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When the direction of politics shifts

By Charles M. Madigan

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The earth may be about to shift under American politics.

The pieces are in place for realignment. There is a simple way to understand what that means by looking at presidents associated with realignments.

Try these: Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan.

Who you are determines whether this is good or bad news. The most important thing to remember is that no one will be able to say on Nov. 5 whether a realignment has happened or not, although certainly a number of people will say it has.

It takes a long time to measure realignment. Political scientists are still arguing about whether there was a realignment under McKinley.

A lot of people are disturbed by the possibility of realignment, largely because realignments change the direction of politics and government so completely that what comes after one bears little resemblance to what happened before.

It would be nice to think that it's just one politician who is responsible for all of this. If that were the case, it would not be Sen. [Barack Obama](#). It would be President George W. Bush.

Why?

Realignments need a series of components, with an important one being a flash point. They also tend to follow cycles. The other parts include changes in voting behavior, usually the arrival of a new bloc of voters (young people this time around) and, over a longer period of time, changes in attitude toward government.

Lincoln had emancipation and the Civil War. Teddy Roosevelt had reform. Franklin Roosevelt had the Great Depression. Reagan had the Iranian hostage crisis and the sense that Jimmy Carter had become powerless.

The next president, Obama or not, will have Bush, who has presented at least four realignment-level



disasters: The U.S. knew Osama bin Laden was threatening an attack and could not stop it; the wars in Iraq (early on) and Afghanistan (later and now); the pathetic inability of the federal government to respond to the damage of Hurricane Katrina; and, now, the collapse of the economy.

One would have been enough.

Put the four together and they create an undeniable swelling statistical wave. Four of every five people don't like the direction the nation has taken. That's all the fuel anyone needs for change.

If this theory about the election is correct, Nov. 4 may open an era of civic engagement, a change that will replace what we have had since the era that began with Reagan's election to the White House, an era defined by ideals.

"Ideals" is not a good or a bad word in this context. It is just a description. It's better to use examples to show the differences in these eras.

The era of civic engagement under Lincoln led to emancipation of black people and the salvation of the Union. Under Teddy Roosevelt, it led to crackdowns and regulation of the robber barons whose excess had defined the end of the 19th Century. Franklin Roosevelt's civic era delivered the Tennessee Valley Authority, Social Security and an assumption that government was responsible for helping people.

By contrast, prayer in school, anti-abortion legislation, prohibitions aimed at gay behaviors and lifestyles and arguments that government should have less influence on people's lives are some of the earmarks of ideals eras.

Charles M. Madigan, a professor at Roosevelt University, is writing a book about the presidential campaign.

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