In 1980 Ronald Reagan swept the presidential election. The election, it seemed, was one of the most significant in the twentieth century—the GOP answer to 1912, 1932, 1964. Talk was in the air of a Reagan Revolution, or if not a revolution, then at least an important realignment. Gone was the New Deal; here was the New Right.

However, within the White House, Reagan’s team of advisers was worried: Was there really a new Republican majority? Could the country be counted on to support conservative policy in a predictable fashion? Would they vote for the GOP in such high numbers in future elections? In short, was the electoral victory built to last?

Reagan and his advisers had cause for concern. Reagan won in a stunning landslide. But this conservative took office in a new era of political polarization and divided government, at a moment of global economic dislocations, which further made it difficult for either party to solidify a loyal political following. In 1986 Sidney Blumenthal published The Rise of the Counter-Establishment. As he explained it, the counterestablishment of conservative think tanks, institutes, and journals “was a political elite aspiring to become a governing elite.” The era of economic uncertainty and policy gridlock would make that a considerable challenge.

Reagan’s top team understood the difficulty of transforming their 1980 victory into a permanent governing majority. On the one hand, Reagan came into office with highly mobilized grassroots partisan support. As Lee At-
later, from his platform as the newly elected governor of California in 1967, Reagan told his voters: "We are going to squeeze and cut and trim until we reduce the cost of government. It won't be easy, nor will it be pleasant." But, as he said, "the time has come to match outgo to income." And, in 1981, as the just-sworn-in president, he issued his famous inaugural adage, "Government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem."

When Reagan ran in 1980, he took on an unpopular incumbent, Jimmy Carter. In 1976, running as an outsider, Georgia governor Jimmy Carter had barely defeated President Gerald Ford. Once in office, Carter had a hard time winning the loyalty and approval of American voters. Carter alienated Democratic Party regulars by his tepid embrace of traditional Democratic interests such as organized labor, especially in the face of rising unemployment and stagflation, which were making it harder for working-class Americans to make ends meet. And he left many questioning his competence when he failed to prevent a second oil shock in the summer of 1979 that sent inflation sky high and Americans reeling. The Iranian hostage crisis further undermined popular support for this Democrat, who looked at best incompetent and at worst culpable in these difficult times. The week before the election, during the campaign debate, Reagan landed a fatal blow when he asked viewers: "Are you better off than you were four years ago? Is it easier for you to go and buy things at the stores than it was four years ago? . . . Is America as respected throughout the world as it was?"

On Election Day, Reagan received 43.9 million votes to Carter's 35 million, and in the Electoral College the victory was a landslide, with the GOP challenger garnering 489 votes to the president's 49. Reagan took forty-four states to Carter's six. In the House, Republicans gained 35 seats, giving them 191 seats to the Democrats' 242. And the Senate shifted to Republican control for the first time since 1954, with a 53 to 46 majority. Conservative southern Democrats also posted impressive gains, further strengthening the conservative coalition of southern Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill.

Reagan had sailed to victory on the wings of many different conservative groups. As the standard-bearer of conservatism, he won support of social conservatives, probusiness and antitax voters, and foreign policy hawks. Evangelical Christians turned out in record numbers, and Reagan also had a strong showing in the South and the Southwest, building on Richard Nixon's inroads in these previously Democratic strongholds. Alongside this southern switch to the GOP were blue-collar voters in the Northeast and the Midwest—the Reagan Democrats—who were also changing their party affiliation.

Throughout the election, Reagan had sounded the antigovernment themes upon which he had built his career. If Barry Goldwater, Phyllis Schlafly, and other conservative activists had urged voters back in 1964 to vote for "a choice, not an echo," then it appeared that Reagan was finally fulfilling this hope. As New York Times reporter Hedrick Smith commented: "The nation today arrived at a fascinating and quite remarkable moment in its political history: A 69-year-old citizen-politician who has spent most of his working life in another profession has entered the White House and won the opportunity to lead a conservative political renaissance.... [Reagan] is a crusader, the first missionary conservative to be elected with the aim of reversing the liberal New Deal revolution of government activism and Democratic Party dominance established by Franklin D. Roosevelt nearly half a century ago."

The key item, the one upon which Reagan would demonstrate his strength and solidify the new direction of conservative governance, was his tax cut. During the campaign, Reagan had embraced a supply-side theory that held that tax cuts, especially those aimed at the upper income brackets and corporations, would stimulate investment and economic growth for every American citizen. During the primaries, before Reagan tapped him to join the ticket as the vice presidential candidate, George H. W. Bush had criticized Reagan's "voodoo economics," displaying skepticism that this trickle-down theory would indeed spur the economy. Once Reagan was in office, all groups of Republicans knew the tax cut was the first order of business as the centerpiece of a larger policy agenda that favored market mechanisms over government spending.

The strength of this proposal, which would be the largest single tax cut to date, was its packaging as a cure to all Americans' economic troubles, not just those in the highest income brackets. Since Richard Nixon and his quest for a new Republican majority, the GOP had sought to win the support of white, ethnic, traditionally Democratic working-class voters who had become disillusioned with Great Society spending that was aimed at minorities and the poor. In the early 1970s, a spate of books hailed the possibilities of what analyst Kevin Phillips called the "emerging Republican majority" by appealing not only to southerners but also to working-class Americans for whom tax cuts not only meant less money taken out of their paychecks but also symbolized a shift in public policy away from social spending.

