

An Inquiry on the Debate of the U.S. Liberal—Conservative Swing in the 1980s

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I. Introduction

The electoral triumphs of the Republicans in the United States in 1980 and 1984 could be seen as part of a trend that has touched many Western industrialized democracies (the Progressive Conservatives in Canada in 1979 and 1984, the Conservatives in Britain in 1979 and 1983).¹⁾ It was frequently argued that the American people turned to the right and something happened in the ever—long American liberal tradition. Of course, as many scholars observe, the election result of 1980 can be said as the outcome of Democratic economic misfortune. But the landslide victory of Ronald Reagan in 1984 could not be attributed to just a misfortune of the Democratic party and liberal philosophy. Reagan obliterated the opposition. Mondale carried only his home state, and that by the narrowest margins. It became a signal toward a speculation about the resurgence of conservatism. Did really America turn to the right?²⁾

In this paper, I will discuss what was explained to argue “the right turn” and counter—arguments on that. It seems to me that whether Americans turned to the

1) Barry Cooper, Allan Kornberg, and William Mishler, eds., *The Resurgence of Conservatism in Anglo—American Democracies* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1988).

2) Liberalism or Conservatism is a hard concept to pin down and describe. So I want to take a general notion of those concepts which was known to ordinary people. For various usages of the concept, see Tom W. Smith's 1990 paper.

right is of empirical question rather than of logical deduction. For this, at first I will see what was explained within the context of a conservative tide. And thus I will examine various kinds of explanations about "the right turn" argument and then try to refute them through examining the results of many empirical studies as possible as I can. However, unfortunately, in this short analysis with a very limited time, I couldn't search for much data (they are all secondary data from excerpted from other studies) to justify my argument which assumes a general liberal trend in American public opinion. Therefore, I just want to investigate the state of the researches on that intriguing question. Nonetheless, with a very limited data, I will try to argue that America is still a liberal country in the sense that even though some policy direction directed toward the right, others did not and even more directed toward liberal attitudes. And it also will be argued that some conservative orientations in issue positions have been part of American tradition.

II. Explanations about "The Right Turn"

1. Party Realignment Theory

Many scholars discussed American politics of the 1980s using many kinds of concepts, including party realignment, policy realignment, and sharp opinion changes. The first interpretation of the electoral politics of the 1980s is based on the notion of realignment. This line of view argues that a realignment has taken place in the 1980s, though it differs in various more-or-less important ways from preceding realignments and from our theoretical understanding of the realignment process. But this theory also has many ramifications. Some emphasizes changes in social groups while others focus on policy shifts, and some explains the reason why policy shifts has happened.

As we know, the classic realignment perspective developed by Key³⁾ and Burnham⁴⁾ is rooted in changes in mass electoral behavior. If realignment is conceived as a change in voting bloc, some phenomena in the 1980 election such as the

3) V.O.Key, "A Theory of Critical Elections," *Journal of Politics* 17, (1955), pp.3-18.

4) Walter Dean Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York: W.W.Norton, 1970).

defection of the White South to the Republicans, the continued difficulties of the Democrats with Catholics, and a variety of smaller changes constitute evidence of new realignment, even though many do not agree with that claim.⁵⁾ Thus, by this shifting group alignments, some political scientists conclude that realignment has certainly occurred.⁶⁾

Other analysts emphasize policy shifts as evidence of realignment. More than any administration since the New Deal, the Reagan presidency altered the political agenda of the nation.⁷⁾ The conservative politicians cut taxes and reduced both federal role and spending on social policies and even increased military (defense) spending. However, it is not clear whether the victory of Reagan and subsequent conservative policy are the result of the mandate of policy change from the general public. Therefore, we must examine the general public's opinion on issues.

Recently, based on the political economy perspective, Ferguson's investment theory of realignment has developed. According to Ferguson and Rogers, major investors of politics, including business firms, industrial sectors, or, in some (rare) cases, groups of voters organized collectively, has shifted their allegiances to parties and thus led to the Republican surge.⁸⁾ These business group, and some of their GOP allies, were assessed as a primary forces to tighten the money supply, and cut social spending, immediately before the 1980 election. This helped the Republican victory. But noteworthy, Ferguson and Rogers maintained that since Reagan took office, the liberal tradition in American public opinion remained unchanged except the sharp rise in support for military spending at the late 1970s.⁹⁾

These much theoretical discussion must be clear by the empirical studies.

