

The Great Political Realignment

H. Douglas Adams edited and enhanced by ChatGPT and Claude AI

Political realignments are the nominal result of political/social dynamics at play in society. Politics is a competition about values and political parties or factions are the teams competing to win. Voters, as individuals, affiliate with those teams in an effort to achieve an outcome. But such affiliation can be fluid as changes in ideological values, institutional mission creep, social dislocations, shifting economic distributions, generational succession, cultural evolution, and historical cycles impact the patterns of political affiliation. Parties themselves evolve over time and a dissonance can develop between previously claimed values and values now articulated. Today the US is at an inflection point regarding those alignments as voters and parties both shift along a dichotomy continuum between left and right.

An illuminating interpretation of the dichotomy can be found in Thomas Sowell's *A Conflict of Visions* (2007) in which he argues that many political and social disputes stem from underlying "visions" of human nature and social order. Sowell identifies two primary visions: the *constrained vision* and the *unconstrained vision* - and contends that these competing frameworks shape how people interpret evidence, define justice, and evaluate institutions. The constrained vision views human nature as limited, self-interested, and morally imperfect. The unconstrained vision holds a far more optimistic view of human potential. The constrained vision sees the limitations as permanent rather than remediable and that institutions such as markets, traditions, the rule of law, channel imperfection toward socially beneficial outcomes. The unconstrained vision assumes human behavior is shaped by social conditions rather than fixed limitations, and that with sufficient knowledge, rationality, and moral commitment, social problems can be solved. Sowell argues that these visions lead to predictable disagreements across a wide range of issues: economic policy, criminal justice, education, and social welfare. Advocates of the constrained vision emphasize incentives, unintended consequences, and institutional limits, while proponents of the unconstrained vision focus on moral aspirations, expertise, and systemic reform. Importantly, Sowell maintains that debates between these camps rarely hinge on empirical disputes alone, since facts

are interpreted through the lens of the underlying vision. This is why political conflict is both enduring and, to a significant extent, unavoidable. We can apply Sowell's arguments as a lens to view the first party alignment drama of the American republic: the debate between the Federalist and the Anti-Federalist. The Federalists like Madison and Hamilton embodied a constrained vision. Skeptical of both rulers and majorities, they designed institutions to restrain power rather than rely on virtue. As Madison argued in *Federalist 51*, government must be structured to control itself because neither leaders nor citizens can be trusted consistently to act selflessly. The Anti-Federalists leaned toward a more unconstrained outlook. They placed greater confidence in the virtue of citizens and local leaders, believing that smaller republics preserved liberty better than distant national authority. Sowell's framework reveals a conflict between institutional restraint and moral trust that is a tension that became a permanent feature of American politics.

Another way to understand how Americans align themselves politically can be found in the work of Daniel J. Elazar. Elazar, in his book *American Federalism: A View from the States* (1966), posits a theory of political culture as a framework for understanding variation in American politics. Elazar argued that political behavior is shaped by moral orientations, shared assumptions about authority, citizenship, and the proper role of government. He defined political culture as a community's prevailing pattern of orientation toward political action. These cultures shape expectations about participation, legitimacy, and public purpose. Elazar outlined a cultural typology of moralistic, individualistic, and traditionalistic political cultures. Moralistic culture views politics as a means of achieving the common good; Individualistic culture treats politics as transactional for advancing private interests; Traditionalistic culture regards politics as the domain of the elites preserving existing social hierarchies. Although political cultures evolve over time, they are not deterministic but do constrain political choices. Elazar's model suggests that national party realignments are filtered through state political cultures. This explains why partisan change is uneven and often more about *who controls parties* than about mass ideological conversion. Elazar's political culture framework reveals that American party alignment is not merely ideological or

institutional but culturally embedded. Parties succeed when they align with prevailing political cultures and fracture when they do not.

To understand realignment from another perspective is to look beyond immediate causes to the deeper cyclical forces that have shaped American politics. Three theoretical frameworks - Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s cycles of American history, the Strauss-Howe generational theory, and Kondratiev's long economic waves - offer insights into the drivers and trajectory of the current upheaval.