Peggy Noonan, who became one of Reagan's favorite speechwriters, captured the GOP appeal. Growing up Irish Catholic in Brooklyn as part of a
loyal Democratic family, Noonan had named her first two fish Jack and Jackie after the Kennedys. The first in her family to go to college, which she did at night, Noonan felt alienated from the party of her youth and the apparent radicalism of her fellow students. With Reagan, Noonan felt she was part of "the quiet realignment in the eighties, in which what had seemed in my youth the party of the rich dullards became, almost in spite of itself, the party of the people." Similarly, David Stockman, who would serve as Reagan's budget director and chief architect of his tax cut, shed the radicalism of his college days and became a free-market fundamentalist. "I began to feel as if I was part of a movement. My revolutionary fires had been rekindled once again."

On August 13, 1981, Reagan signed the Economic Recovery Tax Act and the Omnibus Reconciliation Act. Together, these measures announced a radical new agenda for the government, the crowning achievement of this new Republican era. One measure cut taxes by 25 percent, significantly lowering the overall tax rates, and the other cut spending by $35 billion. Days earlier Reagan had fired striking air traffic controllers, signaling a major departure in the recognition and support of union rights. As a backdrop to these policy changes, Reagan supported Paul Volcker's move at the Federal Reserve to impose a tight monetary policy as a way of bringing inflation under control, even if it meant triggering high unemployment.

But still, as impressive and historic as these accomplishments were, did they signal a fundamental realignment of the electorate? That was not clear. To be sure, political scientists before and since have debated the idea of electoral realignments. In 1980 the idea of realigning elections had much traction in the academy, which in turn filtered into the popular press and helped generate a news story about the election as fulfilling a cyclical vision of history where voters, in regular intervals, turn out old regimes and replace them with a new and enduring coalition that supports a significant shift in public policy. A decade earlier Walter Dean Burnham had published *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics,* his famous analysis of American political parties and the realignment theory.

From the contemporary vantage point, the evidence was unclear. In an age when a majority of Americans got their news from television, part of Reagan's appeal was specific to him, the handsome, charismatic Hollywood actor who after the assassination attempt on his life in March 1981 had even greater popular support among the electorate. But giving Reagan favorable ratings did not mean that the majority of citizens were solid members of the GOP. Indeed, exit polls for 1980 revealed that only 11 percent of voters pulled the lever for Reagan because "he is a real conservative." The majority who voted for him did so because they felt it was "time for a change." And still, the number of registered Democrats was significantly greater than registered Republicans.

Even those who switched into the GOP column could not necessarily be counted on. In this era, partisan attachments were not as strong as they had been. In the past, partisan affiliations ran deep, reflecting attachments that, as in Noonan's family, carried through generations and received reinforcement from active urban machines that had a strong hold on their local constituents. New Deal largesse dispensed through local machines cemented partisan identities rather than diluting them. But the rise of middle-class suburban voters loosened these attachments and opened the way for the emergence of large swaths of unaffiliated voters. Many were as likely to identify with and take their cues from any number of public interest groups who were becoming politically active and powerful in this period. And many who switched over to the GOP, such as neoconservatives, white southerners, and the white working classes, did so hesitatingly, and their support could be reversed.

Moreover, the political support that catapulted Reagan into office did not translate into a significant realignment in Congress. The Republicans' hold on their newfound power was divided and tenuous, and indeed the GOP would once again be in the minority when Democrats strengthened their numbers in the House in 1982 and regained control of the Senate in 1986. And the Democrats outside the South who were elected to office were increasingly liberal, reflecting a growing polarization between the two parties. The congressional reforms of the 1970s undercut some of the power of the more conservative southern Democratic committee chairs, increased the number of subcommittee chairs who were often younger and more liberal Democrats, and strengthened the ability of the rank and file to influence party leadership. In this environment, public interest groups, just like business interests, had much greater access and influence. Moreover, the weakening of the New Deal coalition did not mean its disappearance. Even though conservatives had increased their numbers, the Speaker was Tip O'Neill, an old school New Deal liberal with little appetite for caving in to a conservative revolution.

Indeed, Kevin Phillips, who had once augured a new Republican majority, issued a warning. Americans, according to Phillips, were more populist than conservative. That is, as he put it, they "are hostile to the rich and to big
business at the same time as they dislike minorities and the liberal politicians who seem to favor minority interests over those of the white working class.” He cautioned the White House about jumping to the conclusion that the electorate shared Reagan’s antigovernment ideology. Patrick Caddell, a Democratic pollster, had written the epitaph for the Democratic Party, calling support for Reagan and for his tax cut a “revolution against government.” But Phillips was not too sure. If Reaganomics did not provide the tangible benefits it promised, such as renewed recovery, more jobs, and a reduction in inflation—in other words, more money in voters’ pockets—then they might not be willing to pull the GOP lever again. The tax cut provided tangible benefits, allowing citizens to keep more of their income. But it was not yet clear that the larger promise of Reagan’s economic policies would be fulfilled. And in that case voters might not feel as committed to the GOP in future elections as they had in 1980.11

Building a Majority

The White House understood the challenges they faced from day one. And so did Reagan himself. During his days as California governor, he had learned firsthand the difficulties of dismantling government, an idea that had appeal as campaign rhetoric but could prove lackluster when it came to cutting actual programs. Aware of the institutional and even electoral strength of liberal policies and programs, top Republican aides projected a story line that would suggest that indeed the new president had a mandate for conservative reform. The idea of a “Reagan Revolution” was a creation of Republican insiders as part of a political strategy to translate the electoral victory into governing success. From the early days in office, Reagan had to decide how to chart a political course forward. All presidents, at least since Franklin Roosevelt, have done this, setting an agenda, making some issues higher priorities than others. The challenge then is how to move aggressively in one area without losing support in others. Given that Reagan came to office with the support of a new coalition of voters, the challenge was especially acute. As Reagan invested all his energies in the Economic Recovery Act, he had to figure out ways to satisfy groups for whom tax cuts were not the paramount issue.