5) Some argues that the 1980 election was not a party realignment but a party dealignment.

6) Everett C. Ladd, "Alignment and Realignment: Where are all Voters Going?," The Ladd Report #3 (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986), p.24. Cited from Morris P. Fiorina, "The Reagan Years: Turning to the Right or Groping Toward the Middle?," in Barry Cooper, Allan Kornberg, and William Mishler, eds., The Resurgence of Conservatism in Anglo-American Democracies (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1988), p.432.

7) Martin Shefter and Benjamin Ginsberg, "Institutionalizing the Reagan Regime," in Benjamin Ginsberg and Alan Stone, eds., Do Elections Matter? (New York: M.E.Sharp, 1986)

8) Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers, Right Turn: The Decline of the Democrats and the Future of American Politics (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), p.45.

9) Ferguson and Rogers, *ibid.*, p.196.

2. Social Conservatism or Social Liberalism?

The new conservative movement must be backed by the preceding attitudinal change in social issues like civil rights, law and order, civil liberties, political protest, lifestyle and morality. Basically, we can find the notion of social conservatism in the theory of conservative political movements elaborated by Lipset and Raab.¹⁰⁾ They argue that because support for different kinds of conservatism is located in different sectors of the population, a successful conservative political movement must produce a marriage between very different constituencies drawn to conservatism on the basis of very different issues. That is, specifically, the movement must involve both the affluent, high status persons who are conservative on economic issues, but liberal to moderate on social issues, and the lower and middle strata persons who may be liberal to moderate on economic issues, but who are reliably conservative on social issues.

Although Lipset and Raab did not apply this theory of class marriage to the 1980 election, it nonetheless has clear implications for that election. If Reagan represents a successful conservative political movement, one would expect "the New Republicans" to be a disproportionately middle to lower strata constituency converted by appeals to their social conservatism. And the particular relevance of social conservatism in America is supported by the theories of post-industrial society.¹¹⁾ According to these theories, with growing affluence of the working class, post-industrialism produces a new political alignment. The lower and middle class changed their view on economic liberalism and social conservatism. They became conservative on matters of values, lifestyles, and social order. This new lower and middle class became New Republicans. Here, as a matter of empirical question, we must examine whether the New Republicans show conservative opinion in social issues.

To test the hypothesis that new Republicans were social conservatives, J.L. Himmelstein and J.A. McRae, Jr. investigated the 1980 National Election Survey

10) Seymour M. Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

11) Notably, Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978); Russel J. Dalton, *Citizen Politics in Western Democracies: Public Opinion and Political Parties in the United States, Great Britain, West Germany, and France* (Chatham, N.J.: Chatham House Publishers, 1988).

data.¹²⁾ They categorized Old Republicans as those who voted for the Republican candidate in both 1976 and 1980, also categorized New Republicans as those who did not vote for Republican in 1976, but did in 1980. As shown in Table 1., they found that the New Republicans were not consistently more conservative on social issues and more liberal on economic issues than the Old Republicans and that the New Republicans were less religiously oriented and angry at government than the Old Republicans. Therefore, they concluded that the New Republicans were not social conservatives as much as they are usually considered. Rather it would be true that a general social liberalism has diffused to the lower class of the Republican constituencies.

Table 1. Conservatism on the social issues

Issue	Old Republicans	New Republicans
Oppose ERA	62.8%	46.9%
Oppose all abortion or favor only if life & health of women is endangered	56.8	58.2
Support cuts in government domestic spending	57.4	49.9
Oppose government—guaranteed Job	70.2	58.6
Religion offers quite a bit or a great deal of guidance	60.1	53.3
U.S. government officials are not trusted to do the right thing	81.6	75.4

* The analysis was confined to whites following the theories under investigation, and in any event, very few blacks voted Republican in either in 1976 or 1980.