Arthur Schlesinger Jr. in his work *The Cycles of American History* (1999) identified approximately 30-year cycles in American politics, alternating between periods of *public purpose* and *private interest*. Schlesinger's cyclical theory identifies alternating periods of liberalism and conservatism in American politics. The theory suggests that these cycles are self-generating, meaning each phase creates conditions for the next. Liberal periods are characterized by progressive reforms and a focus on social justice. These phases often emerge during times of economic prosperity or social upheaval, where the public mood favors change. Conservative periods are marked by a return to traditional values and a focus on individualism and market solutions. These phases typically follow liberal periods and may resist or maintain existing reforms without significant rollback. Schlesinger posits that the cycles reflect the national mood, suggesting that political leaders are often chosen to express the prevailing sentiments of the masses rather than to lead them in a new direction. The theory argues that these cycles have repeated throughout American history, influencing major political events and elections. Individual periods can vary in length due to historical events. Each phase ends when the nation becomes exhausted by the current mood—either from the “strenuousness” of reform or the “boredom” of inactivity—leading to a swing of the pendulum.

The Strauss-Howe generational theory posits an 80-90 year cycle consisting of 20-25 years increments. These increments are when institutions are torn down and rebuilt and the fundamental organizing principles of society are renegotiated. This framework explains the intensity and existential quality of contemporary political conflict. The last incremental period is characterized by a sense that “everything is at stake,”

that reform is insufficient and that fundamental choices about national identity and governance must be made. The polarization we experience isn't merely partisan disagreement but reflects competing visions for post-crisis institutional reconstruction. The theory suggests that current chaos is prelude to resolution: an end with a decisive moment when new institutional arrangements crystallize and a new social contract emerges. The coalitions forming now may represent early versions of the post-crisis political order, though their final form remains uncertain.

Nikolai Kondratiev identified 40-60 year economic cycles driven by technological innovation and capital investment patterns. We are potentially in the early stages of a new Kondratiev upswing, as artificial intelligence, and other transformative technologies begin their expansion phase. This economic transformation profoundly shapes political realignment.

The “long depression” phase of the previous Kondratiev wave (roughly 1970s-2000s) saw deindustrialization, wage stagnation, and the hollowing out of middle-class economic security in many regions. This created fertile ground for populist movements challenging the neoliberal consensus that dominated that era. Communities devastated by manufacturing decline became receptive to politicians promising economic nationalism and skepticism toward globalization—regardless of traditional party loyalty.

The emerging Kondratiev upswing centered on digital and green technologies creates new geographic and educational winners and losers, scrambling political coalitions accordingly. Metropolitan areas with tech sectors, research universities, and professional service industries thrive, while rural and post-industrial regions struggle to adapt. This geographic divergence increasingly predicts political behavior better than traditional class indicators, as urban-rural and educated-uneducated divides widen. Moreover, the transition between Kondratiev waves typically produces political instability as old economic arrangements break down before new ones fully emerge. The regulatory frameworks, labor relations, and social insurance systems designed for the industrial economy fit poorly with the digital economy. This mismatch generates grievances across the political spectrum and creates space for political entrepreneurs offering radically different visions of economic governance.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that the current American political realignment is not a transient disruption but the convergence of enduring ideological visions, deeply rooted political cultures, and long-running historical and economic cycles. Sowell helps explain why conflicts persist regardless of evidence, Elazar clarifies why realignment unfolds unevenly across states and regions, and cyclical theories illuminate why moments of rupture feel existential rather than incremental. The present instability reflects not merely partisan sorting but a broader renegotiation of institutional authority, economic order, and national purpose. Whether the emerging alignment yields renewed cohesion or prolonged fragmentation will depend less on tactical party maneuvering than on how successfully new coalitions reconcile constrained realities with unconstrained aspirations in a transformed economic and generational landscape.

References

Elazar, D. J. (1966). *American federalism: A view from the states*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell.

Kondratiev, N. D. and Stolper, W. F. (1935). The long waves in economic life. *The review of economics and statistics*, 17(6), pp. 105-115.

Schlesinger, A. M., Jr. (1999). *The cycles of American history*. Boston: Mariner Books.

Sowell, T. (2007). *A conflict of visions: Ideological origins of political struggles*. New York: Basic Books.

January 31, 2026