Mayhew begins by explaining the central ideas offered by scholars of realignment theory (V. O. Key, E. E. Schattschneider, James Sundquist, and Walter Dean Burnham), the specific contributions and assertions they made, and how these arguments have been passed on to the last several generations of political scientists. I must confess feeling relieved by Mayhew's discussion at this point. We have all read these works as undergraduate and graduate students and in turn assigned much of it to our own students. Eventually, many of us dropped them from our reading lists, or relegated them to one lecture in a semester since we had plenty of other good material to fill the semester. Mayhew's analysis demonstrates multiple reasons for this unease, and then proceeds to thoroughly and convincingly offer evidence for the shaky ground on which realignment rests.

The author identifies 15 elements to realignment theory that he wants to test. Once those points are raised in Chapter 2, the rest of the book is dedicated to pursuing these propositions in great detail. Through a number of measures, he finds that several major tenets of realignment theory do not add up. First, he confronts the cyclical dynamic in Chapter 4, investigating evidence of the magnitude of changes in the electorate during the ideal realigning elections of 1860, 1896, and 1932. He finds that with the exception of 1932, the other "ideal" elections do not exhibit the most remarkable deviations in voter alignments. The elections of 1880, 1920, and even 1972 seem to fare better. This evaluation brings several other major tenets of realignment into question, including the periodization argument and the explanation of historical events building up stress points that cause significant changes in voter identification. As Mayhew states, "neither statistics nor stories bear out the canonical realignments calendar of 1860, 1896, and 1932. Something like faith seems to be needed to keep it in place" (pp. 58-59).

Not content to stop there, Mayhew then evaluates other significant claims of realignment scholars, including the magnitude of voter turnout in these elections, the turmoil found in presidential nominating conventions of those years, the timing and influence of third-party activity in the realigning era, evidence of issue cleavages between the parties, ideological polarization of the electorate, and the nationalization of issues. While the "big three" elections may perform well on some of these indicators, none exhibits all these qualities and, more importantly, other elections may fare better. Finally, Mayhew takes on the significance of policy changes surrounding the big three realignments, focusing on how poorly 1896 fares on all the specified indicators. He finds more evidence for impressive policy change around the Progressive Era than during the 1890s, but without the 1890s, most of realignment's elegance evaporates.

Mayhew does not deny that major shifts take place between parties and among voters. He believes that our acceptance of realignment theory has prevented us from considering alternative explanations that could be as or more robust. In the concluding chapter, he reassesses the 15 claims of realignment that are based almost exclusively on economic-duelistic explanations, and offers three broad thematic interpretations of electoral change that have not been considered fairly because of the hegemony of realignment: bellicosity (the effect that wars have had on domestic voter alignments), race, and economic growth. If we abandon realignment, then we might find these alternative lines of inquiry more fruitful for explaining the performance of political parties and the behavior of voters.

As impressive as Electoral Realignments is, there are two omissions worth noting. First, Mayhew seldom refers to midterm congressional elections, even though some specific ones (1874 and 1974 in particular) are singled out for discussion. An exclusive focus on presidential election years tells only half the story about several of the major indicators discussed (even more curious to me because the 1994 elections are only mentioned once and in passing). Second, the life cycle of important third parties should be given more of a role in explaining changes in party and voter alignments. Although Mayhew acknowledges that realignment theorists may be on to something here, he shows that the timing of these movements is all wrong according to the theory. Significant third parties or independent presidential candidates should become an investigative theme in and of themselves for exploring alternatives to realignment. Why do they emerge and how do their significant "disruptions" alter the behavior of parties and voters?

Ultimately, these points are just quibbles. They suggest that Mayhew's provocative book has been successful in suggesting future research avenues and should help current scholars get beyond trying to rationalize realignment and move on to more illuminating work.


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Should U.S.-Cuban relations have changed substantially in the years following the end of