Source: J.L. Himmelstein and J.A. McRae, Jr., "Social Conservatism, New Republicans, and the 1980 Election," Public Opinion Quarterly 48 (1984), pp.599—600.

III. Is America still liberal?

I think so because liberalism is a deep-seated American tradition. Of course, I will try to show evidence on that from some empirical data. But to begin with, to

12) Jerome L. Himmelstein and James A. McRae, Jr., "Social Conservatism, New Republicans, and the 1980 Election," Public Opinion Quarterly 48 (1984), pp.592—605.

maintain my assertion and to have a strong foundation of my argument, it seems better for me to examine how strong the liberal tradition is in American thought.

1. Liberal Tradition in America.

America is a nation obsessed with liberty. This view is shared by many works of American political thoughts. For instance, according to Louis Hartz, American liberalism is a "natural" phenomenon and the secret root from which have sprung many of the most puzzling of American cultural phenomena. Of course, as Clinton Rossiter said, the American political tradition is a product of American history. A vast pattern of forces — ethnic, geographic, religious, political, sociological, economic, cultural, ideological — has molded people's thoughts into something characteristically American, that is, liberal.¹³⁾ The Americans were privileged to begin their experiment in liberty without feudal tenures, centralized and arbitrary government, a national church, a privilege-ridden economy, and hereditary stratification. Thus Americans have thought liberty as a heritage to be preserved rather than a goal to be fought for. The result is a political tradition that is so conservative about liberalism, so defensive about the open society.¹⁴⁾ After all, liberalism became a fixed, dogmatic liberal way of life, "The American Way." The so-called Lockean liberalism was ultimately enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, the Bills of Right, and the Constitution and protected by the unusual power of the Supreme Court.¹⁵⁾

The development of liberal attitudes has been aided by America's economic modernization and some historical event such as the New Deal realignment and leadership, the Civil Right Movements, and the Watergate etc.. We can not think anything about American political life without depending on liberalism as a political ideal. Nonetheless, it does not mean that Americans have always lived up to or followed these liberal creed and ideal. In practice, American frequently have violated the principles and this in turn have created a tension between liberal norms and illiberal attitudes. Huntington notes the fundamental gap between the aspiration of the liberal creed and the realities of power. According to him, if the creedal values are actually

13) Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America: The Thankless Persuasion* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1962), p.68.

14) Rossiter, *ibid.*, p.70.

15) Hartz, *ibid.*, p.9.

sought, then the result is necessarily an attack on the power and authority of governing institutions.¹⁶⁾ And Herbert McClosky and his colleagues focuses on the tension between democratic values and capitalist values.¹⁷⁾ In a similar context, Clinton Rossiter argued that conservatism is part of American political thought as well as liberalism.¹⁸⁾ Can opinion studies reveal the liberal tradition? For this particular study, to examine empirical opinion studies seem inevitable.

2. Some Empirical Study Results

Unlike a strong persuasion of conservative rhetoric, many studies do not approve "the right turn" argument based on the notion of party realignment, attitude trends on a large number of issues. We saw that Ferguson himself did not believe party alignment and conservative trend in opinion and that Himmelstein and McRae, Jr. also found that the lower class was still liberal on social issues. But it is true that the 1980 election shocked many analysts to believe "swing to the right" among the electorate. Frequently election outcomes are regarded as a public message — including the public wants fewer government programs, less government spending, less government involvement in economic affairs in general — which became the Republican rhetoric.

To see how Americans respond to some controversial issues, I will analyze the results of the empirical studies. A series of the studies carried out in the early 1980s did not find "the right turn." Firstly, sociologist James A. Davis of NORC and Harvard University analyzed the GSS results from 1972 to 1978 and found that conservative trends increased in spending on defense but declined in spending on blacks, the environment, drug problems, and cities.¹⁹⁾ Katherine M. Smith and William Spinrad also found that people wanted to cut taxes and lessen governmental regula-

16) Samuel P. Huntington, American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap press, 1981), pp.31—60.

17) Herbert McClosky and John Zaller, The American Ethos: Public Attitudes toward Capitalism and Democracy (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984); Dennis Chong, Herbert McClosky, and John Zaller, "Patterns of Support for Democratic and Capitalist Values in the United States," British Journal of Political Science 13 (1983), pp.401—440.

