

## Walter Dean Burnham: An American Clockmaker

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The eminent writer and thinker Elias Canetti published *The Secret Heart of the Clock* in 1985. His book of aphorisms suggested to me the image of a curious antiquarian clockmaker who finds an old but functional clock that he carefully takes apart. After analyzing the different components of the timepiece, the clockmaker decides to reassemble the device. When he finishes, the clock is in a good working order, ticking and elegant, but different.

Dean Burnham has done something similar in his long career. Throughout his decades in academia, Professor Burnham has immersed himself in the past, searching for facts, for data, which he has assembled according to his own viewpoint and theoretical framework. The raw facts were there even before Dean was acquainted with them, but they needed a political scientist like him to give them life and meaning, to construct a new explanatory narrative. In doing exactly that, Dean reconstructed the United States' past, creating a new vision, a new history –in short, a new timepiece. Walter Dean Burnham has been an U.S. American clockmaker.

The purpose of this article is to study the life, work, and influences of this prominent political scientist. My goal is threefold. The first is to analyze Professor Burnham's work, concentrating on two aspects: realignment theory and his contribution to the field of U.S. American political development ([U.S.]APD). The second is to show how the kind of macro analysis advanced by Burnham has essentially "Gone with the Wind." The new trend of [U.S.]APD, with its emphasis on the micro-foundation of politics, has changed the discipline to become more scientific but less political. The third goal is to reconsider how Dean's work is important for exploring and understanding the beginnings of [U.S.]APD. In fact, [U.S.]APD specialists use the main features of his work to this day.

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To achieve these goals, this article will be divided into three main sections. First, I will explore Walter Dean Burnham as a young boy interested in politics and collecting data, or, as Burnham has called it, a “hobby.” In the second section, I will talk about Dean’s contributions to political science. And finally, I will present some concluding remarks.

## DISCOVERING POLITICS, SEARCHING FOR DATA

“Three days I am a political scientist, three days an historian, and on the remaining day, I do not know who I am,” Professor Burnham told Nicole Mellow and me in the summer of 2002 (Mellow and Velasco, 2002). Dean is a scholar whose love of history, politics, and data is both time-honored and widely renowned. But Burnham is also a curious intellectual, a person interested in geography, geology, meteorology, and evolutionary biology, disciplines not commonly associated with the curiosities and work of political scientists. Burnham is above all an intellectual; he enjoys mental activities and works constantly with his intellect. He is a true believer in the convergence of knowledge that one can find in other disciplines and creating theoretical frameworks and ideas to explain political phenomena. In this regard, he is following not only a deep tradition in political science—the applications of law, psychology, or economics to the study of politics—but also of the hard sciences. Burnham’s passion for interdisciplinary analysis has helped him develop his work.

Dean grew up in Pittsburgh in a middle-class Republican family and in the midst of acute world disorder. At the age of ten, he was already interested in politics, collecting buttons and attending meetings. At fourteen, he joined a crowd supporting the election of Dewey over Roosevelt. In those days, he expressed interest in historical data, and in particular, the question of where votes came from. This is how, in his own manner, during his adolescence he discovered the “clock.”

Professor Burnham, like any other human being, was shaped by his historical time. He was deeply impressed and politicized by three key historical events: the Great Depression; World War II, in particular the Nazi invasion of Norway; and the Korean War. Dean’s mother was the granddaughter of a Norwegian immigrant. His mother maintained strong ties with her relatives in Europe. When the Nazis swept into Norway in 1940, the entire family was greatly troubled. “You do not need to be rocket scientist,” Dean said, “to figure out that my parents were very strongly in favor of the Allied cause” (Mellow and Velasco, 2002). In his own words, the Nazi invasion of Norway “was the first event that, as it were, propelled me out of the neighborhood and the city and into awareness of a much larger world outside”

(Burnham, 1982: 5). This historical event significantly influenced his concern with history and comparative analysis.

Dean decided to study at his father's alma mater, Johns Hopkins University. From the beginning of college, he showed an inclination for the social sciences. "I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do [at Hopkins]," Burnham recalled, "but I knew that it would be something related to politics and history. I basically majored in both" (Velasco, 2012g). At the time that he entered Hopkins, he was already a deeply politicized teenager. As an undergraduate, Malcolm Moos, a scholar interested in political parties, significantly influenced him. Moos helped Dean get a grant to write *Presidential Ballots* and alerted him of the relevance of studying the history of the Supreme Court. Burnham became fascinated with constitutional law and constitutional history and very aware of the interplay of U.S. American political institutions.

When Professor Burnham was in his second year at Hopkins, he expressed a passion for data. "I like to speculate," he recalled. "I like to theorize as much as I can, but also I like to spend a lot of time saving data" (Velasco, 2012g). Thus, when he was a sophomore, he found another chance to express his personal propensity for data-gathering and historical analysis. During those years, Dean was interested in election returns, and he liked to spend time looking for books in the library. In the Hopkins library, he found Edgar Eugene Robinson's *Presidential Vote 1896-1932* (1934). This is a book of data, a collection of county-level presidential election returns for the period indicated in the title. Robinson's book, recalls Dean, "stimulated me to launch my first data-retrieval project: Why not take the story back to 1836, the first election in which (except for South Carolina from 1836 to 1860) full national-wide reporting of country-level presidential data exists, and extend the series forward to 1892?" (Burnham, 2013).<sup>1</sup> The outcome of his exhaustive research was the publication in 1955 of his first book, *Presidential Ballots, 1836-1892*. Here, Dean immersed himself in the data not just to resurrect the numbers themselves, but also to search for clues that could assist him in understanding the United States' political past. During his research, he became sensitized to the problem of periodization and to the theme of change and continuity in U.S. electoral history. This project was completed when Dean was 22 years old.

*Presidential Ballots* was an impressive start for a young empiricist, who embarked on a search for the lost soul of U.S. electoral politics. For Dean, as Richard Jensen has rightly pointed out, history was at that time "merely a depository of facts—really just numbers—which had to be carefully and completely assembled if a new science of election analysis was to progress" (Jensen, 1986: 210). To extend my earlier

<sup>1</sup> Dean Burnham said something similar to me in a conversation that I had with him on August 13, 2012.

metaphor, with the publication of *Presidential Ballots*, Dean's reconstructed clock began to tick.

During the Korean War, he joined the army with the intention of acquiring a foreign language at the Army Language School in Monterey, California. He spent 46 weeks learning Russian culture and language. His time in the army not only familiarized him with the real world and expanded his worldview and interest for Russian and Soviet history,<sup>2</sup> but helped him place U.S. politics in an international context. The Korean War was, for Burnham, his first personal realignment. "I regard my stay in the U.S. Army," asserted Dean recently, "as my third graduate school, in some respects the most important in my intellectual (and social) horizon: it vastly expanded my horizons" (Burnham, 2013: 1).

In 1956, Dean Burnham applied to both the Law School and the Department of Government at Harvard. During the application process, Harvard asked all applicants to send a written sample of their work. Dean sent not a schoolwork sample but his book, *Presidential Ballots*. He was admitted to both schools. After contemplation, he enrolled in a Department of Government PhD program.

His arrival at Harvard, after having been in the Korean War, was a shocking moment for Dean. "It is a very strange experience," Burnham evoked, "sleeping at the orderly room in January 1956 and then listening to Carl Friedrich, one of the great political philosophers, talking about Plato or St. Thomas Aquinas at the end of the month. That was a transition, a cultural shock" (Velasco, 2011).