Part of the job of building a predictable and reliable following fell to the Office of Public Liaison (OPL), an executive-level office within the White House that reached out to various constituencies as a way of winning their support. To head the OPL the White House recruited Elizabeth Dole. Dole came from a long line of political women who got their start in consumer issues, a traditionally female domain within American policy making. By the time of her appointment as head of the OPL, Dole was a skilled political operator, and she became the boss of her former mentor, Virginia Knauer, who had headed the Office of Consumer Affairs under Nixon and Ford and was also a member of the OPL. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Knauer mentored Dole as she emerged from her background as a southern Democrat from a conservative North Carolina family to become a new and promising member of the GOP. A Harvard-trained lawyer, Dole was one of two dozen females out of 550 students in her 1965 graduating law school class. Her contemporaries included Elizabeth Holtzman and Patricia Schroeder. Even as women’s liberation was reaching college campuses, the Harvard professors called on women on “ladies’ day,” as Dole recalled it. Upon graduating, Dole moved to Washington, where she entered public service, rising through the ranks until her appointment to the Federal Trade Commission. She resigned that position in 1976 to join the vice presidential campaign of her husband, Senator Robert Dole, the Kansas Republican whom she had married the previous year. When Reagan appointed her to the OPL, her job was, as she put it, “to develop a consensus for Reagan administration programs.”12

At the OPL, Dole relied on a coterie of younger party activists, many of whom came from inside the Beltway and had been working since the 1970s on shifting the GOP and the electorate to the right. Her staffs included Aram Bakshian, Jr., who had worked for Republican William Brock in the 1960s and then for William Simon in the Ford administration, and Robert F. Bonitati, who had served as an aide to Senator Howard Baker (R-TN) and then moved to Nixon’s Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Dole also worked with active members from the conservative think tank and intellectual circles, such as Morton C. Blackwell, who had been the editor of the New Right Report and a contributing editor of Conservative Digest, and Wayne Valis, the special assistant to the president of the American Enterprise Institute.13

In the first year of the administration, the approach to various organized interests and different demographics was similar, regardless of whether they were supporters or critics of the president. To the extent that the White House devoted the majority of its political capital to passing Reagan’s budget measures, the White House built loyalty on other issues through the appointment process. The appeal of James Watt as secretary of the interior, for example,
had as much to do with his background as a lawyer and lobbyist defending land claims of western miners as it did with his affiliation with the hard right and his outspoken stance on many of the leading conservative social issues of the day. If Reagan failed to move forcefully on issues like a constitutional ban on abortion, he could score political points through his backing of these kinds of high-level officials. Similarly, in the summer of 1981, Reagan nominated Judge Sandra Day O'Connor as the first female Supreme Court justice as a way to repay campaign commitments to Republican women.

But there were several problems with this approach. For one thing, conservative supporters wanted more. Richard Viguerie, the direct mail guru who had galvanized millions of conservative voters, openly criticized the administration, and the press was regularly reporting on the "uneasy coalition" of Reagan supporters that was becoming ever more shaky. One year into her job, Elizabeth Dole was worried about these social conservatives. The decision to rally supporters behind the tax program had made sense, but she expressed concern that that move had, "in turn, relegated the conservative social agenda to the back burner." "To do little or nothing" on social issues such as busing or prayer in school, Dole warned White House counselor Edwin Meese and James Baker, "will lead to greater conservative dissatisfaction and diminished active support for the economic battles." 5

These concerns became more pronounced as the 1982 midterm elections drew near. Everyone in Washington understood that the first midterms usually did not go well for the party of a new president. Based on history, Reagan's advisers knew they would probably suffer losses. Indeed, by the summer of 1982, Terry Dolan, the chairman of the National Conservative Political Action Committee, was sending the same warning to Baker. Dolan shared polling data that demonstrated a significant drop in the numbers of self-identified conservatives who regarded Reagan favorably, telling Baker, "Unless you stop this erosion immediately, Republican and conservative candidates could be facing another 1974 election, where sympathetic voters will stay home because of the signals being sent from Washington." 6

Of equal concern, of course, was the growing dissatisfaction among those who either had not supported the president in the first place or, more worrisome, those who were newcomers to the GOP. In early 1982, Dole was contemplating a strategy of how to reach out to African Americans, similar in approach to how she strategized about Hispanics, Jews, and other ethnic and minority groups.

It was no secret that, as a group, no other constituency had given the new president less support. While the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 might have swung southern Democrats toward the GOP, as Lyndon Johnson had feared from the very start, they forged a durable alliance between African Americans and the Democratic Party. Carter won support from 90 percent of the black community. There were cynical reports within the White House of African American schoolchildren cheering in the streets when they heard the news that Reagan had been shot in the assassination attempt. Yet Dole was not willing to abandon any group of voters as the White House sought to build a lasting and durable coalition.

