

II. Are there Recurrent Patterns or Cycles in American Politics ?

I. The Public Purpose vs. Private Interest Model

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., The Cycles of American History esp. "The Cycles of American Politics." Schlesinger posits recurrent 15-20-year periods of recurrent national moods cyclically alternating between other-directed "public purpose" and inward-directed "private interest." Responding to these swings in national mood, the national government pursues agendas that alternately serve public purpose (democratic, progressive) or private interest (capitalist, market) values.

1787-1800 private; 1800-1815 public; 1815-1828 private; 1828-1840 public; 1840-60 private; 1860-70 public; 1870-1900 private; 1900-1918 public; 1918-1932 private; 1932-1950 public; 1950-1960 private; 1960-1976 public; 1976-1992 private; 1992 -2000 public; 2000-2008 private; 2008 ff. public.

Schlesinger further holds that these national moods are largely self-generating and are explainable by one of two ideas :

- psychological explanation : high Idealism breeds its own repudiation.
Commitment to uplift and reform "ultimately exhausts as well as disappoints."
People then turn inward, and pursue private interest.
- generational explanation: A new generation comes to power every 15 years. Each generation rejects the preceding generation's ideals thus producing an alternation between the public and the private. Upon gaining power, the new generation champions ideas absorbed during its formative younger years.

II. The Critical Election Theory or Realignment Model

Walter Dean Burnham, Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics (1970); V.O. Key, "A Theory of Critical Elections," Journal of Politics, (1955), 17: 3-18. Critical election theory posits critical turning points in U.S. political history when a new party (or an old party) achieves political dominance through a new policy agenda and a new majority. This happens when a festering national problem or issue takes center stage, demands solution, and is decisively addressed by the new party. Concurrently, existing voter alignments are shattered, reshuffled, and reconstituted, and the new party emerges with a new electoral majority that endures until the process repeats itself. The theory identifies five (maybe six) "critical" realigning elections: 1800; 1828; 1860; 1896; 1932; 1980 (?). Others are "reinforcing," "deviant," and "reinstating" elections.

III. The Three Regimes Model

Morton Keller, America's Three Regimes: a New Political History (2007).

This interpretation periodizes U.S. History into three "regimes":

1. "deferential-republican regime" colonial -1820s : i.e. deferential social norms and republican values dominate politics
2. "party- democratic regime" 1820s -1932 : i.e. party competition and democratic [popular] values now dominate politics
3. "populist-bureaucratic " regime 1932 ff. i.e. the bureaucratic [welfare-regulatory] state and outside-the-party "populist" forces, such as TV, advocacy groups, lobbyists, grass-roots mass movements [rather than parties] now dominate politics.