At Harvard, he was influenced by important academic figures like Louis Hartz, V. O. Key, Robert G. McCloskey, and Barrington Moore. Dean originally considered dedicating his professional career to Russian/Soviet studies, but decided against it because of the lack of good contemporary information on the USSR. "Then," he said, "I had to consider what aspect of the [U.S.] American scene I would specialize in and at first committed myself to [U.S.] American constitutional development, chiefly involving the doctrine of continuity and changes in Supreme Court decisions" (Burnham, 2013: 1). Thus, under the supervision of McCloskey and Arthur Sutherland, he wrote his dissertation, *Civil Liberties and the Dilemma of Judicial Power: The Warren Court and Its Publics, 1953-1961* (Burnham, 1961). Moos and McCloskey's influence on Burnham was clearly expressed in this work. Recently, he recalled that McCloskey "made a huge difference" in his life, and Sutherland was "a classic Yankee in some respects, an exceedingly sharp person with a very, very penetrating mind,

<sup>2</sup> In 2002, in a seminar in honor of Dean Burnham in Mexico City, several U.S. and Mexican scholars went to visit Trotsky's house. In the exhibit, there was photograph showing about 20 high-ranking Soviet politicians, especially from the time of the Bolshevik revolution to the 1940s. Dean was the only one who was able not only to identify about 17 or 18 of them, but also told us the way they died.

who cut tons and tons of bullshit, an admirable person to have as a thesis advisor" (Velasco, 2012g).

In his dissertation, Burnham used a "quantitative and evaluative" method (Burnham, 1961: 3). This mixture of quantification and interpretation would characterize most of his work, allowing him to have a dialogue with different schools of thought in political science and other disciplines like history and law. For Dean, quantification was the best tool to avoid disapproval, a way to objectively defend against ideological or personal disqualifications. In personal conversations, Peter Trubowitz and Catherine Boone, both former colleagues of Professor Burnham, told me that Dean extensively used quantification-limited criticism from people with different ideological perspectives (Velasco, 2012h).

The study of the Supreme Court was a very important phase in Dean's professional development. His study of U.S. constitutional history reinforced his belief in the importance of clear periodization to make sense of the burdensome amount of data. As he has recently argued, "The Supreme Court's history has a very notable element of periodization: continuity punctuated by quite sudden and large-scale changes affecting the power of government to govern, especially *vis-à-vis* the always hegemonic position of private capitalist enterprise in economy and society in the USA" (Burnham, 2013: 1). The breaks in Supreme Court history were important episodes that made Dean aware of the relevance of periodization.

Later, the influence of his professors and the study of Supreme Court history would be manifested in his conception of realignment theory. As Stephen Skowronek and Karen Oren have asserted, in his realignment theory, Burnham blends the contradictory views of two of his Harvard teachers, V.O. Key and Louis Hartz. "In the initial formulation," Skowronek and Orren asserted, "the idea of critical election seemed to run entirely contrary to Hartz's consensus theory. Whereas Hartz was observing the uniformity of the [U.S.] American political experience and explaining why apparent breakpoints like the New Deal had changed so little, Key was observing large scale electoral discontinuities like those, which had brought FDR to power," and Burnham "proposed that electoral convulsions were the characteristic products of [U.S.] America's exceptional culture" (Skowronek and Orren, 2004: 60-61).

Professor Burnham began his professional career even before finishing his PhD, teaching six courses at Boston College from 1958 to 1961. In the early 1960s, the word "change" embodied the main tendencies and directions in U.S. political life. The United States was in a global crisis. It was perhaps natural for a young scholar to be concerned with the topic of crisis, with the possible crumbling of the system and its eventual repercussions, and with themes of change and continuity in U.S. politics.

After teaching from 1961 to 1963 at Kenyon College, Dean obtained a Social Science Research Council grant to work in the Inter-University Consortium for Political Research at the University of Michigan. His stay at Michigan helped him clarify his differences with other empiricist scholars, such as Phillip Converse. In 1960, Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stoke published their seminal work, *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1967). This work was “inevitably presentist,” Burnham told me. After reading this book, Burnham pondered a couple of questions, “a) Was it always like this? And, b) Do electorates in other democratic political systems respond to political stimuli in the same way?” (Burnham, 2013: 2). The answer to these questions and Dean’s disagreements with these scholars were revealed in 1965 with the publication of his influential article “The Changing Shape of the American Political Universe” (Burnham, 1965).

At that time, the dominant tendency in U.S. American political science was behaviorism. Dean was highly influenced by it and was very comfortable doing behavioral political science. “In his original manifestations,” Jeffrey Tulis told me, “realignment theory as first developed is part of behavioral political science. There is no distance between realignment theory as Dean was doing it and other people were doing about elections and behavioral political science.... In its original manifestation, Dean was like a leader of behavioral political science. He may not have thought of himself that way but he was; that was what he was doing” (Velasco, 2012e).

For behavioral political scientists, the main goal was to measure, to quantify, and to predict. Those using this framework aspired to making political science a truly scientific discipline. Studying the past was simply a useless endeavor. History was generally ignored. Burnham, however, reasoned otherwise. For him, history and behavioral political science were complementary. Historical and comparative analyses were essential for ensuring a proper historical perspective and making appropriate generalizations about the current times. These apparently simple ideas were very new in the 1960s. For Benjamin Ginsburg, Burnham was the first to “give an historical dimension to political analysis” (Velasco, 2012f). Additionally, Calvin Jillson told me that Burnham’s book *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics* was an “eye opener” because Dean was the first person to show “that you could do accurate historical work with quantitative methods that gave you results different from what most historians will get” (Velasco, 2012d). In other words, Burnham’s article “The Changing Shape...” brought history back in and set the agenda for further analysis of electoral behavior, especially political realignment. Paul Allan Beck likewise claimed, “This remarkable article ... remains at least as influential today as it was 20 years ago” (1986: 221).

After his time in Ann Arbor, Dean went to Haverford College from 1964 to 1966. In that period, he also taught a course at Swarthmore College. Dean recalls his days

in liberal arts colleges with great pleasure. He remembers how carefully he had to prepare every class to answer the puzzling questions many students asked. "The Haverford and Swarthmore kids," he recollected in a conversation with me, "were very good. It was enormously gratifying to deal with real talent at that level" (Velasco, 2012g).

Later in 1966, Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, offered him a position as a full professor, and Burnham spent five years teaching there. After the publication of his book *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics*, Burnham became a very well-known scholar. Different political science departments approached him with job offers. In 1971, for instance, he received a phone call and an invitation to join the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). In many ways, however, he was isolated at MIT: few people there worked on U.S. politics. He had a wonderful experience nonetheless. At MIT, many of his colleagues studied other countries and cultures, and he was exposed to a broader picture of political science. He recounted his conversations with Lucian Pye on China very affectionately.

In 1988, the University of Texas at Austin came along with a very generous offer, and Dean spent the last 16 years of his professional career in Austin. At that time, Professor Burnham was already a central figure in U.S. political science. His articles and books were studied and criticized, but never ignored. His realignment theory became the central paradigm to study not only elections and voting in U.S. history, but also U.S. political development. Burnham was a distinguished scholar and a very respectable teacher. Dean's clock, by this point, was ticking; it was elegant. Most people admired his timepiece, fully convinced of its value.

From the beginning of his career, Dean was highly regarded by his students and became a source of inspiration for many of them. However, the inspiration was unconventional. In most university settings, it is common for the students to follow in the footsteps of their professors. The reason is simple: students are so impressed with their professors' work and erudition that they want to conduct research along the same lines. It is not strange, therefore, that David Mayhew argued, "In its current 'normal science' form [the realignment genre] seems to be blinkering graduate students an exacting opportunity cost" (Mayhew 2002: 5).<sup>3</sup>

Yet Dean's case is different. His influence on his students was in many ways unorthodox. Except for John Coleman, who works on a similar topic, most of Dean's students do research on other themes. Cathy Jo Martin examines business interests and politics. Louis DeSipio observes Latino politics. Former students Victoria Hattam, Peter Trubowitz, and Nicole Mellow are other examples. Despite the differences in

<sup>3</sup> I want to thank Jeffery Tulis for highlighting Mayhew's comments on students of realignment (Velasco, 2012e).



their research topics, these pupils of Dean have something in common: they have a historical perspective, and party politics plays an important role in their analyses. In other words, Burnham has influenced these academicians not entirely through his themes, main research questions, or methodological approach—none of them work on realignment or use Burnham’s conceptual scheme—, but he has influenced them through his perspective on politics and his approach to evaluating political phenomena.