18) Clinton Rossiter, op.cit., 1952.

19) James A. Davis, "Conservative Weather in a Liberalizing Climate: Change in Selected NORC General Social Survey Items, 1972—78," Social Forces 58:4 (June, 1980), pp.1129—1156.

tion, but still supported a strong role of government in economic (social) matters.²⁰⁾

Particularly here, the studies of Tom W. Smith is worth to note.²¹⁾ Smith questioned whether in the last four decades attitudes in the United States have been largely moving in a liberal direction and for this, he examined liberal-conservative trends on a large number of applicable attitudes during the post-World War II period and classified the items into major areas of topical interest to see if propensity toward liberalism was generally uniform across various topics. Then, he found that religious items, abortion, civil liberties, race relations and feminism (equal right) have shown a majority of liberal trends and almost a complete absence of conservative countertrends. Sexual morality and social welfare are still in the liberal direction. Crime/violence and taxes/spending items show a tilt toward the conservative (See Table 2).

Table 2. Liberal-conservative trends by topical issues

Liberal-conservative scale1: Religion (1.000) > Abortions (0.857) > Civil liberties (0.750) > Race Relations (0.619) > Feminism (0.600) > Miscellaneous (0.545) > Sex (0.250) > Social welfare (0.111) > International (0.000) > Crime/violence (-0.294) > Taxes/spending (-0.750)

Liberal-conservative score2: Abortion (77.8) > Race/ethnicity (72.0) > Feminism (71.1) > Family (66.7) > Religion (53.9) > Foreign affairs (47.1) > Life-styles (44.5) > Sex (42.8) > Civil Liberties (44.5) > Economic regulation (10.2) > Labor (10.0) > Political (8.7) > Spending/tax (-4.0) > Social welfare (-8.4) > Military recruitment (-20.0) > Miscellaneous (-20.7) > Crime (-20.8)

- 1) Liberal-conservative scale in his 1981 paper = % liberal direction - % conservative direction.
- 2) Liberal-conservative score in his 1990 paper = % liberal direction - % conservative direction.

20) Kathleen M. Smith and William Spinrad, "The Popular Political Mood," *Social Policy* (March/April, 1981), pp.37-45.

21) Tom W. Smith, "General Liberalism and Social Change in Post World War II America: A Summary of Trends," *Social Indicators Research* 10(1981), pp.1-28.; Tom W. Smith, "Liberal and Conservative Trends in the United States Since World War II," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 54(1990), pp.479-507.

Similarly, from examining 36 NORC opinion items from 1972 to 1980, Janet S. Chafetz and H.R.F. Ebaugh also found that conservative trends were shown only in economic factors, when they clustered items on three dimensions: civil liberty, abortion, and economic factors, and that the economic scale peaked in 1977 and subsequently remained.²²⁾ Thus, from the opinion trends by the 1970s, we can think that American public opinion somewhat moved to the right in some issues such as crime and tax/spending issues but in general sense it is virtually liberal as dominant studies echo.

However, here, the question arises why certain topics in the 1970s have moved overwhelmingly in a liberal direction while others have shown a net conservative shift. The reason is believed to come from economic decline which dampens the liberal ideal. As Smith maintains, the conservative shift in the seventies can be the consequences of a series of circumstances such as the rising burden of taxation, the weakening of economic growth, and the disillusionment at the Great Society promises. So policy failures and deteriorating economic conditions could be the cause of American ideological shift.²³⁾

Then, how about the 1980s? An empirical study shows a somewhat neutral evaluation. The study of Thomas Exter and Frederick Barber notably traces change in the liberal trend, using General Social Survey from 1975 to 1985 and indicates that the stormy whether of conservatism has calmed in mid-1980s.²⁴⁾ They saw that Americans have been becoming both more conservative and more liberal during that period. According to their data, public support for spending on defense (60%→15%) and foreign aid (60%→47%) as strong indicators of conservatism had declined between 1980 and 1985 while public support for spending on cities (only 19% oppose), the environment (8% oppose), and education (5% oppose) have grown. Yet notably some social issues such as the leniency of the courts (87%) and capital punishment (79%) was still in the strong conservative trend. Therefore, their finding implies the weakening of conservatism during the first half of the 1980s.