Perhaps most important was that the African American critique of Reagan, steeped largely in economic terms, resonated with many other groups of voters as the economy dove into a recession. By the fall of 1982, unemployment reached 10.8 percent, a level not seen since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Compounding this economic downturn was the fact that many Reagan budget cuts targeted precisely the kinds of social programs that usually assisted those in need and offset economic hardships. Given that 80 percent of the federal budget paid for the military, entitlement programs, and the financing of the national debt, the most vulnerable programs were the ones that benefited the needy. Dole explained to Baker the challenges that Reagan was facing. "We are now grappling with the larger issue of the President's image, reputation, and public esteem... a dangerous stereotype of a President who is unsympathetic to the plight of the poor and needy," said Dole. She laid out the larger stakes as she saw them. "These perceptual issues impact most negatively on Black Americans, but have serious ramifications for other groups as well. In particular, the 'lack of compassion' label is one which has harmful long-term implications for women, the elderly, and moderates of all parties." 7

The Reagan recession underscored the tenuous hold the GOP had on a new political majority. When the economic bottom fell out, it was far from clear whether the coalition of 1980 would remain in place through these difficult times. In his first two years in office, Reagan had scored an impressive achievement with his tax and budget measures. But he had also seen the limits to his self-proclaimed revolution. When he attempted to cut Social Security benefits early in his presidency as a way to reduce the deficit and offset tax cuts, there was a revolt in Congress so strong that Bob Dole, as chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, was forced to push through a resolution
denouncing the White House move. As the economy turned down, and as
the spending cuts to Great Society programs that benefited low-income Amer-
icans went into effect, Reagan's standing in the polls declined.

In the November 1982 midterms, the Republicans lost twenty-six seats
in the House, giving the Democrats an even stronger majority. Historically,
parties in power tend to lose voters in the off years. But that was not always
true, and that had not been true in 1934, the year that Roosevelt solidified
his gains, a victory from which he was able to push forward and cement the
New Deal. The story for Reagan was different. As much as his advisers had
craft the idea of a mandate for leadership, the president was now leading
a country with a government that was more divided, an electorate unsure of
its political leanings, and an economy in trouble. The *New York Times*
reporter Tom Wicker wrote an epitaph for the White House, grimly concluding, "There
is no Reagan Revolution."

The Gender Gap

After the midterm losses, the issue of the gender gap captured White House
attention. If there was going to be a revolution, the Republicans were going
to have to win over a much larger percentage of women voters. The party no
longer felt confident that they could write off voters who had not joined them
two years earlier. Lee Atwater, Reagan's senior political strategist, was wor-
ried. Days after the 1982 losses, Atwater wrote, "One of the most severe chal-
enges facing the Administration in the next two years is the 'gender gap.' Some
observers speculate that a new sex-based political realignment is occurring;
one that could lock the GOP into permanent minority status," said Atwater
in a nineteen-page memo to senior White House staffers. "Clearly we will have
to take some action."

As a candidate in 1980, Reagan had reached out to women. He did not
support what were seen as the leading women's issues, including the Equal
Rights Amendment (ERA), which was facing its final deadline for ratifica-
tion in June 1982, and reproductive rights on abortion. But he did promise
to eliminate statutes in federal regulations that discriminated against women.
With his typical cowboy swagger, Reagan had said, in the debate against Jimmy
Carter, "I would have someone ride herd on those regulations."

The 1980 election had already revealed potential problems for the GOP,
especially among women voters. As Richard Beal, special assistant to the pres-
ident, explained to top advisers, "President Reagan's relative vote support
among women (compared to men) was the lowest of any Republican presi-
dential candidate in the last 30 years." Never before had there been a signifi-
cant difference between the preference of men and women, and never before
had women demonstrated such weak support for the GOP candidate. In 1976
women preferred Gerald Ford to Jimmy Carter, and in 1960 they had also
chosen Richard Nixon by larger numbers than John F. Kennedy. In

In the afterglow of the 1980 victory, Republicans were not yet concerned
with the vulnerability in their coalition. Reagan's victory was so overwhel-
ming, and, after all, more women voted for Reagan than for Carter. Women's
support of Reagan was considered weak only in comparison to the strong sup-
port Reagan had received from men. The numbers revealed that men voted
for Reagan by a much greater margin (57 percent to 37 percent) than women
(47 percent to 44 percent). In Reagan's first year in office, the White House
did not put forward proposals that were meant to address what had been com-
monly thought of as "women's issues," including the ERA, legal abortion, and
equal pay for equal work.

Since the emergence of the women's liberation movement, the Democrats
had been the party that more aggressively responded to these issues and so-
lidiced the support of women who pushed for equality and an end to discrim-
ination in the workplace and in society. Since the party reforms of 1968, the
Democratic leadership had included more women in the conventions, in the
primaries, and even in Congress. In 1972 Democratic voters elected Dole's
former classmates Elizabeth Holtzman and Patricia Schroeder as well as Bella
Abzug and Barbara Jordan to the House of Representatives. In 1973, when a
constituent questioned Schroeder's decision to run for office as the mother
of two young children, she responded, "I have a uterus and brain, and they
both work."

Until 1982 the Republicans were so confident of their standing and had
so little concern about winning over this constituency that they actively
blocked initiatives to promote gender equality. Once in office, the president
had created the Task Force on Legal Equity, which promised to rid federal
statutes of sex discrimination. In conjunction with this executive effort, the
White House also initiated the 50 States Project to root out discrimination
in state-level regulations. But neither of these were top priorities, and they
received little serious backing. At the same time, the White House slowed
the enforcement of affirmative action guidelines for government-contracted
companies in their hiring and promoting of female workers. Clarence Thomas,
who would become the chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, said he would not enforce laws with which he did not agree. Unlike in the Carter administration, Reagan’s personnel team deliberately did not create separate staff for women’s issues.