## REALIGNMENT THEORY: DEAN’S FAVORITE SON

Professor Burnham called his areas of work “sons,” and no doubt realignment is his favorite one. In a personal conversation with me, Dean said that he became aware of realignment even before reading about it. He told me that when he was researching and later writing *Presidential Ballots*, he observed in U.S. electoral history the “replacement of one major party by another one, and that obviously led you to realignments” (Velasco, 2012g). Professor Burnham recognized that he did not have any framework of reference to discuss this phenomenon, but he could see important breaks in the historical sequence, such as the Civil War or 1892-1896. Likewise, he argues that *Presidential Ballots* “had periodization written all over it: the consolidation of the second ‘Jacksonian party system’ in the 1830s, the vast disruption of 1856-60 and its consequences, and in 1892 the threshold of the critical realignment of 1894/96. But I was only a youngster when this opus was finished and did not at once leap to the largest systemic implications of all that data. What you don’t look for, you’re not going to see!” (Burnham, 2013: 2).

Dean formally learned about realignment theory at Harvard. During those years, he read E. E. Schattschneider’s *Semisovereign People* (1960), which highly influenced his perspective on realignment. As a student of V.O. Key, Jr., he became familiar with his professor’s work. He recently asserted that Key’s article “A Theory of Critical Elections [1955] was a major stimulus,” and he also recognized the relevance of Key’s second article on secular realignment (1959). According to Burnham, in this second piece, Key discussed the flow of secular realignment and where it comes from. For Dean, this article was important because Key stressed another dynamic in the process of realignment. Burnham argues that Key “got it right. Changing demographics, changing economics, and other things of the sort are what provoked a secular realignment.” In his view, Key was a very important figure, “but he didn’t do many things” (Velasco, 2012g). Thus, he decided to expand and improve Key’s work. Ted Lowi noted to me, “Burnham demonstrated Key’s model, and made Key a bigger figure than what he was....Dean was more scientific than



Key and took much, much further Key's ideas....Dean made V. O. Key, Jr. the best guy" (Velasco, 2012a).

"The Changing Shape of the American Political Universe" was Dean's first work on political realignment. The piece's main goal was "the preliminary exploration of the scope of change since the mid-nineteenth century in turnout and other criteria of voting participation and the possible substantive implication of such a change" (1965: 8). In this work, Burnham expressed his dislike of the timeless perspective of U.S. political scientists. Instead he "mapped out the existence of the 'lost Atlantis' of nineteenth-century U.S. politics marked by very strong party organization, limited electoral swings (except during realignment sequences), and higher voter turnouts than anything that appears after 1900 (Burnham, 2013: 2). Likewise, Dean evaluated the partisan realignment of 1896, and put forward many topics that would mark his academic work for the years to come: 1) change and continuity in U.S. politics; 2) the relevance of history; 3) his tendency to combine interpretative and quantitative analysis; 4) the prominence and pertinence of comparative analysis; 5) his combination of micro- and macro-politics in a very dynamic model; 6) patterns of periodization; 7) voting behavior; 8) realignment sequences; 9) the political and policy consequences of realignments; 10) repercussions for the general population of realignment episodes; 11) the interplay of U.S. political institutions; and 12) U.S. democracy and the Constitution. Five years later, Professor Burnham would develop these ideas in depth in his most important book, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (1970).<sup>4</sup>

In this work, Burnham analyzed the "function and implications of critical realignments for the [U.S.] American political process" (1970: 8). His work deviated from the dominant tendency of those years that viewed U.S. politics statically (Burnham, 1974). According to Steven Skowronek, Burnham meshed together three relevant themes:

The Constitution, political culture, and political behavior, with the central idea that [U.S.] American politics develops. You have the same Constitution, but you have major shifts that fundamentally re-change the Constitution; then you have this consensus culture that periodically changes. You have this stable party system that fundamentally changes over time, behaviorally, constitutionally, culturally; he put all that together behind the central idea of development: [U.S.] American politics develops. (Velasco, 2012b)

<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note that Theodore Lowi published his book *The End of Liberalism* almost at the same time, in 1969.

Burnham viewed U.S. political history in cycles, in long periods of political stability marked by an abrupt disruption of the process. These disruptions occur regularly and are the result of recurrent tensions between a dynamic political economy and an ancient political structure (1970: 181-182). In Burnham's words the United States system

heavily privileges stasis in politics (the faces change, the basic remains)... But if capitalism is, as Marxists and the business theorist Peter Drucker agree, one of "permanent revolution" in the material order and if the private sector is hegemonic ... then the victims of disruption gravitate to (a secondary) government for relief. They encounter a not-quite impermeable wall of organized interests. Uncompensated demands accumulate over two or three decades. Then a triggering event erupts, and an explosion occurs. (Burnham, 2013: 2)

The phenomenon provokes substantial modifications in the economic and socio-political structure, altering the nature of traditional political alliances and the character of the U.S. political system. Therefore, Burnham continued, "New equilibrium structures are developed and consolidated, and the system goes back to (relative) stasis –until the next time" (2013: 2). Periodically, based on a stable constitutional structure, the United States re-invents its political system (Jillson, 1994: 26-30).

In *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics*, Burnham would again use quantitative and interpretative models. To find periods of realignment, he used the discontinuity coefficient with t-tests and applied these statistical procedures to several national elections. These results are not only evaluated by their statistical significance, but are also assessed by their meaning and repercussion for U.S. politics. This is what anthropologists called "thick description" (Geertz, 1973), and it has a similar academic value to those statistical results for Burnham.

The last three chapters of Burnham's book deal with the contemporary period. Here, he highlights the decline of political parties as organizations for collective action, and maintains that the United States is "in a realigning sequence and that we are en route to a sixth party system" (1970: 135). For him, the political parties are atrophied, and consequently, civil society no longer has a proper vehicle of communication between their demands and the state. The decline of parties disengages the electorate from the policy process. Pessimistically, even before the 1973 economic and international crisis, he thought that the "evidence would suggest that a decisive triumph of the political right is more likely than not to emerge in the near future," and the U.S. political system, thus, is in crisis and "is not likely to emerge unchanged from its ordeal" (1970: 192-193).

Realignment theory was not only a proper methodological framework with which to study voting behavior and elections with a historical and comparative per-

spective; it was also a way to interconnect these topics with central concerns on governability and U.S. democracy. As Sidney Milkis recently expressed to me, “What I love about Dean’s work is that he asked the biggest questions about democracy, citizenship, and the [U.S.] American constitution –with a big C and small C.” For Burnham, Milkis continues, “parties were the mainsprings of democratic participation; that is why Burnham was very concerned when parties declined” (Velasco, 2012c). Contrary to many political scientists, preoccupied almost exclusively with the scientific nature of their inquiries, Burnham used political science to address relevant topics that affected the [U.S.] American people.

Dean Burnham argued that the realignment framework of analysis is, in many ways, a research agenda. It is a puzzle in which the board is there, but the pieces must be constructed and inserted in the right places for it to be completed. The researcher builds the pieces of the puzzle, but those parts are perfectible. So it can always look nicer. In the 1960s, for example, he detected several contradictions or anomalies that could not be fitted into the dominant paradigm of U.S. American electoral politics. His model sought to explain the “anomalies and a lot of other things.” In his words, with realignment theory, a

set of boxes, very largely empty, has been constructed. If the model seems useful, then the researchers may be guided into filling them with the concrete data about such things as elites, organized groups, particularly useful and marginalized and rejected ideologies, and so on (as well as electoral returns). If, not, then not. But along the way, it should be noted that, as I see things, the accumulation of uncompensated politico-social demands tends over time to engage the threat system and also arises out of contradictions that are embedded in any apparently static functioning order of mayor institutions and processes.... The processes of stasis-upheaval-stasis are essentially dialectic in character; I think that this whole subject has been vastly underdeveloped in political science. (Marxism: A No-no! Hegel: incomprehensible to a non-German mind!) And I would strongly recommend that this shortcoming be rectified by somebody (or somebodies). (2013: 3)

Dean’s work stimulated significant research on realignments. Over the years, some realignment scholars refined and developed Burnham’s ideas, while others severely criticized this perspective. However, for better or for worse, the literature on critical realignment grew enormously, and realignment theory has certainly become “one of the great success stories of modern social science” (Shafer, 1991: xi).