22) Janet S. Chafetz and H.R.F. Ebaugh, "Growing Conservatism in the United States: An Examination of Trends in Political Opinion Between 1972 and 1980," *Sociological Perspectives* 26:3 (July, 1985), pp.275-296.

23) Tom W. Smith, op.cit, 1981, p.20.

24) Thomas Exter and Frederick Barber, "The Age of Conservatism," *American Demographics* 8 (November, 1986), pp.30-37.

By contrast, Smith's another analysis involving latest surveys more clearly shows a long movement toward liberalism in American public opinion. In his paper published in 1990, Smith expanded his time span to the late 1980s and analyzed 455 survey trends during the post-World War II period.²⁵⁾ And he found that while the growth of liberalism has still not been uniform across topics and time, however, at least some issues showed ideological preferences: some items dealing with increased support for freedom of individual choice and/or equal treatment/rights for individuals such as race/ethnicity, feminism, and abortion showed the most consistent liberal trend and such items related to economic regulation and government power (economic regulation, labor, spending and taxes, and social welfare) had both sides of change. But sill crime was the most conservative item and involved increased support for social control and in many ways might be seen as a counterbalance to the liberal trend toward more individual freedom (See Table 2.). In sum, Smith concluded that on average, liberal growth leveled off, but did not move in a conservative direction. But the limitation of Smith's paper is on the long-term trend research not on directly liberal-conservative fluctuation in the 1980s and thus we can't know a definite fluctuation of it, even though we can somewhat acknowledge the trend.

IV. Conclusion

It is evident that almost all the opinion studies investigated here found little evidence on the general shift toward conservatism in American public. Commonly, conservative trends were only found in crime (sometimes leniency of court and capital punishment) and spending/taxes items. With respect to market life, Hirschman argued that consumers can swing from the public realm to the private realm and vice versa with their disappointments.²⁶⁾ This may be applicable in the spending issues resulting from the economic decline. And it also is possible that changes in opinion on spending issues fluctuate more than opinion on social issues which has strong moral overtones. Thus, it can be said that the growth of America has not been uniform across topics and time, yet America has generally moved in a liberal direction.

25) Tom W. Smith, "Liberal and Conservative Trends in the United States Since World War II," Public Opinion Quarterly 54 (1990), pp.479-507.

26) Albert O. Hirschman, Shifting Involvements: Private Interest and Public Action (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982).

The stalling of the general liberal movement in the mid-1970s can be understood as the public reaction to increasing crime and stagflation as well as such events as Vietnam, Watergate, etc.. This kind of explanation seems plausible, but not profound. To me, the essential tension between liberal not profound. To me, the essential tension between liberal ideal and liberal practice in American political thought and even in American public opinion is of much importance. While freedom was the old American ideal and liberty and equality has expanded through the American history, such issues as civil rights, feminism (equal right of women), and abortion were relatively new but contributed to expand a liberal horizon. How much these issues contributed to expanding liberalism in America needs a new empirical study and thus beyond the scope of this paper. But such issues as governmental spending, tax, and social control over crime were products of social change and essentially related to economic individualism which has been part of American political thought.

Therefore, I would say that American opinion change is characterized as a slow, long-term trend toward liberalism in the opinion climate, plus intermittently, a sharp, short-term shift toward conservatism in the opinion weather with economic decline and recession, but not fundamentally replaces liberalism. If we concern the historical cycle of liberal reform and conservative retrenchment developed by Schlesinger²⁷⁾, we could understand why the Bush administration lost the election and why Bill Clinton came up strong with the repercussion of public opinion toward liberal voting. The limping economy of the Bush administration led to a victory of Bill Clinton. Thus, the whole picture of American liberalism has not been dented much. And we still witness the liberal tradition in the U.S. of the 1990s.

27) Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., "Tides in American Politics," Yale Review 29 (1939), pp.217-230; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Cycles of American History (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986).