3, Sections D and E). On racial policy, since the 1960s, Democrats have been much more likely to favor a government role in helping minorities than are Republicans. Recall from Table 7.2 the strong tendency for blacks, who are much more likely than whites to support government efforts to integrate schools and fair treatment in jobs, to identify as Democrats. And there is a truly striking party difference between those who call themselves liberals and those who identify themselves as conservatives (Table 7.3, Section F). As one pollster puts it, "We have two massive, colliding forces... One [the Republican coalition] is rural, Christian, religiously conservative, with guns at home.... And we have a second America [the Democratic coalition] that is socially tolerant, pro-choice, secular, living in New England and the Pacific coast, and in affluent suburbs."[31] Party divisions increasingly reflect differences that have been termed "the culture wars."[32]

In short, there is a close but evolving relationship between the stands a party takes and the groups that form the party's core support. Parties take positions on issues to maintain the support of the groups in their existing coalition. Sometimes party leaders use issue positions to draw members of other social groups to the party, as Republicans did with white southerners since the 1960s. At times, it is the group that tries to put its concerns on the party's agenda, as we have seen in the case of the abortion issue. As these newer groups become a larger force within the party coalition, the party's leadership will try to firm up their support with additional commitments on their issues. In recent years, this process has led to a growing division on issues between the two parties' coalitions. The result is that even if most voters have not become more ideologically extreme, political debate has become more clearly divided by party, as voters have sorted themselves into the party that is closer to their views on issues.[33]

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SIXTH PARTY SYSTEM

The current alignment of social groups with the parties differs in some significant ways from that of the New Deal coalition. That should not be surprising; the political environment has changed a lot during the past 70 years. Once World War II brought an end to the Depression in the United States, some groups that had benefited from government assistance under Roosevelt moved up into the growing middle class. In return for this economic gain, however,

they found themselves paying higher taxes to support those who still needed the assistance. That led many people to reevaluate the costs and benefits of the welfare state in their own lives. At the same time, the issue of race, which had been held in check by Roosevelt's deft maneuvering, was pushed to the top of both parties' agendas by activists hoping to change their parties' stands.

The party system has changed in other important ways since the New Deal as well. Democratic dominance gave way to closer competition between the parties. The party organizations do not expect to anoint candidates now, run their campaigns, or hand out patronage jobs. Rather, the party organizations work primarily to help fund and support campaigns that are run by candidates and their paid consultants. And the relationship between party ID and election results has changed. Until 1952, the elections of the New Deal party system had usually been ***maintaining elections***, in which the presidential candidate of the majority party—the party with the most identifiers—normally won. Since 1952, most national elections have been ***deviating elections***—those in which short-term forces such as candidate characteristics or issues are powerful enough to cause the defeat of the majority party's candidate. Racial issues have figured prominently in this change.

Major Changes in the Parties' Supporting Coalitions

Liberal northern Democrats in the late 1940s pressed their party to deliver on the long-delayed promise of civil rights for blacks. When Democratic administrations responded and used federal power to end the racial segregation of schools and public accommodations such as restaurants and hotels, some conservative white southerners felt betrayed by their national party. They found an alternative in 1964 when Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater opposed the Civil Rights Act. Goldwater, the candidate of the party's newly triumphant conservative wing, argued that no matter how much Republicans supported civil rights, the party's commitment to smaller government and states' rights prevented the federal government from forcing integration on reluctant state governments.

Southern whites responded by moving slowly in the direction of Republican partisanship. The same forces caused blacks to shift rapidly toward the Democrats. When the Voting Rights Act restored southern blacks' right to vote, their overwhelmingly Democratic voting patterns led the national Democratic Party to become even more liberal on race and related issues. A further push came from legislative redistricting in 1992, in which legislatures were asked to draw majority–minority districts (see Chapter 8), and which led to the defeat of a number of longtime conservative southern Democrats.[34] Both national parties, then, had markedly changed their positions. The Democrats moved from an acceptance of segregation in the South to a commitment to use government as the means to secure rights for black Americans. The Republicans reacted against the big government programs of the New Deal with a stand in favor of states' rights and small government, even at the cost of the party's traditional pro–civil rights stand.[35]