Realignment theory has taken diverse directions. There are at least six perspectives within this analytical framework, which are:

- 1) The classic theory of realignment or partisan realignment represented by authors like Sundquist, Burnham, Clubb, Flanigan and Zingale, or Campbell and Trilling (Kleppner, 1987: 239-249);<sup>5</sup>
- 2) Brady's congressional realignment;
- 3) Chubb and Peterson's policy realignment;
- 4) Ferguson's investment theory;
- 5) Burnham's nonpartisan realignment or realignment II; and
- 6) Gourevitch's external influence on political realignments. (Burnham, 1970)

These are neither all the main authors nor an inclusive list of academic works based on the realignment perspective. For instance, Burnham asserts that Stephen Skowronek's *The Politics Presidents Make* (1993) and the "constitutional moments" by Bruce Ackerman (1991) coincide with the main framework of critical realignment theory (Burnham, 1994: 64; Burnham, 1994 *APSR*; Burnham, 1991a). Furthermore, Ackerman has recognized in private that Dean influenced his work, especially in *We the People* (Velasco, 2012g). Nevertheless, the six approaches mentioned above are accepted by most scholars as the main schools of thought within the realignment perspective.

Thus, from the 1960s to the 1990s, realignment theory was subjected to profound revision, reconsideration, reflection, and change. Burnham's non-partisan realignment, Thomas Ferguson's investment theory, Chubb and Peterson's policy-institutional approach, and Gourevitch's coalition model are clear expressions of specialists' persistent search for new avenues of research within the realignment framework. Innovation is the best word to describe realignment studies during those years.

However, since the 1960s and the publication of "The Changing Shape of American Political Universe" (1965), Burnham has been severely attacked. His work has generated serious controversies around electoral politics, U.S. democracy, and the advent of a new realignment. Important works often provoke a mixed reaction. Some scholars find the research relevant and support the work while others reject it. Academic enterprises are rarely conclusive, so they provoke polemics. Lowi considered that this was exactly what happened with Burnham. "Dean," Lowi told me, "started a movement that he led for a long time. Everybody started either killing or supporting him" (Velasco, 2012a).

<sup>5</sup> For Paul Kleppner, two of the analyses on realignment theory after Key are the works of Burnham and the research by Clubb, Flanigan, and Zingale (1980). Needless to say, there are differences in the analyses that the various authors included in the classical theory of critical realignment. Likewise, as I will show later, Burnham is the only specialist who has expanded his perspective to incorporate non-partisan realignment, or what he calls "realignment II," within his methodological framework (Kleppner, 1987: 239-249).

Reviewing all the critiques of his work goes beyond the scope of this article. Let me just highlight some important negative critiques. In the early 1980s, Campbell and Trilling (1980: 4) slammed Burnham's work for being an "immature theory, which articulates the often vague links among the social and economic environment, mass and elite political behavior, and governmental policy." Later, Everett Carl Ladd (1991: 24-36), a permanent critic of Dean's work, offered two main disagreements. First, he argued that the notion of realignment was so vague that it was fundamentally useless. He additionally claimed that realignment theory failed to predict the 1968 realignment. Joel Silbey agrees with Ladd, stating that realignment theory "has not been able to account for what has happened over the past generation of [U.S.] American politics," and suggests a different periodization scheme to study U.S. political history (1991: 3).

For Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, politics is a permanent flow of events that can neither be fully captured nor explained by an inflexible model. They see realignment periodization as "overly rigid." One needs a "paradigm that engages several periodization schemes at once." From their perspective, the "overall view of politics is no longer that of an integrated order punctuated periodically by a radical change [as realignment does]. Rather, it is one of multiple and disjointed ordering that overlay one another, with the interplay among them breaking down the period-bound distinction between order and change" (1996: 117). In a nutshell, for Stephen Skowronek, Burnham's "periodization scheme is wrong" (Velasco, 2012b).

Finally, the most recent and severe criticism comes from the pen of David Mayhew. Mayhew was not always a critic of realignment theory. He studied at Harvard under V. O. Key, who was his dissertation advisor.<sup>6</sup> During his days in Cambridge, Massachusetts, realignment theory was already a popular framework in U.S. political science. As he stated to me, "I was a firm believer of the idea [of realignment], but then I became less than a firm believer of the idea as I moved on and new experience accrued as a variety of new scholarship accrued" (Velasco, 2013a).

Mayhew openly began his criticism of realignment theory in 2000 when he was invited to write a piece on the subject for the *Annual Review of Political Science* (Mayhew, 2000). As he stated to me in an interview, the "idea of writing about realignment was in my mind, but I have not written anything about it." It was a sort of confluence, if "they never asked me I might never have written about it.... I was thinking about it, and they asked me. So I wrote about it (Velasco, 2013a). Subsequently, he expanded and refined his views and published a book on the subject.

Mayhew maintains that two reasons moved him to write a critical opinion of realignment. The first was the absence of a classical critical realignment in the late

<sup>6</sup> The title of Mayhew's dissertation was "Democrats and Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives: A Study in Intra-Party Coalition Patterns in the Postwar Period."

1960s. The second reason, he argued to me, is that “I was reading about [U.S.] American history before the 1960s, about the nineteenth century, and the more that I read about it ... the less taken I became by the idea of critical realignment and electoral eras” (Velasco, 2013a). In a nutshell, the classical case of the missing realignment of the 1960s, together with the lack of historical explanatory power of the realignment theory, pushed him to write a critique of the realignment genre.

Mayhew shares the views of both Silbey and Ladd, contending that realignment theory does not explain the last two centuries of U.S. electoral politics, party politics, and political history. Mayhew argues that the “genre has evolved from a source of vibrant ideas into an impediment to understanding.” He presents 15 classical claims of realignment theory (such as “electoral realignments have appeared in a pattern of regularity that is periodicity”; the causes –he calls motors– that trigger realignment events; “turnout [is] usually high in realigning elections”; “electoral realignments are associated with major changes in government policy”; the relevance of third parties before realignments; the existence of a realignment in 1896, among others) and criticizes them from an empirical standpoint (Mayhew, 2002: 14-30).

After presenting the 15 classic assertions, Mayhew argues that realignment theory’s claim of the dichotomy realignment and non-realigning elections, periodicity, and dynamic are untenable. He concludes by arguing that the “ambitious version of the realignment perspective had its fruitful days, but it is too slippery, too binary, too apocalyptic, and it has come to be too much of a dead end” (Mayhew, 2002: 5 and 165).

Other scholars had presented many of these criticisms before, and Burnham had already responded to them in several articles published in 1991 and 1992. Although Burnham has substantial disagreements with Mayhew, he has never replied in written form to him. The only confrontation between the two scholars was in a panel at the American Political Science Association (Ferguson and Chen, 2005).<sup>7</sup> Richard Bense, David Mayhew, and Dean Burnham were panelists, while Ted Lowi moderated. According to Jeffrey Tulis, the discussion was a sort of “trivia contest,” in which they were debating fundamentally about details and specificities of different elections. After a long discussion about electoral turnouts, specificities of what constitutes a realignment, or if we had realignment in the 1890s, Lowi opened the floor for questions and answers. Jeffrey Tulis asked Burnham if realignment was more about the big picture of U.S. American political development rather than the

<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the most serious critique to Mayhew comes from the pen of Thomas Ferguson and Jie Chen. Ferguson and Chen (2005) have criticized Mayhew’s book on three fundamental grounds. First, Mayhew does not present any new data to corroborate his assertions. Second, he does not offer any statistical analysis to demonstrate his allegations. Third, Ferguson maintained that in fact there was realignment in 1896. To support their argument, they present new data.

particularities of certain elections. When Burnham responded “yes,” a crowd full of graduate students and professors screamed in his favor (Velasco, 2012e).