The White House worked hard to derail the signature women’s issue, the ERA. It was a major disappointment to women’s groups that Elizabeth Dole, upon joining the administration as the most senior woman in the White House, rescinded her support of ERA. The amendment had passed Congress in 1972, and the ten years that the legislators had allowed for ratification would expire in the summer of 1982. Eager to thwart any movements for an extension, instead the White House promoted its 50 States Project. This was not a high-profile program around which to cement widespread loyalty. Instead, it was the kind of initiative constructed to satisfy and keep mobilized a band of already well-organized and active conservative women and leaders, such as Phyllis Schlafly, who saw this regulatory reform as a way to kill the ERA. To lead the effort, the White House appointed Judy Peachey, a Republican Party operative in Virginia who had played a key role in building the GOP in that Democratic state and, in the 1970s, had served as a mentor to a young Karl Rove.

The White House looked favorably upon using the tax code and other regulatory reforms as a way to provide what Barbara Honegger, a special assistant in the Justice Department’s civil rights division, called “the financial disfranchisement of women.” As in other areas of domestic policy, Republicans thought that using the tax code was the best way to provide tangible benefits to different constituencies, including women, without relying on direct government assistance. Reforms to remove the tax penalization for marriage for a dual-income family, for example, and to provide tax credits for dependent care, along with expanding the ability of women to participate in IRA accounts and giving widows the right to draw income from their husbands’ pension funds, allowed wage earners and their families to keep more of the money they earned. In addition, the White House looked favorably on reforms to allow for stricter enforcement of court-ordered child support payments.

The Economic Equity Act, a bipartisan measure introduced by Patricia Schroeder and Senator Dave Durenberger, a moderate Republican from Minnesota who had replaced Hubert Humphrey, advanced all these measures. But in 1981 the White House was focused on its own tax initiative, which would include things like the repeal of estate taxes for spouses. Furthermore, the bipartisan measure included other provisions that conservatives opposed, such as gender-neutral health insurance, and as a result the White House worked against what associate director of the OMB Annelise Anderson referred to as “the legislative vehicle for liberal feminism.”

The 1981 recession would change the political forecast for the president and the Republican Party. The recession unsettled the Reagan White House. All the confidence that came out of the election started to fade. Whereas those in the White House could once dismiss anyone who had not joined them in November 1980, now, as the bottom fell out of the economy under their watch, they started to fret over which constituencies might leave them and how they could reach out to new voters. With Democrats pounding away at the White House for its economic record, the president’s advisers started to take a close look at their coalition. Known as the Reagan Recession, the downturn lasted from July 1981 through November 1982. The unemployment rate began inching upward in the fall of 1981 after having lingered around 7 or 8 percent throughout the year. By March 1982, the rate was at 9 percent, and by year’s end it would be as high as 10.8 percent.

The decline in support for Reagan was precipitous. As the economy collapsed, so too did the president’s favorable approval ratings. In just a single month, February 1982, as unemployment worsened and the White House released its 1983 budget, the president’s job rating dropped eight points, approval of his handling of the economy fell ten points, and an overall sense of whether he was on the right track declined by thirteen points.

Polling showed the sharpest decline among women. In February 1982, men gave Reagan a 57 percent approval rating, whereas only 45 percent of women gave the president a favorable rating, with 49 percent disapproving. By April the gender spread in approval rating was 19 percent. And more women than men continued to believe that Reagan’s economic programs hurt the country and felt more pessimistic about the future.

By the summer of 1982, as the recession continued, the White House had real anxiety about the electoral implications of the gender gap. “What is the gender gap?” asked senior political strategist Richard Wirthlin rhetorically. “About 10 percentage points on the presidential job rating,” Wendy Borcherdt, who was the White House staffer in charge of recruiting women into the administration and the former director of the conservative Pacific Legal Foundation, took her concerns to Reagan’s chief of staff, James Baker. “The criticism of the president has become severe and vocal and the polls have shown a steady erosion of women’s support for the president. The women’s constituency has
declined in support more than any other group. . . . Currently, we are very vulnerable,” Borchardt told Baker.30 Even the president was worried about his standing. When the New York Times ran a piece criticizing the administration, Reagan saw it and sent it directly to Ed Meese for his attention.31

The largest group against Reagan were nonmarried women, who gave the president a 61 percent disapproval rating. They were most likely to be low income and less educated and to have jobs outside the home. They tended to be more liberal and registered to vote Democrat, though one in four was not registered to vote. While a disproportionate number of the unmarried women who disapproved of the president’s job performance were African American, pollster Richard Beal pointed out that 70 percent of these women were white. “It would be a serious mistake to explain the President’s poor showing among women as a factor of ‘race.’” Two out of every five women were unmarried. These single women were pessimistic about their personal circumstances and felt that the president’s budget cuts had gone too far.32

The White House understood this polling result as a reaction to its agenda of slashing the welfare state. “The Democrats’ social programs have made most non-married women dependent on the government, and hence, most directly susceptible to the President’s program changes,” asserted pollster Richard Beal. To the extent that the Reagan budget targeted social services, single, impoverished female heads of households, including those who were divorced or widowed, would feel these cuts most sharply. And the White House understood this. “This group is the most vulnerable one in American society. . . . It is understandable why they hold such strong anti-Reagan views,” said Beal. Their vulnerability, according to Beal, stemmed from their dependence on government assistance. “No major breakthroughs can be gained until . . . [they] are weaned from the government dependency.”33