These changes in the parties' positions led to a steady reformation of their constituencies.[36] Table 7.4 shows shifts between the 1950s and 2008 in the representation of various groups within the Democratic and Republican Parties in the electorate. Look first at the dramatic changes with regard to race. Blacks were only 6 percent of the Democratic Party in the electorate, on average, between 1952 and 1960; at this time, of course, very few southern blacks were permitted to vote. During 2000–2008, on average, blacks constituted 22 percent of all Democrats, and Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans added another 11 percent, for a total of one-third of Democratic voters. The change was especially profound in the South; by 2000, blacks made up a majority (52 percent) of the Democratic voters in the Deep South states of Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina.[37]

At the same time, southern whites, who were a quarter of all Democratic partisans in the 1950s, dropped to just 16 percent in the 2000s (and this is probably an exaggeration of Democratic strength in the South, because change in people's party ID often lags behind change in their voting behavior). Surveys show that in 1956, 87 percent of white southerners called themselves Democrats, but in 2000 only 24 percent did so.[38] In the 2010 election, only

TABLE 7.4

Change in the Parties' Coalitions, 1952–1960 to 2000–2008

	Democratic Voters (%)		Republican Voters (%)	
	1952–1960	2000–2008	1952–1960	2000–2008
Blacks	6	22	3	2
Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans	1	11	0	9
Southern whites	24	16	8	32
Northern whites	69	51	89	58
Upper income	40	35	46	45
Middle income	30	30	26	30
Lower income	31	35	28	25
Protestant	61	56	83	62
Catholic	31	26	14	27
Jewish	6	4	2	1
Other, no religion	2	14	2	11
Married	82	56	79	71
Unmarried	18	44	21	29

Note: Entries are the proportion of all Democratic or Republican Party identifiers, among those who say they voted, who belong to the group named in the first column.

Source: American National Election Studies data for 1952–1960, calculated by Alan Abramowitz and excerpted with kind permission from Abramowitz, *Voice of the People* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004), p. 87, and for 2000–2008, calculated by Nathaniel Birkhead.

one white Democrat was elected to Congress from the Deep South region, and an Associated Press story's lead was, "The white Southern Democrat—endangered since the 1960s civil rights era—is sliding nearer to extinction."[39] The Democratic Party's loss was the Republican Party's gain; southern whites had increased from a mere 8 percent in the 1950s to almost a third of the Republican Party in the electorate in the 2000s. Consistent with the change in the national parties' stands, it was the conservatives among these southern whites who were more likely to move to a Republican identification.

This change was part of a larger shift in the parties' regional bases. In the mid-1950s, as you can see in the upper part of Figure 7.1, almost half

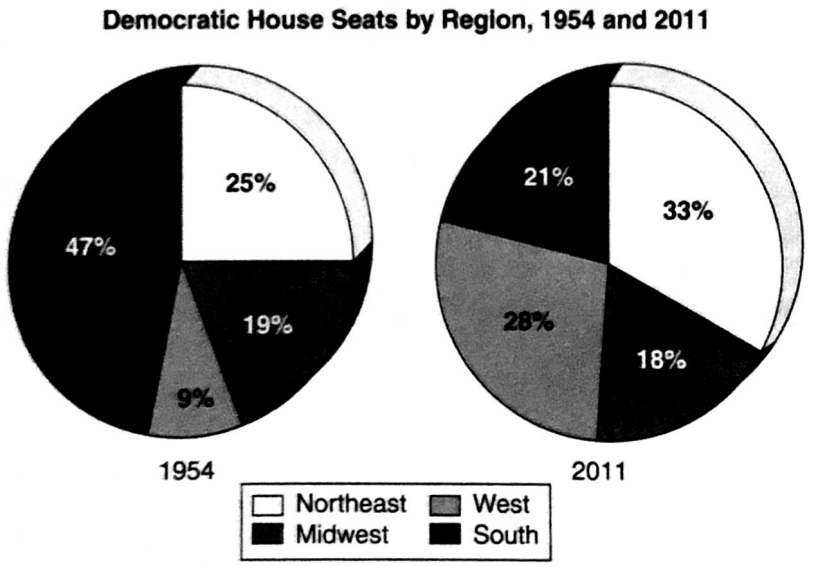

FIGURE 7.1
Democratic and Republican House Seats by Region, 1954 and 2011.

