Party Division: A Delayed Republican White South in Congressional Elections

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On July 2, 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson sat in the East Room of the White House in front of a crowd of politicians, civil rights activists, and media, and signed the Civil Rights Act. The bill was the culmination of months of work; many say it was a defining moment of his presidency. And in his ensuing ebullience Johnson would tell the crowd surrounding the desk how proud he was that the signing occurred on his daughter’s birthday and the ninth anniversary of his 1955 heart attack. But his elation did not last long. Later, in a more somber tone, he confided to White House aide Bill Moyers: “We have just delivered the South to the Republican Party for a long time to come.”

Johnson was right—to a degree. Following the 1964 Civil Rights Act and to this day, the White South has consistently voted Republican in presidential elections, ending decades of “Solid South” support for the Democratic Party. But this support for Republican presidential candidates did not coincide with support for Republican congressional candidates; in fact, it was not until the 1990s, generally known as the “Republican Breakthrough in Congress,” that the White South, as a majority, even supported Republican congressional candidates. New allegiance in congressional politics was delayed, but why?

Often a popular president can carry his party’s congressmen into office in what is known as the “coattail effect.” The “Reagan Realignment,” as coined by historians Earl and Merle Black, is a popular explanation for the final congruence of White South party identification and politics: Ronald Reagan, after two successful terms, was the first Republican president supported by the White South to have strong enough coattails to carry Senators into office.

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Nevertheless, underlying Reagan’s visible popularity was the evolution of the Democratic and Republican Parties, both of which were undergoing ideological shifts of their own, shifts that initially manifested much more clearly in presidential politics. Party division was the primary reason for the gaps between the two “Great White [South] Switches,” the first in presidential politics and the second in congressional politics. Conservative southern Democratic congressmen, dissenting from their national party on divisive issues such as Civil Rights, were able to cling to their White South constituencies by appealing to them on a local level, deviating from their national party platform. These congressmen also wielded the enormous social power of incumbency in the South, allowing them to defeat conservative Republican congressional candidates at a time when Republican presidential candidates were already the conservative champions of white southerners. Furthermore, Republican Party division stalled their congressional takeover of the White South: Republican congressmen, as a whole, were not completely aligned with their party’s new conservative stance, beginning in the 1960s, keeping them from making a strong, unified appeal to the White South until 1994, the year of Gingrich’s Republican Contract with America.

A Reagan Realignment

Reagan, an ex-Democrat himself, was in many ways more persuasive in realigning white southerners to the Republican Party than his Republican predecessors had been. “As a former Democrat,” he said in 1964, “I can tell you [that], . . . the leadership of that [Democratic] Party has been taking that Party, that honorable Party, down the road in the image of the labor Socialist Party of England.” When he was running for president, his lampooning of the Democratic Party often took a more subtle form: one particular advertisement features a soft-speaking Nancy Reagan chastising Jimmy Carter and Democratic Party leadership for their “vacillating,” weak foreign policy.

Previously, White South support for Barry Goldwater in the 1964 presidential election had been largely a repudiation of Johnson’s 1964 Civil Rights Act; support for American Independent Party candidate George Wallace in 1968 put on hold the possibility of a Republican partisan
realignment. In fact, Wallace distanced himself from both parties in the presidential election: “You can take all the Democratic candidates for President and all the Republican candidates for President,” he said in 1968. “Put them in a sack and shake them up. . . . Take the first one that falls out. . . because there’s not a dime’s worth of difference in any of them.”

As Black and Black argue, only successful showings in elected office align groups to new parties, leading to switches in congressional voting. Reagan was the first White South-supported Republican president since Reconstruction to have two successful terms; Goldwater was never elected, and Richard Nixon, while popular among white southerners in his 1972 landslide reelection, resigned in disgrace in 1974 following the Watergate scandal, preventing a “coattail effect” of his own. The “Reagan Realignment,” similar to Carlyle’s “Great Man Theory,” places great importance on the influence of a single man, and perhaps rightfully so: by the end of Reagan’s tenure, 60 percent of conservative white southerners identified with the Republican Party.

However, this argument assumes a certain congruity between presidential popularity and congressional voting that, while often true, in this case ignores the positions of the very congressmen in question. Simply calling the congressional realignment a product of Reagan’s superior political aptitude ignores the changing, internally contentious political climate in which Goldwater and Nixon were running. For almost three decades, presidential candidates from both parties had been arguing for ideals different than those advocated by some of their party’s congressmen, particularly those in the South. Underlying Reagan’s visible popularity was a more profound change: the beginning of more unified parties.