To understand Burnham’s rebuttal of Mayhew’s attacks, it is necessary to comprehend some important modifications in his thinking. In 1991, Burnham redefined realignment theory, enlarging his original conception. First, he started using the notion of punctuated equilibrium developed by paleontologists Niles Eldredge and Stephen Jay Gould. In their piece, published in 1972, Gould and Eldredge argued that the fossil records did not corroborate the traditional notions of evolutionary biology. For them, the transition from one species to another did not occur in a slow, gradual, incremental fashion as Lyell and Charles Darwin maintained. On the contrary, species seemed to emerge suddenly and remain stable for very long periods of time. In the words of Gould, “Punctuated equilibrium holds that the great majority of species, as evidenced by their anatomical and geographical histories in the fossil record, originate in a geological moments (punctuation) and then persist in stasis throughout their long duration” (2002: 766). In one of Gould’s definitions, there were three central concepts: stasis, punctuation, and dominant relative frequency. Therefore, Eldredge and Gould thought the evolution of living organisms on earth was characterized by stability and change, disruption and equilibrium.

Burnham became fascinated with the theory of punctuated equilibrium. He had discovered a great scientific metaphor that impeccably fit his basic conception of realignment. He soon started calling Stephen Jay Gould one of his heroes and became an avid reader of his books. Burnham’s encounter with the work of these paleontologists was a central episode in his academic career. At least three reasons explain the relevance of this discovery.

The first is the timing. Dean started learning about Eldredge and Gould’s work in the late 1980s and early 1990s when the theory of realignment was losing ground, but the field of [U.S.]APD was emerging as an important sub-discipline of political science to study U.S. American politics and history. Burnham was a [U.S.] APD scholar even before Orren, Skowronek, Tulis, and others coined the term. He was the forerunner of [U.S.]APD, and therefore his ideas were debated. The revitalization of his work through the theory of punctuated equilibrium helped him to continue as one of the main specialists in U.S. politics and as an active and distinguished participant in the birth and growth of U.S. American political development.

Second, the theory of punctuated equilibrium helped him expand his conception of realignment. Traditionally, realignment scholars have examined U.S. political development to identify critical elections and realignment periods, linking them to parties, party coalitions, and changes in the nature and direction of public policy. The concepts of Eldredge and Gould helped Dean concentrate on the macro-changes



that substantially modified U.S. politics rather than on the particularities of an election in a certain state or county. In other words, replacing the word “realignment” with “punctuated equilibrium” allowed him to embrace a broader concept: to analyze change and continuity, stability and upheaval in U.S. American politics without the indispensable connection to critical elections. With the adoption of the notion of punctuated equilibrium, Burnham was, to a certain extent, leaving behind the over-concentration on parties, elections, and turnouts to focus on the big changes shaping U.S. American politics.

Third, the theory of punctuated equilibrium helped him provide an explanation for the anomaly of the late 1960s and early 1970s. During the late 1980s to early 1990s, scholars’ attention to realignment theory started to decline because no traditional realignment had occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Several scholars were trying to find an explanation, but many more began calling this historical period a time of de-alignment. Burnham’s concentration more on the broader picture allows him to perceive different types of realignment, to see changes in U.S. American politics.

As David S. Prindle has correctly pointed out, “Burnham no longer speaks of critical realignment, but of punctuated equilibrium, with explicit reference to Eldredge and Gould” (2009: 102). Furthermore, Burnham employs this framework to evaluate the work of other scholars. He titled his long review of Bruce Ackerman’s *We the People* “Constitutional Moments and Punctuated Equilibria,” and he even maintained that “*We the People* proposes a punctuated-equilibrium model of macro-level constitutional order.” Dean finds “striking convergence between Ackerman’s work and what, in political science, has sometimes been called critical realignment theory” (1999: 2238-2249). In a nutshell, the adoption of Eldredge and Gould’s ideas allowed him to talk not only about electoral politics and political realignments, but also about any sea change in U.S. American politics. Evidently, this new conception would be severely criticized by Mayhew and other scholars.

Thus, in his new realignment conception influenced by Eldredge and Gould, Burnham argues that the sixth political order has its origins between 1968 and 1972 and that it reflects the exhaustion of the New Deal realignment (Burnham, 1996).<sup>8</sup> The deterioration of this era is linked to a profound economic, political, and international crisis and denotes the emergence of a non-partisan realignment. For Burnham, the new order has four main characteristics:

<sup>8</sup> Burnham has argued that the 1994 mid-term election reflects the beginning of the seventh realignment era (1996a and 1996b).

- 1) The first is the decline of political parties as organizations for collective action and their replacement by mass media.
- 2) The decline of political parties has caused the rise of “candidate-centered politics” (Wattenburg, 1991). The candidate and not the party is now the principal protagonist in electoral contests. For John Aldrich and Richard Niemi, candidate-centered politics is the main feature of the political realignment of the late 1960s (1995: Chapter 5).
- 3) The third is what Nelson Polsby calls the institutionalization of the House of Representatives, a phenomenon that is manifested in the high rate of returning incumbents seeking reelection (1978).
- 4) The fourth is divided government in a post-partisan era. According to Burnham, we have an electoral system ruled by what Sidney Blumenthal has called “the permanent campaign” (1982) and a political order governed by the interregnum state, a state in which public policy is increasingly dissociated from a base of popular support. (Burnham, 1989: 21)

In his new conception of realignment, Burnham considers that there is not only one type of realignment, but two: the partisan, or type A, and the non-partisan, or Type B. Realignment, he argues, occurs when “politically decisive minorities of the relevant population at any given time, alter what they have traditionally been doing in politics (including participation or non-participation) rather suddenly, ushering in something very different” (Burnham, 1991a: 115-116). In his definition, he acknowledges the relevant role played by elites in realignment events and their subsequent effects. He also points out the role of ideas in the legitimization of policy realignments. His formulation of Type B non-partisan realignment allows him to explain the 1968-1972 period as a critical time, as a moment of punctuated equilibrium, as a time of big disruption and subsequent stability but not as a moment of electoral shift or readjustment. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, we had a sea change; we had a non-partisan realignment.

As a result, Burnham thought classical realignment ceased to exist because political parties (in their traditional form), the main protagonists of realignment episodes, ceased to exist. In his view, traditional realignments require the dominance of political parties as “connectors and channels of mass action in politics.” Burnham was highlighting this fact as early as 1970. Thus at the time that he published his main book on realignment, he was asserting that the crisis of political parties as a “primary channel through which mass opinion is articulated,” would imply that traditional critical realignments would probably become—or already be—extinct (Burnham, 1991a: 106, Burnham 1970: 173). For Burnham, the notion that classical realignments

were no longer possible did not mean that the United States would not experience significant change. For him, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the United States underwent a considerable political transformation with severe implications in the functioning of U.S. politics. The repercussions of these transformations were as profound as traditional critical realignments.

The reaction to Burnham's new approach to the study of realignment was, generally speaking, favorable. Patricia Hurley concludes in her review of the *End of Realignment*, a book edited by Byron Shafer in which Burnham presented this idea, that "nothing attests more to the vitality of the concept of realignment than the existence of a group of eminent scholars willing to write—and a publisher willing to publish—a volume entitled *The End of Realignment?*" (1992: 1186). In a similar vein, Ronald P. Formisano maintained that the "realignment theory model was both descriptive and predictive," and considered that with the exception of Burnham, the authors in this book "seem unpersuaded that the theory retains predictive utility." However, he considered that the "concept [realignment] and its associated classificatory elements remain descriptive tools that scholars (historians, in particular) want to keep using" (Formisano, 1992: 656). Finally, Jerome M. Clubb sustained that the changes of late 1960s and early 1970s were profound. But,

cannot be seen, however, as realignment—at least not of the classical form.... Treating these years as a further example of realignment, only of a different form (as Burnham does), may only add an additional complexity to an already complex formulation. The test is, of course, further exploration, but even without such an addition, realignment remains an important (though perhaps time-bound) component of our understanding of historical [U.S.] American politics. (1992)

Clubb concludes his comments by asserting that the "panelists have come, as McSeveney suggested, to 'bury realignment.' Taken in total, however, the resulting volume suggested that burial would be, to say the least, premature" (1992: 1073).