Source: CQ Weekly, April 20, 2009, for 1954 data; 2011 data calculated by the author (as of May 28, 2011).

of all Democrats in the U.S. House were southerners. By 2011, the drop in Democratic support among white southerners left the party's House contingent much more regionally balanced. Republicans in the House, on the other hand, have moved from one regional base to another. In 1954, the great majority of Republican House members were from the Midwest and Northeast, and a substantial number of northeastern Republicans were liberals and moderates. But the Republican platform changes that drew conservative southern support made it harder for the party to appeal to liberals and moderates in New England and the Midwest. So the Northeast is predominantly Democratic now; in fact, in the 2008 elections not a single Republican U.S. House member was elected from New England, for the first time ever.

Another shift has been the interesting income difference between the two parties. As noted earlier and as Table 7.4 shows, lower-income people are becoming a larger part of the Democratic coalition, whereas middle-income people (but not those with higher incomes) are more prominent among Republicans. And people's income relates differently now to the new issues—those involving religiosity, gender, and sexual identity—that divide the parties. Although SES predicts individuals' positions on economic policies pretty well, that is not the case with people's attitudes toward "values" issues such as stem cell research.[40]

The Democratic Coalition in 2010

Group (Percentage of the Voting Population)	Percentage Reporting a Democratic Vote for U.S. House
Liberal (20%)	90
African American (11%)	89
Gay, lesbian, or bisexual (3%)	69
Labor union household (17%)	61
Disapprove of U.S. war in Afghanistan (54%)	61
Latino (8%)	60
Didn't complete high school (3%)	57
Live in an urban area (31%)	56
Age 18–29 (12%)	55
Moderate (38%)	55
Income under $50,000 (36%)	54
Live in Northeast (21%)	54
Postgraduate education (21%)	53
Don't attend church weekly (52%)	53

Source: CNN exit poll, at www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2010/results/polls/#val=USH00p1 (accessed April 4, 2011).

In sum, the current Democratic Party in the electorate differs from the New Deal coalition in several important ways. Although it continues to include blacks and Latinos, lower-income and less-educated whites, and young people, the Democrats have lost a portion of white union members and Catholics and most white southerners. On the other hand, the party has gained support among liberals, Northeast and West Coast residents, unmarried people, gays, and those who don't consider themselves religious (see box "The Democratic Coalition in 2010" on page 145). Although the Republican coalition is still heavily white, married, and Christian, its Protestant base has shifted from mainline denominations to evangelical churches. Religiously observant whites have become the largest single group of Republican supporters,[41] and the party now has a southern base. Republicans have also gained more support from Catholics, men, rural or exurban people, and those who define themselves as conservatives.

From Democratic Majority to Close Competition

The second major change has been the gradual wearing away of Democratic dominance in party identification. In the 1950s and early 1960s, many more Americans called themselves Democrats than Republicans or independents. The Democratic edge began to erode after 1964, but Republicans were not immediately able to capitalize on the Democrats' losses. The proportion of "pure independent" identifiers increased, and there was a steady stream of independent and third party candidates.[42] These changes in partisanship struck many scholars as resembling a ***dealignment***, or a decline in party loyalties.

Yet as we have seen, even as both parties were losing adherents nationally, signs of the coming change were apparent in the South. The movement toward Republican partisanship in southern states began to speed up in the late 1960s, and Republican candidates reaped the fruits. In 1960, there had been no Republican candidate on the general election ballot in almost two-thirds of southern U.S. House districts. The only real competition was in the Democratic primary. By 1968, the number of these one-party House races had been cut by half.[43]

The speed of partisan change increased again during the 1980s. Across the nation, for the first time in 50 years, young voters were more likely to call themselves Republicans than Democrats.[44] Two powerful reasons were President Reagan's popularity and the increased efforts of evangelical Christian groups to promote Republican affiliation. Republicans gained a majority in the U.S. Senate in 1980 that lasted 6 years, and in 1994, the GOP won control of both houses of Congress for the first time in 40 years. Republicans were now competing effectively with the Democrats in statewide races in the South. In 1994, there was a Republican majority among the region's Congress members and governors for the first time since Reconstruction, and the Republican congressional leadership is weighted toward southerners. Republicans ran candidates in 430 of the 435 U.S. House districts in 2010—an all-time high for the party.

How Can We Characterize These Changes: Realignment, Dealignment, or What?

A number of researchers have argued that these changes can best be called a ***party realignment***—a significant and enduring change in the patterns of group support for the parties, usually (but not always) leading to a new majority party. We have certainly seen the big changes in group support for the parties; the Republican coalition has become more southern, more evangelical, and more conservative, and a Democratic Party that used to draw much of its strength from the white South now depends to a much greater extent on the votes of blacks, liberals, and secularists.