The OPL concluded the same thing. According to Wendy Borchardt, who had become Dole’s assistant, widows, poor single heads of households, and divorced homemakers were the GOP’s greatest critics. “These were the women,” explained Borchardt, “who use the Federal financial support to aid them in their daily lives.” They were the ones who would feel the cuts in Aid to Families with Dependent Children, food stamps, and job training funds. “The unmarried woman is opposed to this Administration and will continue to be since we are reducing her Federal largesse,” explained Borchardt. Given the direction of policy, she concluded, there was nothing to be done. “This proportion of the women’s constituency will never be supportive of this Administration.”34

Even as the White House regarded the gender gap as a functionalist response by this group of women, they understood that there were differences among women. “It is a mistake to conclude that women now represent a major, one-dimensional voting bloc,” instructed Beal. Polling experts broke down female voters, like male voters, according to age, employment, marital status, and educational level. Yet, when the economy was in decline, collectively, support from female voters fell off substantially, and not just among the most economically disadvantaged.35

The issue that revealed the greatest difference between the genders related to whether the president, through his policies, “lacked concern for the people,” or what pollster Richard Seal called the “compassion or fairness issue.” In part, for some women, the impression came as a result of real budget cuts. Indeed, programs aimed at women, such as those housed in the Women’s Bureau in the Department of Labor, the Women’s Enterprise Program at the Small Business Administration, and health services for women, had come under the axe of Reagan’s budget cutters. “Women’s programs throughout government have generally been reduced in scope and funding—almost 50 percent more than those of other constituencies,” said Borchardt.36 But in part this view of Reagan as uncaring stemmed from a broader perception issue. And on this question the White House felt it was especially vulnerable to losing support it would need to count on.

The negative polls were unnerving precisely because they reflected a widespread disappointment, which could even be found among the most loyal supporters, conservative women. The White House had counted on the support of these conservative activists. For decades, these women had been integral to the networks that had built the conservative movement. At the local level, they had gathered supporters, published newsletters, and in 1980 mobilized voters at the polling booths. Reagan would need these “reliable women . . . [to] provide the effective opposition to active feminists.” But now, reported Borchardt, “their enthusiasm is waning, for they perceive that the president does not care about them in a personal sense.”37

The crucial group of women were the ones in the political center, the so-called independents. The key, as the political team argued, was to switch the allegiance of voters who were “uncommitted” and “mildly disapproving.” These women, according to White House officials, were independents and “soft” Democrats who suffered from perception problems. As Annelise Anderson explained, “The gender gap arises from two separate problems—perception problems and the economy.” With the right communication, these
independent women "could be convinced that the economic benefits which the President is seeking are in their self-interest."38

What most distressed the White House was the failure of women to appreciate the reduction in inflation. When Reagan came into office, the inflation rate was more than 12 percent, and a year later it was cut in half. Significantly more women than men believed that the inflation problem was not getting better. Even as women entered the workforce in unprecedented numbers, most were still the primary shoppers, and as a result, they faced the challenge of stretching dollars of the family budget. "Why women feel that 'inflation is not better' probably relates to their being the primary most frequent shopper for the family," concluded Edwin Harper. Harper informed Ed Meese, therefore, that "the most important message we need to get across to women is that even though prices are still increasing, they aren't going up as fast as they were a year ago before the President's program began to take hold."39

Most worrisome, many men also shared women's critique of Reagan's economic program. A month before the midterm elections, 57 percent of all Americans disapproved of Reagan's handling of the economy. Twice as many Americans trusted Congress to handle economic policy more than they trusted the president. And economic problems were at the top of the agenda of concerns, with 72 percent pointing to the economy as the most pressing problem. Perhaps most ominous was the fact that two out of three Americans regarded the midterm election as a referendum on the president's and the GOP's performance.40

The key issue was the economy. That was true for men and for women. In general, concluded Red Cavaney, Elizabeth Dole's aide, "Americans do not understand Reaganomics ... or how the President's program will improve their everyday life."41 And the differential in their support of the administration reflected their relative judgment on the economy. In what Cavaney called "the gender gap bottom line," he said, the gap "is not related to questions concerning abortion, ERA, a woman for president, unjust discrimination, etc." His conclusions were stark. "We know that economic concerns rather than social issues dominate women's attitudes today. Economic concerns are paramount for men and women in 1982." To the extent that the gender gap narrowed in the months leading up to the election, it was because male support for Republicans was declining.42

The election proved damaging for Republicans and for the president. Instantly, the conclusion was that the women's vote mattered. What had previ-

ously been an observation by pollsters was now an electoral reality. And the evidence suggested that in certain races, such as the governor's race in New York, which saw the election of Democrat Mario Cuomo, and that in Texas, which resulted in the defeat of the incumbent Republican Bill Clements, women provided Democrats with an important margin of support. These races did not augur well. "It is clear that the gender gap undermines the President's governing coalition and could have a major impact on the '84 presidential election," concluded the staff at the Office of Policy Development. It was women's negative approval rating on the economy that was significant.43