These reviews, although critical and many of the criticisms profound and pertinent, considered that realignment is a useful tool to study U.S. American history. In the view of specialists like Formisano, realignment retains a significant value for historians. The periodization scheme, although criticized by Orren, Skowronek, and Silbey, is useful for classifying and compartmentalizing U.S. history and to make sense of the abundant data about it. If its predictive tools are atrophied, its descriptive tools are still useful for understanding significant variations in U.S. history and its electoral past. In many ways, realignment was a retrospective theory. Like paleontology or geology, realignment is a theory that emerged after specialists evaluated

U.S. electoral history. When Key or Schattschneider started writing about realignment, they were basically observing regularities and irregularities in the country's past. The predictive nature of the theory came after observing that critical elections emerge with a certain periodicity. The basis for predictability was history and nothing more. It is not strange, therefore, that historians want to preserve realignment theory as a useful tool for understanding the yesteryears of the United States.

The strongest criticism of Burnham's reformulation of realignment came 11 years later. David Mayhew disliked the notion of non-partisan realignment. For him, Burnham was basically moving the discussion into another dimension. Classical realignments are no longer the main subject of study. "To give up on critical elections as a defining property is to sacrifice not only content—the flightless bird comes to mind—, but also definitional constraints. In proving for Type B realignment, what are the rules for deciding what qualifies as a relevant indicator? Whatever the answer, the genre risks embarrassment with this move," Mayhew suggested. In his view, in the "case of the alleged Type B realignments, the rules are unclear and the past is uncharted" (2000: 39-42).

It is almost certain that Mayhew's valid questions about Type B realignment will remain unanswered. We need more research on the definitional problem and the forms of functionality of this new idea. However, one fact is clear: with this move, Burnham is seeking to develop a more inclusive and comprehensive framework. He wants to talk not only about electoral politics, but also about changes and substantial transformations in U.S. politics. This is a complex and ambitious enterprise that aspires to offer the big picture, to create a theory of change and continuity in U.S. political development. To develop his ideas in a comprehensive fashion is one of Dean's more inconclusive enterprises.

## THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF DEAN'S WORK

"I can say with confidence," said eminent political scientist Theodore Lowi (2010), "that [U.S.] American political development was the offspring of Dean Burnham." Other political scientists, such as Benjamin Ginsberg, Calvin Jillson, David Mayhew, Sidney Milkis, Stephen Skowronek, and Bartholomew Sparrow, to name just six, concur with Lowi. For them, the birth of [U.S.]APD as a sub-field in U.S. American political science,<sup>9</sup> which began with the publication of *The American Party Systems*, a book edited by William Chambers and Walter Dean Burnham in 1967. As Lowi

<sup>9</sup> On the origins of [U.S.]APD, one may consult John Gering (2003).

asserted, “The birth of [U.S.]APD was the Conference on American Political Party Development in 1967 at Washington University in St. Louis. Ten authors (five historians, five political scientists) joined by twelve commentators, spent two days of the most heated discussion imaginable –among friends. And most of these ten essays in the *American Party System* could not have been prepared and published without the grounding provided in Burnham’s ... *Presidential Ballots*.” (Lowi, 2010).<sup>10</sup> As Bartholomew Sparrow has rightly pointed out, Dean “was an [U.S.]APD person before there was [U.S.]APD, before the inaugural issue of *Studies* (Orren and Skowronek, 1987),<sup>11</sup> and before the convening of the Politics and History section of APSA (1990). No wonder there is now a PhD dissertation in his name in the Politics and History section for young [U.S.]APD scholars” (Sparrow, 2010: 4).

Thus, one of the main unintended consequences of Dean’s work was that his work on realignment offered a comprehensive approach to the study of U.S. political development. Evidently, Dean did not invent [U.S.] APD. As Orren and Skowronek have shown, the history of U.S. American political development goes back to the origins of U.S. political science in the late nineteenth century, but Burnham offered a contemporary impetus at a time that history was not appreciated by many political scientists (Orren and Skowronek, 2004). Burnham was one of the first who gave a historical dimension to electoral analysis. In this book, the “idea of regularly succeeding ‘party systems’ as concrete historical entities was first set forth” (Burnham, 2013: 4).

In *The American Party Systems*, Burnham and Chambers did something else. They employed certain analytical categories in their approach to studying U.S. American electoral history that would become central components for future research in the sub-field of [U.S.] APD. Six analytical categories are highlighted here. First, U.S. politics was not static but dynamic. Throughout U.S. history, the country has experienced different party systems, each with its own peculiarities and characteristics. Parties evolved and changed: they are living entities. Chambers believed the “central problem of this volume [*The American Party System*] is to provide some analysis and explanation ... of [U.S.] American party development, and of the particular character of our political parties” (1967: 3).

The second analytical category was the theme of change and continuity in U.S. politics. If [U.S.] American politics and parties were not static but dynamic, it was imperative for the book’s contributors to evaluate what remained and what would

<sup>10</sup> Among the different people that I have interviewed, only Jeffrey Tulis disagrees with the notion of Burnham as the founding father of [U.S.]APD . For Tulis, the founders of [U.S.]APD were his professors at the University of Chicago, David J. Greenstone, and Herbert Storing. If Tulis is right, these scholars could be considered pioneers of the cultural and constitutional perspective to the study of [U.S.]APD (Lowi, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Sparrow refers here to *Studies in American Political Development*, a journal published by Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek.

change in U.S. political parties. In that regard, Frank J. Sorauf, had an ambitious task: he wanted to understand, "how one integrates the study of development of political parties themselves into the study of development of the entire political system." For him, to understand the development of political parties, one should look in two directions. First, to consider the "developments of the parties themselves." Second, to consider political parties as "contributor[s] to, or a cause of, the political development of the entire political system" (Sorauf, in Chambers and Burnham, 1967: 34-39).

In Sorauf's opinion, during the last 50 or 60 years, there have been two main changes in the development of U.S. political parties. First, we have witnessed that two-party competition has expanded all over the United States. There are basically "no substantial pockets of one-partyism." Second, parties have been losing their "monopoly over the political activism (or functions) they have traditionally performed." For Sorauf, "political development ... has been accompanied by parallel changes not only in the parties *qua* parties, but in the competitive position as political organizers. All of these may even suggest that politically sophisticated electorates in heterogeneous and pluralistic political systems have come to depend less and less on the organizing medium of political parties" (Sorauf, in Chambers and Burnham: 54-55).

Third, the five political scientists –and, of course, the historians– who participated in the book had a significant appreciation for historical analysis. The political scientists considered history a valuable discipline and were fully convinced of the relevance of doing historical-political research. For them, history was more than a simple source of data to corroborate hypotheses. It was a discipline that could perfectly fuse with politics to enhance our comprehension of politics over time. They aspired to build theories with solid historical grounding that could help us make accurate descriptions and generalizations over time, and that could assist us to interconnect past and present.

Fourth, in each vein related to the previous theme, this book is not only multidisciplinary but also interdisciplinary. Here political science and history come together to form a unit of analysis. Each discipline nurtures the other. As I previously mentioned, political scientists have significant regard for historical inquiry, but historians also valued the conceptualization and theoretical frameworks developed by political scientists to make sense of the U.S. past. The notions of party systems or realignment theory were the expression of the interdisciplinary blend of both disciplines. As Thomas H. Eliot expressed in the foreword of the book, "for the first time, the present volume joins the two disciplines in a systematic effort to illuminate problems of [U.S.] American political party development and action in a comprehensive way....The two disciplines are not only engaged in a dialogue, but their dialogue is giving direction by common concern" (Chambers and Burnham, 1967: v).