These changes in the parties' coalitions affect their policy stands. A Democratic Party that draws a substantial minority of its followers from among blacks is likely to take different stands from a Democratic Party that depended heavily on conservative white southerners. Southern whites have provided the critical mass for their new party, the Republicans, to adopt more socially conservative positions, not only on civil rights, affirmative action, and racial profiling but also on health care, abortion, women's rights, aid for big cities, and support for private schools. Chapter 15 shows these changes in the two parties' platforms. Further, as the policy preferences of blacks, southern whites, and evangelical Christians have become more consistent with their partisanship, each party has become more homogeneous internally, and more distinct from the other party on issues, than had been the case in decades; the Democratic Party's identifiers in 2012 are much more consistently liberal than was the Democratic Party in the electorate in the 1970s, and Republican identifiers are even more homogeneously conservative.

As added support for the realignment perspective, the successes of Republican presidential candidates since 1968, the growth of the GOP in the once-Democratic South, and Republican gains in Congress are often cited as evidence that the Democrats are no longer the real majority party.[45] The Bush administration tried diligently to create a Republican majority by attracting a larger proportion of Latino, Catholic, and black votes and by working with evangelical preachers to promote voter turnout among conservative Christians,[46] presumably aware that the groups that have become the backbone of the Republican Party—in particular, white, married Christians—are declining as a share of the voting population.[47]

Problems with the Idea of Realignment

There are both practical and theoretical reasons why other scholars are reluctant to use the *R* word (realignment) to describe these changes. In practical terms, although Republican strength has increased, Democrats still hold the edge among party identifiers. And in a theoretical sense, the idea of realignment is difficult to apply with any precision. How much change has to occur in the parties' coalitions in order to call it a realignment? As political scientist David Mayhew points out, there are no clear standards for sorting elections

into periods of realignment as opposed to nonrealigning periods.[48] Many prefer to use the concept of "issue evolutions" to discuss the variety of ways in which issues have affected partisanship over time.[49]

Changes in the partisanship of southern whites and blacks are highly significant. Yet in several ways the parties retain their New Deal character. The Democrats remain the party of the disadvantaged and of minority racial and religious groups, but the minorities have changed; as Catholics have entered the mainstream of economic and political life, they have divided more evenly between the two parties, but the Democrats still represent the majority of lower-income, black, Latino, gay, and nonreligious people. And even if the movement of blacks and white southerners has been dramatic enough to propel the United States into a new party system, when did that system begin? Was it during the 1960s, when southern blacks regained the right to vote and the civil rights movement shook the South? Was it in the 1980s, when southern partisan change accelerated and Ronald Reagan attracted many new voters to the Republicans? Was it in the early 1990s, when Congress finally came under Republican control? Or does it encompass all of these periods in a constantly evolving (so-called secular) change?

The debate will continue as to whether the concept of realignment is a valuable tool in understanding change in the party system. Perhaps a more useful approach is to recognize that there are many different kinds of party changes and that we have seen all of them to at least some degree in the past 50 years. The evidence for party organizational change, as presented in Chapters 3 and 4, is convincing. There is little doubt that the Democratic dominance of the New Deal party system gave way to more of a balance in national party strength. And whether we call it a realignment or not, there has been enough change in the two parties' coalitions to produce a palpable shift in campaign and congressional debate. When Democrats call for federally funded embryonic stem cell research and Republicans are opposed, and when Democrats support civil unions for same-sex couples, whereas Republicans agree with the pope on abortion, we know that there is a broader agenda in national politics than simply the economic conflicts of the 1930s and 1940s.

At the beginning of the second decade of the 2000s, then, the American electorate is composed of two groups of partisans of roughly comparable size. There is a group of Democrats, including liberals, lower-income people, and minorities, whose size has shrunk a bit in recent decades but shows the potential for recovery. There is a group of Republicans dominated by conservatives, southerners, and churchgoers. And there is a third group that could truly be termed "dealigned," in that it feels no lasting party loyalties and usually stays out of political activity.[50] Because of the demonstrated ability of both major parties to bounce back from defeat, it is also an electorate capable of producing mercurial election results. The trajectory of American politics, then, has the potential for rapid change.