Within a week, the White House established the Coordinating Council on Women. "There is no question," Elizabeth Dole told the president, "that the role of women in America has changed dramatically in the past twenty years. It is our task to help your Administration respond effectively and sensibly."44 The demographic changes of the 1970s, with the rise in the number of female-headed households, would likely increase the gender gap. The evidence suggested that Reagan's support was weakest among women born after World War II, who in 1982 would be between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-six, those who were just entering the workforce, having young children, and also, in larger numbers than before, separating from their spouses. These women tended to be the most vulnerable economically, having jobs in the service sector that were the least secure, provided few benefits, and were nonunionized. The conclusion, according to Republican pollster Ronald Hinckley, was that a continued strengthening of the gender gap "could cause serious trouble for Republicans in 1984."45

For the White House, the gender realignment was confounding chances for a Republican realignment. New York Times reporter Adam Clymer, before the election, said that the specific results did not matter because the demographic and resulting electoral shifts were long-term and irreversible. "This so-called gender gap ... may influence American life in the 1980s as much as the civil rights revolution did in the 1960s."46 Lee Atwater, the White House political analyst, concurred. "There is solid evidence," he wrote in the weeks following the election, "that Clymer's thesis of sexual realignment is correct." "The political party that 'gets the women' will be the majority, while the party of men will be the minority." In 1980, Atwater noted, 5.5 million more women had voted than men. "It is clear that if the sexes continue to realign, the Republicans will be once again locked into minority status."47

As all the polling revealed, women gave Reagan poorer marks on the economy. Atwater noted in his memo that women did not support budget cuts
and more general “deregulatory laissez faire policies.” To explain this, Atwater searched beyond rational economic explanations. In the 1970s, Jimmy Carter’s pollster Pat Caddell was reading sociologists Robert Bellah and Christopher Lasch about the breakdown of the social fabric. Now Atwater was reading Harvard psychology professor Carol Gilligan on male-female differences. In 1982 Gilligan published In a Different Voice, a paradigm-shifting treatment that suggested a fundamental difference between the genders. Men thought about justice, whereas women thought about fairness; the former cared about individual rights, the latter about relationships. “Only a liberal female Harvard professor could get away with outlining these differences so bluntly,” said Atwater. According to the qualities Gilligan listed, the Reagan administration and its rhetoric were strongly masculine. Atwater went as far as to suggest that perhaps the administration was not lacking in support of women, but just had a “masculine surplus.” “After all, Ronald Reagan is a man’s man,” a view put forth in Psychology Today that explained the male attraction to Reagan as a result of “his image as an outdoorsman, his articulation of the benefits of freedom, his expansive view of human potential.” A possible theme moving forward, meant to soften the president’s image and appeal to women, Atwater suggested, could be “Reagan Cares.”

But Atwater was not a reductionist. His basic thinking rested on a profound demographic shift, the entry of women into the labor force. Twenty-eight million women were now in the workforce, which was fourteen million more than the number of homemakers who did not work outside the home. The Friday before the election, Elizabeth Dole had published a high-profile editorial, “The Real Gender Gap,” which outlined her view that the gender gap stemmed from what she called the Quiet Revolution, in which more than half of women were working outside the home. Writing with empathy, Dole acknowledged that women had yet to reach financial and legal parity with men. This labor force participation led to what Dole characterized as “fresh expectations and attitudes.” “Modern woman’s new-found economic involvement has virtually guaranteed independence of thought and action.”

The challenge for Republicans was to convince working women that the party’s free-market policies would best serve their interests. Dole argued that Reagan’s fight against inflation resulted in real economic gains, as did his tax cuts, including the easing of the marriage tax penalty, the elimination of estate taxes for spouses, and increasing the child care tax credit. “These initiatives represent more than verbal solidarity with working women. They add up to compassion women can put in the bank.” Altogether, Dole reported, the average working woman earning $11,000 a year received an additional $700 in her pocket. But obviously, amid recession, this argument fell on deaf ears.

So what could the White House do? In 1982, 45 percent of married women voted Republican, and only 33 percent of nonmarried women did. It was working women who had to be won over. They could be seen, said Atwater, “as almost a new immigrant group of low-paid workers, earning on average 59 percent of what men make.” The trick was to recruit them to the GOP, which, history suggested, would be hard. “The Democratic Party has always been the party of the working man; now apparently, it might become the party of the working woman.” If the New Deal gave workers labor rights and a safety network, the Democrats’ support of equal pay for equal work would be “the new redistributionist battle cry.” “We will have to work hard, within the constraints of our beliefs, to show working women that Republican policies are more beneficial to them,” explained Atwater.

The real issue was economic growth. If the economy improved before 1984, then claiming credit for this upturn and selling Reagan’s deregulatory, market approach would be easier, Atwater hoped. In addition, the party and the president could adopt a more caring, compassionate tone. The basic Republican ethos, as Atwater reminded his colleagues, was centered on notions of voluntarism and community, “soft” values that the White House had ignored at its own peril in its emphasis on market principles and individualism. Nothing would be more important in the 1984 election than economic recovery. But reframing the president as a more compassionate leader “would help us with men and women.”

In 1984 Reagan would repeat his 1980 electoral performance with another stunning victory, winning 59 percent of the popular vote. Reagan’s victory rested on the substantial economic recovery that preceded the election. In the two years between the midterms and this election, the White House had supported policies such as tax subsidies for child care for working women, enforcement of child support laws, and pension reforms to remove gender inequities, all premised on market approaches to improving working women’s economic standing and security. Years later George W. Bush would promote what he called compassionate conservatism, a political economic vision that blended the Republicans’ market approach with gender-based appeals. But the key thing in Reagan’s 1984 victory, as in all future electoral successes, was that in the short term the economy was doing well, and this election year fact ameliorated some of the bread-and-butter concerns that had
loomed large in parts of the electorate. In his "Morning in America" theme, Reagan stressed the renewed recovery that benefited working men and women alike. "Today more men and women will go to work than ever before in our country's history. With interest rates and inflation down, more people are buying new homes and our new families can have confidence in the future," said Reagan. Lee Atwater and Elizabeth Dole understood the importance of tangible economic benefits to the working classes. As Dole had said two days after the 1982 midterm losses, "We have two more years after '82 to impact positively the two most important groups for '84: women and blue collar workers." The results of the economic upturn paid off at the voting booth.