Party division, in the form of dissenting Southern Democrats, kept the White South from voting Republican in congressional elections in 1964, the year that they first started supporting Republican presidential candidates; greater Democratic and Republican national party unity finally allowed the congruence of presidential and congressional elections in the 1990s.
Southern Democratic Congressmen Maintain Power

Republican presidential candidates may have dominated White South presidential voting, but Southern Democrats until the 1990s still reigned in local politics, wielding tremendous local power and quelling the political aspirations of any potential Republican candidates. Many Southern Democrats, such as Georgia Senator Richard Russell Jr., chose to remain in the party despite obvious, growing differences with the national party. These senators, and not simply the failures of Goldwater and Nixon, were instrumental in stalling new White South party identification. A “southern man of my decided views against the modern trend euphoniously labeled ‘civil rights’ had no chance for the [Democratic Party presidential] nomination,” said Russell in 1951, but he continued to serve as a conservative Democratic Senator from Georgia until his death in 1971.7 South Carolina Senator Olin D. Johnston, in an article published in the Citizens’ Council, the newspaper of the white supremacist group known as the “White Citizens’ Council (WCC),” gave his “absolute agreement” to the group’s fight against racial integration, despite the fact that their methods included mob lynching and terror.8 The same party whose northern, national leaders were pushing civil rights bills and meeting with Martin Luther King had southern members, like Johnston, who were “heartily in favor” of groups like the WCC.

These senators could still be elected and wield local power simply by continuing to adopt their views to fit the views of their district, something impossible for presidents to do. Presidential candidates had to take a side on divisive national issues.9 For a party with a constituency as diversified as the Democratic Party’s in the 1960s, Democratic presidential candidates could not help but alienate part of their party with divisive issues such as welfare, busing, and integration. And at the time, the White South constituted a minority of the national party but a majority of the southern senators’ electorate.

At a local level these Southern Democratic senators were able to quash Republican attempts at congressional seats with the power of incum-
bency. Incumbency, as explained by political scientist James E. Campbell, connotes “ability and experience” to voters, a primary reason why senators are often re-elected despite changing national political atmospheres. Incumbency often means familiarity, and voters are more likely to vote for a familiar congressional candidate. But incumbency goes further than just single candidates: in many cases, such as rural Mississippi, the incumbent Democratic Party had become so entrenched in southern society that it was institutionalized, the only ticket on which to run. After all, the Democratic Party was the traditional party of the ex-Confederates, and the southern Democratic senators were the ones who had maintained many of the pro-white racial policies, such as de facto slavery (with sharecropping) and de facto school segregation (with opposition to forced busing).

One might assume that the rising liberalism of the Democratic Party would at least sway the thinking of some southern Democratic senators, and it did. But, further illustrating the power of dissenting Democratic Party members, these “loyalist” senators were repudiated in Democratic primaries, keeping them from being targets of conservative Republican congressional candidates. For, in final elections, what was the point of turning to a conservative Republican candidate if there was already a conservative Democratic congressman to vote for, a member of the traditional southern party? Gillis Long, widely recognized as the South’s most “liberal” Democrat, was defeated in 1965 by a conservative cousin, Speedy O. Long. In 1970, Texas Democratic Senator Ralph Yarborough, a staunch supporter of “Great Society” programs and an opponent of the Vietnam War, was defeated by Lloyd Bentsen, a more conservative Democrat who supported tax cuts and school prayer. Both defeats conveyed the power of conservative Democratic senators and their ability to stall the rise of conservative Republican senatorial hopefuls, a sharp contrast to national, presidential politics where Republican presidential candidates had already cemented themselves as the conservative champions of the White South.
A New Generation of Southern Democrats: Waning Interest in the White South

To illustrate the role of dissenting Southern Democrats in a different way: when they finally loosened their stronghold on the White South, both voluntarily and involuntarily, the Republicans found increased congressional success. The traditional, dissenting Southern Democrats could not evade national politics forever. By 1986, the generation of Southern Democrats who had opposed the Civil Rights legislation had largely passed on; segregationist Mississippi Senator Jim Eastland, the “Voice of the White South,” retired in 1978. The Voting Rights Act, among other things, had changed the demographics of the Southern electorate: by 1986, there was less than a 5% difference nationwide in the number of African-American and White voters. The end of African-American disenfranchisement meant that new Southern Democrats had to cater to a biracial electorate simply to get elected, further narrowing the number of traditional Southern Democrats.

Even before this demographic change, the Democratic National Party had been working to “reform” the dissenting Southern Democrats. In 1972 Alabama Governor George Wallace, fresh off his candidacy for the segregationist American Independent Party in 1968, ran for president on the Democratic ticket. Wallace’s campaign was promising; polls had him defeating George McGovern 40% to 23% in national primaries. Wallace was substantially more popular in the South, winning over half of the party’s vote in the area. Despite the popular support of southerners, however, Wallace only won 19% of the southern delegates’ votes from the “reformed” southern Democratic states. African-Americans made up a much larger portion of the southern constituency than they had in 1968, and with them came a “Democratic [Party] insistence on more equitable representation [in the South] of minorities, females, and young people” that was manifested in a new legion of liberal southern delegates. Only one-third of the South’s delegates in 1972 were chosen in southern primaries; the rest were chosen at conventions. And these new Democratic delegates saw Wallace as “exactly the type of southern politician they wanted to repudiate.”
The South’s new electorate and the Democratic National Party’s pressing influence on the South led to a decline in the traditional, dissenting Southern Democrats. By 1986, the voting record of Democratic Party congressmen was much more unified; on average, 86% of party congressmen would vote together on any given bill, a substantial increase from 70% in 1972.\textsuperscript{18} Party division maintained a gap between southern congressional elections and southern loyalty in presidential elections; as conservative Democrats gradually faded from the Senate, the stage was set for a “Republican Takeover of Congress.”

