Perhaps the basic differentiating characteristic of democratic order consists in the expression of effective choice by the mass of the people in elections. The electorate occupies, at least in the mystique of such orders, the position of the principal organ of governance; it acts through elections. An election itself is a formal act of collective decision that occurs in a stream of connected antecedent and subsequent behavior. Among democratic orders elections, so broadly defined, differ enormously in their nature, their meaning, and their consequences. Even within a single nation the reality of election differs greatly from time to time. A systematic comparative approach, with a focus on variations in the nature of elections would doubtless be fruitful in advancing the understanding of the democratic governing process. In behavior antecedent to voting, elections differ in the proportions of the electorate psychologically involved, in the intensity of attitudes associated with campaign cleavages, in the nature of expectations about the consequences of the voting, in the impact of objective events relevant to individual political choice, in individual sense of effective connection with community decision, and in other ways. These and other antecedent variations affect the act of voting itself as well as subsequent behavior. An understanding of elections and, in turn, of the democratic process as a whole must rest partially on broad differentiations of the complexes of behavior that we call elections.

While this is not the occasion to develop a comprehensive typology of elections, the foregoing remarks provide an orientation for an attempt to formulate a concept of one type of election—based on American experience—which might be built into a more general theory of elections. Even the most fleeting inspection of American elections suggests the existence of a category of elections in which voters are, at least from impressionistic evidence, unusually deeply concerned, in which the extent of electoral involvement is relatively quite high, and in which the decisive results of the voting reveal a sharp alteration of the preexisting cleavage within the electorate. Moreover, and perhaps this is the truly differentiating characteristic of this sort of election, the realignment made manifest in the voting
in such elections seems to persist for several succeeding elections. All these character-
istics cumulate to the conception of an election type in which the depth and inten-
ty of electoral involvement are high, in which more or less profound readjustments occur in the relations of power within the community, and in which new and durable electoral groupings are formed. These comments suppose, of course, the existence of other types of complexes of behavior centering about formal elections, the systematic isolation and identification of which, fortunately, are not essential for the present discussion.

I

The presidential election of 1928 in the New England states provides a specific case
of the type of critical election that has been described in general terms. In that year
Alfred E. Smith, the Democratic presidential candidate, made gains in all the New
England states. The rise in Democratic strength was especially notable in Massa-
chusetts and Rhode Island. When one probes below the surface of the gross elec-
tion figures it becomes apparent that a sharp and durable realignment also
occurred within the electorate, a fact reflective of the activation by the Demo-
cratic candidate of low-income, Catholic, urban voters of recent immigrant stock.
In New England, at least, the Roosevelt revolution of 1932 was in large measure
an Al Smith revolution of 1928, a characterization less applicable to the remain-
der of the country. . . .

Central to our concept of critical elections is realignment within the electorate
both sharp and durable. With respect to these basic criteria the election of 1896
falls within the same category as that of 1928, although it differed in other respects.
The persistence of the new division of 1896 was perhaps not so notable as that of

Figure A  Democratic Percentages of Major-Party Presidential Vote, Somerville and Ashfield, Massachusetts, 1916-1952
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e electorate of 1896 cer respects.
 as that of

1928; yet the Democratic defeat was so demoralizing and so thorough that the party
could make little headway in regrouping its forces until 1916. Perhaps the significant
feature of the 1896 contest was that, at least in New England, it did not form a new
division in which partisan lines became more nearly congruent with lines separating
classes, religions, or other such social groups. Instead, the Republicans succeeded
in drawing new support, in about the same degree, from all sorts of economic and so-
cial classes. The result was an electoral coalition formidable in mass but which re-
quired both good fortune and skill in political management for its maintenance,
given its latent internal contradictions. . . .

Figure B Persistence of Electoral Cleavage of 1928 in Massachusetts

Figure C Impact of Election of 1932 in New Hampshire
Figure D  Realignment of 1928 Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island
The discussion points toward the analytical utility of a system for the differentiation of elections. A concept of critical elections has been developed to cover a type of election in which there occurs a sharp and durable electoral realignment between parties, although the techniques employed do not yield any information of consequence about the mechanisms for the maintenance of a new alignment, once it is formed. Obviously any sort of system for the gross characterization of elections presents difficulties in application. The actual election rarely presents in pure form a case fitting completely any particular concept. Especially in a large and diverse electorate a single polling may encompass radically varying types of behavior among different categories of voters; yet a dominant characteristic often makes itself apparent. Despite such difficulties, the attempt to move toward a better understanding of elections in the terms here employed could provide a means for better integrating the study of electoral behavior with the analysis of political systems. In truth, a considerable proportion of the study of electoral behavior has only a tenuous relation to politics.
The sorts of questions here raised, when applied sufficiently broadly on a comparative basis and carried far enough, could lead to a consideration of basic problems of the nature of democratic orders. A question occurs, for example, about the character of the consequences for the political system of the temporal frequency of critical elections. What are the consequences for public administration, for the legislative process, for the operation of the economy of frequent serious upheavals within the electorate? What are the correlates of that pattern of behavior? And, for those disposed to raise such questions, what underlying changes might alter the situation? Or, when viewed from the contrary position, what consequences flow from an electorate which is disposed, in effect, to remain largely quiescent over considerable periods? Does a state of moving equilibrium reflect a pervasive satisfaction with the course of public policy? An indifference about matters political? In any case, what are the consequences for the public order? Further, what are the consequences when an electorate builds up habits and attachments, or faces situations, that make it impossible for it to render a decisive and clear-cut popular verdict that promises not to be upset by caprice at the next round of polling? What are the consequences of a situation that creates recurring, evenly balanced conflict over long periods? On the other hand, what characteristics of an electorate or what conditions permit sharp and decisive changes in the power structure from time to time? Such directions of speculation are suggested by a single criterion for the differentiation of elections. Further development of an electoral topology would probably point to useful speculation in a variety of directions.
QUESTIONS
1. How does Key define a critical election?

2. What do you think Key means when he refers to the consequences for public administration, for the legislative process, for the operation of the economy of frequent serious upheavals within the electorate?

3. Does the persistence of divided government suggest that Key’s assessment of elections and parties is less valid now than it was in the past?