Fifth, for scholars working on U.S. political development, the notion of pattern identification “is the *sine qua non* of the enterprise.... Without patterns [U.S.] American political history would be just ‘one damn thing after another.’” (Burnham, 1994). Pattern recognition is one of the main features of *The American Party Systems*. The authors use the term party system as an analytical tool to evaluate the interactions of actors, coalitions, and policy outcomes in a particular historical time. The notion of party system, argues Richard P. McCormick, allows us to “formulate understandings of how and under what circumstances party systems emerge, define the character of the party system in terms of various proposed typologies, and evaluate contributions to the party system –as an element in the large political system–, to the handling of certain ‘problems’ or the meeting of specified ‘crisis.’ . . . We can engage in the comparative analysis of successive party systems within our own nation over of period of time as well as party systems in different nations. By engaging in such comparative studies, we may hope to formulate and test hypotheses regarding the role of party systems in our culture” (McCormick, 1967: 90-91).

The modifications in the party system have traditionally been considered in terms of critical elections and their subsequent political realignments. Realignments have a periodical recurrence –about 30 years– and are moments in which a new party system is brought to life. Realignment theory, consequently, has been highly concerned since its inception with periodization, a particular form of organizing U.S. history into at least five national party systems. The realignment perspective and the pattern identification used by realignment scholars were significantly embodied in the analysis offered by *The American Party System*. “The “realignment perspective....,” Sydney Milkis recently said, “was steeped into this volume” (Milkis, n.d.: 9).

Sixth, the authors of this book, like most contemporary specialists of U.S. political development had a comparative approach to the study of [U.S.]APD (Orren and Skowronek, 2004: 6). The comparison adopted two fundamental forms. One practice was to compare different historical episodes or periods in U.S. history. This is what historian William Chambers called the “intra-national historical comparison” (1975: 32). Another form of comparison was to contrast the U.S. with other countries. “The first modern political parties,” asserted William Chambers, “arose in the United States decades before they appeared in Great Britain and other nations.” In a similar vein, professor Lowi sustained that the “key to understanding [U.S.] American political development and modern American party politics lies in this distinction; it is decisive to distinguishing between European and [U.S.] American experiences” (1967: 240). Finally, Dean Burnham argued that the more “deeply one reflects on the characteristic properties of political parties in [U.S.] America’s party system of today, the more exceptional these parties seem to become by comparative standards.” (Burnham, 1967: 277).



In the *American Party Systems* and throughout his career, Dean used both forms of comparisons. The theory of political realignment is a theory of “intra-national historical comparison” of the United States with frequent references to other cases, in particular European cases (Burnham, 1972).<sup>12</sup> “Most of the theoretical ideas in [U.S.] APD,” argued Stephen Skowronek, “come from the exchange of theoretical ideas between [U.S.]APD and comparative political science” (Velasco, 2012b). “It is impossible to understand a country,” asserted Seymour Martin Lipset “without seeing how it varies from others. Those who know only one country know no country” (1997: 17). In a similar vein, John Lewis Gaddis maintained, “for surely understanding implies comparison: to comprehend something is to see it in relation to other entities of the same class” (2002: 24-25). No doubt Dean, the authors of the *American Party System*, and contemporary scholars of [U.S.]APD agree with Lipset and Gaddis.

In a nutshell, many of the analytical categories addressed by the authors of the *American Party Systems* are highly regarded by specialists working on U.S. political development. In different forms, the authors of this book preceded some of the main concern and ideas that guide the work of [U.S.]APD specialists. Dean was a pioneer of this field, and above all, the initiator of a research agenda that continues in different forms until today.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Throughout this article, I have tried to present the academic life and fundamental contributions of Walter Dean Burnham to U.S. American political science. I have described Dean’s academic trajectory since his early years as a boy collecting political candidates’ buttons to the present time. I have emphasized Dean’s passion for collecting data and his permanent tendency to offer solid empirical and interpretative analysis. His theory of political realignment was a significant contribution not only to the field of electoral politics, but also to our comprehension of U.S. politics and political development. In a time when stability was the dominant notion, Dean showed us that U.S. politics evolves. The United States changes over time and those changes are significant. Realignment theory is a theory of U.S. American development. “The historical synthesis offered by realignment theory,” asserted Stephen Skowronek, “placed development as the central piece of the questions” (Velasco, 2012b).

With his work, Dean did something else: he was among the first to provide an historical dimension to the study of electoral politics. Throughout his academic career, Dean immersed himself in the enormous task of finding, detecting, analyzing,

<sup>12</sup> An example of Dean’s comparative work with other countries one may consult Burnham (1972).

and interpreting U.S. electoral eras. He found similarities and differences, contradictions and paradoxes, crisis and permanence. He conceived patterns to examine critical U.S. elections. Obsessed with dates and detailed descriptions, he always offered a balanced combination of solid empirical and interpretative analysis.

Thus, Dean showed us the relevance of history as a valid scientific discipline, and the convenience of having an historical perspective on the issues under analysis. He alerted us that without pattern recognition, historical political analysis diminishes toward irrelevance. He showed us that multidisciplinary work is not only valuable but also fruitful. He informed us, together with many others, of the need to place the United States in comparative perspective. He taught us how important it is to think outside the discipline to strengthen our knowledge of political science. He showed us the basic guiding principle to conduct research on U.S. American political development. For these and many other reasons, Walter Dean Burnham is one of the most eminent political scientists of the last 60 years.

Despite all these accomplishments, since its inception, his work has been under attack. As I have shown in this article, the attacks have varied but have also intensified during recent years. Although U.S. scholars are still writing about realignment and evaluating the arrival or not of another realignment cycle, it is clear that the theory is fading (Hopkins, 2010). Realignment is no longer the main subject of analysis for people working on U.S. electoral politics and political development. In this particular context, a central question remains unanswered: Can we reinforce realignment theory fruitfully? Or should it be abandoned to the confines of the annals of U.S. American political science?

To answer these questions goes beyond the scope of this article. However, a brief preliminary response seems pertinent. To properly answer, it is necessary to talk, separately, of two interrelated issues: the usefulness of traditional realignment theory as a framework to explain U.S. American electoral politics, and the convenience of realignment as a frame to study U.S. political development.

Despite the enormous body of work published on different aspects of realignment, it is clear that more research is needed to finally accept or reject realignment theory. Mayhew's critique is a good example to illustrate this point. His appraisal is the outcome of his profound knowledge of U.S. electoral history, and the ostensible deficiencies of realignment theory. However, as Thomas Ferguson has asserted –and Mayhew accepted–, Mayhew neither presents new data, nor does he offers a statistical evaluation to support his claims (Velasco, 2013a).<sup>13</sup> Some of Mayhew's criticisms

<sup>13</sup> In my telephone interview with David Mayhew, I mentioned to him Ferguson and Chen's criticisms of his book on realignment. When I asked him, what his reaction was to these criticisms, he responded, "They are right" (Velasco, 2013a).

are, in many ways, research questions rather than conclusive analysis. Consequently, a good way to start reevaluating realignment theory is to conduct research into Mayhew's critiques.

Inquiring into Mayhew's criticisms has two important advantages. First, we can seriously evaluate how some of his claims are corroborated by a deeper analysis. Second, in doing so, we can evaluate the strength and weaknesses of several realignment claims. Mayhew's criticism of the notion that third parties are important expressions before critical elections is one possible area of analysis. He maintains that "no writer has posited a deterministic, one-to-one connection between third parties and realignments, but various logics conjure up a pattern of the former leading to the latter" (Mayhew, 2002: 21). Here he is recognizing that we do not have a definitive answer to this question. Mayhew, therefore, is offering a speculative claim more than a definitive answer. To uphold or reject Mayhew's assertion, and to reject or accept realignment theory contentions, we need research on this topic.

