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**The Election of 1980 - I**

**Lead:** The presidential election of 1980 is often called a “realignment election,” one of several in United States history. It represented a dramatic shift in political power.

**Intro.:** *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

**Content:** A “realignment election” is a plebiscite on the current party or philosophy dominating the national conversation. The American people decide they want to choose a new direction. These elections, 1800, 1828, 1860, 1896, 1932, and perhaps 1980, demonstrate a shift in political

**orientation due to new geographic bases of power and/or new philosophical coalitions. This change or “realignment” of political power results in a new status quo and resonates in the political climate for decades. For example, historians generally agree that the presidential election of 1932 was a classic realignment election. An alliance of interest groups - labor unions, racial and ethnic minorities, and white southerners – united behind the Democratic Party and the policies of FDR and dominated U.S. politics for the next fifty years - from the New Deal to the Great Society.**

**Although there is not widespread consensus among political scientists**

**and historians that the election of 1980, when Republican Ronald Reagan challenged Democratic incumbent, President Jimmy Carter, was a true “realignment election”, there can be no denial that 1980 was a year in which Reagan’s conservative message and his formidable rhetorical ability resonated with a significant portion of the electorate creating a new coalition of voters, all to the benefit of the Republican Party.**

**In the election of 1980, new geographic bases of conservative electoral power established themselves in the suburbs of American cities and in the Sun Belt, that is, the states in the south and southwest. This section of the country**

**experienced rapid economic and population growth after World War II. As large American cities struggled to cope with declining tax bases, urban poverty and the consequences of these factors, the shifting population to the Sun Belt embraced “conservative values” of lower taxes, pro-family policies, neighborhood control of schools, and patriotism. In addition, the “Southern Strategy,” the direct appeal by Republican candidates to whites in the south, often racist, but certainly skeptical of African American progress, added to the momentum that culminated when an appealing and articulate candidate such as Ronald Reagan gave voice to the movement.**

**In 1980, President Jimmy Carter had big problems. He was saddled with the 1970s energy crisis, an economic recession, exploding inflation, the Iran hostage crisis, and what some called at the time a general “malaise” among the American people. Nevertheless, just a few weeks before Election Day, polls showed Carter and Reagan in a dead heat. Next Time: The Beginning of the Reagan Revolution.**

**Research by Ann Johnson, at the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.**

## Resources

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