**Searching for Voters Since 1980**

To be sure, Reagan's 1980 victory against Jimmy Carter signified an important moment in the history of American politics. Conservatives found a champion of their cause, and he made it into the White House. Republicans had taken control of the Senate, and the mood in Washington indicated that politics was shifting to the right. Reagan capitalized on this success, pushing through a tax cut that weakened the progressive tax system that had been in place for much of the century and had underwritten the expansion of the American welfare state.

But the notion that there had been a Reagan Revolution or a conservative sweep was more a creation of the White House than a reflection of reality. Officials worked hard to convince the media and even voters themselves that 1980 had been a realigning election akin to 1896 or 1932, and that the Democratic coalition of the New Deal was now broken. Reagan's team sought to create the narrative that the election signaled that a majority of the American public was not satisfied with the welfare state and wanted a radical turn in the character of American public policy.

Yet even Reagan's advisers privately understood that this was an incomplete picture, and one that vastly overstated the durability of the conservative victory. Underlying Reagan's successful election was evidence that conservatives had a long way to go if they were to build the kind of coalition that Roosevelt had built in 1932. Huge parts of the electorate were not convinced that public policy should move to the right. In certain cases the White House realized that it could never win over parts of the electorate who at all times remained skeptical, including African Americans.

However, if Republicans were going to succeed, there were other parts of the electorate that could not be written off. Most important were women, who constituted over half of the voting population and were a presence in both political parties. As soon as the election of 1980 was over and when Democrats scored important gains in 1982, Republicans started to worry about a gender gap, a bias in women voters to go with the Democratic Party. The gender gap was not solely about social and cultural issues, as many experts in both parties suggested, but also about economic issues and the vulnerability that working women, many of whom were new to the workforce and also recently single, felt in a recessionary economy. In that climate, working women remained unconvinced that Republican policies would benefit them. Elizabeth Dole worked hard to figure out if the GOP could do anything to allay these concerns. By 1984 the return of economic growth temporarily mitigated some of these fears.

The problems of the gender gap that arose in these elections pointed to a challenge that would continue to haunt the Republican Party: how to build a vibrant and strong electoral coalition. Since 1980 Republican economic policies have created a certain amount of vulnerability with the mass electorate. The perception that Republican economic policies did not benefit middle- and working-class Americans was something that the Democrats would continue to capitalize on, especially during downturns. When Republicans promised economic growth through markets, the Democrats promised fairness and a social safety net. The challenge for Republicans was how to build a stable coalition around free-market policies. Republicans did not forget what happened in 1982 and understood that they could not count on the perception of booming economic times over the long run. To build a dominant coalition in the White House and Congress, they would need to win over large blocs of voters who would stick with them, by and large, in good times and bad.

For all the talk about the culture wars and the ways in which social cleavages of the 1970s have dominated party politics, more attention needs to be paid to how economic issues were actually the fault line between the two parties. The gender gap reflected a larger problem of how to address economic concerns, especially in a transformed economy. As Reagan's advisers understood, the working woman's challenges were the challenges of all American families. Both parties would struggle with appealing to voters as globalization and growing inequality introduced even greater economic uncertainty.

Historians need to look back to the history of elections and to unpack certain issues traditionally characterized as social, such as the politics of
gender, to examine the ways in which growing economic divisions between the parties were at play, shaping electoral behavior as well as party strategy. Recent political science research by scholars such as Larry Bartels, Jacob Hacker, and Paul Pierson has placed emphasis on the centrality of political economy to the evolution of the GOP since the 1970s. What Bartels shows is that pocketbook politics really matters in elections, and the party that has put more money into the wallets and savings accounts of white working-class male Americans has often done better at the polls. The same is even more the case for working women. With all the attention to issues such as abortion, in fact, these early elections showed the importance of the economic anxieties of women entering the workforce.

The gender gap has continued to pose a threat to the GOP since 1980. It has been a perennial source of weakness and turned out a vote that has continued to empower Democrats in Congress as well as in the White House. The conservative revolution fell short in 1980, never figuring out how to win over crucial parts of the electorate that continued to turn to Democrats for economic support and security even in the age of Reagan and George W. Bush. That continues to be true today as single mothers face economic hardships and vote disproportionately for Democrats.

Looking more closely at the gender gap and electoral politics helps us understand better why realignment theory is not particularly helpful for explaining American politics since 1980. The 1980 election was significant, but not in the ways we usually think. It was indeed the start of an age of Reagan. But just as significant, there was no permanent realignment of the electorate. Since the economic upheavals of the 1970s, economic issues for working Americans have remained a regular source of instability in the electorate, especially among women. The elections of the early 1980s were the first when a significant gender gap emerged, not just around women’s or social issues, but also around economic issues. The demographic shift of women into the workforce has created instability and insecurity among a larger part of the voting public, and the result is an even greater unpredictability in electoral outcomes as voters search for the party that can provide the best buffer amid uncertain times.