Second, Mayhew disregards the realignment claim that polarizations between the two main political parties occur during critical elections. However, he recognizes that more research is needed on this topic. "A decisive answer to this issue," he maintains, "requires two measures—a measure of ideological style and a measure of polarization.... To my knowledge," he added, "neither of these two values has been convincingly indexed across [U.S.] American electoral eras" (Mayhew, 2004: 95-96). Mayhew is pessimistic about the possible outcome of such research, but the question remains unanswered. The only way to obtain a conclusive answer is to conduct research on this topic. Mayhew's criticism of realignment is in many ways an interesting research agenda to reinforce or disclaim realignment theory.

Is realignment theory a useful framework for studying U.S. political development? Apparently not. Some scholars consider Burnham's periodization proposal problematic. Others argue that realignment is no longer a concern for people working on [U.S.]APD. In their view, [U.S.]APD scholars are currently interested in path dependency or historical institutionalism, but not in realignment. Criticisms of realignment have led scholars to disregard it without seriously considering the possibility of reinforcing the theory. In a very interesting and enlightening article, Andrew J. Polsky simply argued that the electoral-realignment synthesis has been subject to many telling critiques and now seems indefensible as a general framework for explaining [U.S.] American political development" (2012: 53).

Is realignment theory really indefensible? Can we rescue at least part of this framework as a valid approach or useful tool in our analysis of U.S. political development? Yes. At minimum, three ideas should be carefully evaluated before burying realignment theory.

First, realignment theory is not only a theory for studying U.S. electoral politics over time, but a framework for analyzing U.S. political development. This assertion implies that it is a concept that goes beyond the traditional notion of electoral politics. It is also a particular conception of history that helps us understand how U.S. political history has changed and how those shifts are connected to electoral, institutional, and policy analysis. Realignment looks for patterns to explain change and continuity in U.S. political development and utilizes a form of periodization that enables us to understand events within an entire political era. To “conceive realignment theory in purely electoral terms,” argued Thomas Ferguson, “is a mistake” (Velasco, 2013b). Similarly, Jeffrey Tulis maintains that realignment theory was “first developed as a part of behavioral political science. What is interesting,” Tulis observes, “is that later on it becomes more associated with [U.S.] American political development and that is because once you get beyond elections, there are narratives of policy content, policy trajectory, institutional analysis, historical analysis, and so forth” (Velasco, 2012e). By the same token, Benjamin Ginsberg argues that the main contributions of Dean Burnham to U.S. political science are in the “field of [U.S.] American political development and American political history” (Velasco, 2012f).

Second, realignment theory has been assimilated into the study of U.S. American political development. As I have previously asserted, [U.S.]APD specialists today commonly use six analytical categories used by Burnham since the 1960s. The first is the relevance of history and providing a historical dimension to political science analysis. Second, U.S. politics is not static but dynamic. It is the duty of scholars to evaluate how it moves. Third is the notion of change and continuity and the need to explain these concepts. Fourth is that it is appropriate to do both multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary work. Fifth, pattern recognition is vital to the study of U.S. political development. Sixth, the U.S. should be evaluated with a comparative perspective. Dean Burnham did not necessarily create these notions, but he integrated them properly into a comprehensive framework. Today, scholars use these analytical principles in their work. They constitute a natural component of the way specialists study U.S. political development.

Third is the issue of periodization. Although scholars like Mayhew and Silbey disregard realignment’s periodization proposal, many others accept, at least partially, Burnham’s periodization. Bruce Ackerman considers the 1780s, the 1860s, and the 1930s as the historical periods in which the U.S. constitutional system was redefined. Thomas Ferguson and Jie Chen continue to use the realignment periodization proposal. In direct opposition to Mayhew’s criticisms, they maintain that “there is no point in pursuing a discussion that does not acknowledge, right at the start, that both that era [Jackson’s 1828 election] and the Civil War mark clear realignments.” In

their view, "There was a system of 1896 [and] it is obvious that Burnham's system of 1896 hypothesis is well supported" (Ferguson, and Chen, 2005: 115).

Finally, although Stephen Skowronek has been critical of realignment periodization, he uses the realignment schema (with the exception of 1896) in his analysis of the presidency in "political time." As he has accepted, his work on the presidency was influenced by Burnham's framework and in many ways his analysis "subsumes realignment into the notion of regime" (Velasco, 2012b). For Elizabeth Sanders "The power of Skowronek's theory of the presidency is ... strong evidence for the validity and usefulness of realignment and regime theory" (2005: 538). Thus, the scholars mentioned above—and many others—find the realignment periodization schema useful.

Evidently, specialists are divided on the value of realignment periodization for the analysis of US political history. The only way to completely abandon realignment periodization is if the academic community finds the scheme useless or disadvantageous. At that point, scholars will come up with a more useful and persuasive compartmentalization of the U.S. past, or even, as Mayhew suggests, avoid any form of periodization. At the time of this writing, this is not the case (Mayhew, 2002: 147).<sup>14</sup>

But something more significant is revealed by the work of Skowronek, Ackerman, or Chen and Ferguson: realignment theory is an important framework for evaluating other relevant aspects of U.S. political history. Using realignment, Ferguson and Chen study the investor's block in U.S. history, Ackerman examines U.S. constitutional history, and Skowronek analyzes the presidency in political times. For these scholars, realignment is more than a narrow view of electoral politics. The irony of Burnham's work is that his non-electoral work is the most highly appreciated today by specialists in U.S. political development.

With his framework, Burnham provides a bigger picture that goes beyond the specificities of the existence or not of realignment in 1896. This bigger picture is relevant, even if Burnham is wrong in the particularities of a certain election. We can debate for years or decades if there was or was not a realignment in 1896, and not necessarily disagree that there have been dramatic shifts in U.S. political history. "When you carefully read Dean," Jeffrey Tulis has said, "you realize that he was interested in the narrow [electoral] sense for his connection with the larger [non-electoral] sense.... Ok, which means to say that the majority party becomes the minority party just because it lost a series of elections." The fact is relevant "because something big is happening

<sup>14</sup> Mayhew's suggestion to discard any form of periodization is contrary to the basic nature of historical endeavor. For centuries, scholars have organized their work breaking time into periods to make sense of abundant data. It is in the essence of history to cut the time into pieces. Avoiding that goes against the nature of history. "All historical work," asserted the eminent historian Fernand Braudel, "is concerned with breaking down time past, choosing among its chronological realities according to more or less conscious preferences and exclusions" (1980: 27).

in the polity. So, it is automatically connected to policy and institutional changes even if those are not the focus of those original studies" (Velasco, 2012e).

Realignment will continue to be an important reference and framework for specialists working on U.S. political development. More research is needed to fully comprehend those moments of abrupt shift in U.S. politics, to explore those elements that constitute non-partisan upheaval. There are many unexplored themes: the role of ideas in time of critical realignments; the influence of foreign events in realignments; and realignments and the shifts in U.S. foreign policy trajectories are only three. What is certain is that, one way or another, realignment will continue to be part of U.S. political development in the years to come.

Recently, Calvin Jillson said that Professor Burnham has been "recognized in a way that Dean should be extraordinarily proud of it. If I were him," Jillson asserted, "I would fall sleep every night with a smile on my face, because he has had a career that is well recognized and deeply respected within the discipline" (Velasco, 2012d). In a similar vein, Thomas Ferguson has argued, "Among the thousands of political scientists who are now active, those whose work is likely to be widely consulted a hundred years from now can be counted on the fingers of one hand, I am sure that Walter Dean Burnham will be among them" (Ferguson, 2010: 12). But even if Ferguson is wrong –if the work of Dean is forgotten after a hundred years or more– I am convinced that one day an antiquarian will discover the wonderful clock that Dean has constructed. I am equally sure that when the antiquarian places the clock close to his ear, he will find it still ticking.

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