Republican Party Unity: The New Right

In July of 1980, American political writer and influential intellectual Irving Kristol published an article in the \textit{The Wall Street Journal} chastising the media’s naive coverage of the Republican Party Convention, where conservative Ronald Reagan had officially been nominated for president, as a sort of “political spasm,” a “misadventure” somehow caused by short term electoral calculations. On the contrary, Kristol argued, the Convention was in fact the beginning of an entirely new party: “The New Republican Party.”\textsuperscript{19} And he was exactly right.

Reagan’s election signified the coalescence of three factions in the Republican Party—the “Fundamental [Social] Republicans,” the “Republican Establishment” (Big Business), and the “Neo-Conservative Republicans”—while signifying the defeat of the “Liberal Republicans,” the Rockefeller Republicans. This “New Right” brought together Christian values, such as school prayer; conservative social values, “traditional” family values; and big business interests, such as decreased regulation. To the White South, this new party was simply an extension of the ideals of the conservative Republican presidential candidates that they had already supported.\textsuperscript{20}

But Reagan’s nomination did not immediately end Republican Party factionalism; it simply conveyed, similar to the Democratic Party’s continued nomination of liberal presidential candidates, the sustaining power of the party’s new dominant faction. The ensuing decline of moderate and liberal Republicans did, at times, happen voluntarily;
in 1980, Republican/Independent Congressmen Thomas Foglietta officially became a member of the Democratic Party.\textsuperscript{21} But in many cases the moderate Republicans fought back, and these dissenters also played a vital role in stalling the White South’s move to the Republican Party in congressional elections.

In a 1980 article in the \textit{The New York Times}, moderate Republicans promised to fight the Republican Party’s new conservative initiatives by, at times, joining forces with moderate Democratic congressmen. “We’ve got to fight as hard as the conservatives fight,” said Senator Lowell Weicker of Connecticut.\textsuperscript{22} But they were fighting a losing battle. New York Senator Jacob Javits, the Republican Congressman with the most liberal voting record, lost his bid for reelection in 1980. By 1982, only 15 of the 53 Republican senators in Congress were moderates.\textsuperscript{23}

However, these dissenting Republican senators played a vital role in stalling the White South’s move to the Republican Party in congressional elections; for what allowed for Gingrich’s 1994 “Republican Contract with America” was its unprecedented widespread allegiance by Republican congressional candidates. It was signed by all but two of the Republican candidates for Congress.

\textbf{Republican Contract with America: Unified, Promised Action}

Republicans had held national power, presidential power, among white southerners since the 1960s, but Southern Democrats continued to hold onto the local power that they had wielded since the end of Reconstruction. The 1994 Republican Contract with America sought to remedy this discordance. The Contract begins: “We offer a detailed agenda for national renewal,” and, at its core, it was a promise of Party unity in pursuing the passage of the bills.\textsuperscript{24} Because the Contract promised specific action to combat President Clinton’s policies, it successfully nationalized the election, overcoming the incumbency barrier in the South. Furthermore, the national bills proposed by the Contract were in sharp contrast to the purely local power wielded by traditional, conservative Southern Democratic congressmen. They provided an impetus for white southerners to break tradition and immediately start voting for Republican congressmen.
A pillar of the Republican Contract with America was party unity; without a strong, unified majority, promising the passage of specific legislation would not have been feasible or persuasive. Dissenting Republican congressmen, then, played a significant role in delaying the White South’s move to the Republican Party in congressional elections. As moderates and liberals faded from the Republican Party, the GOP’s Brookings Party Unity score reached almost a century high 91.8% in 1995. In 1980, their score was only 77.5%.25

Specifically, the Contract promised, in part, tax cuts, a smaller role for government and a crackdown on welfare spending.26 The Contract came amidst popular southern protest against Clinton’s liberal policy in regards to health care, gays in the military, and abortion. In June of 1993, white Southern Baptists “bashed” Clinton and gays at the annual Southern Baptist Convention, fury with Clinton uniting one of the most historically tumultuous groups in the nation.27 The bills on the 1994 Contract with America provided an immediate, promising way for the White South to repudiate Clinton and his liberal policies. For perhaps first time for many white southerners, congressional elections would have visible, immediate ramifications in national politics.

The White South was able to immediately repudiate Johnson and the 1964 Civil Rights Act by voting for Goldwater, but party division prevented the Republicans from making a similar, unified appeal to white southerners in congressional politics until 1994.

Enduring Division

But unity against a common enemy is quite different from complete ideological harmony. The 1994 Contract brought together the “Christian Right,” economic libertarians, and social conservatives—many disgruntled “single issue” voters looking to combat a particular Clinton policy. This Republican coalition has remained to this day, consistently voting together against President Obama’s measures.

For this rather awkward coalition, the threat of division is always on the horizon. “Economic libertarians and Christian evangelicals, united
by their common enemy, are strange bedfellows in today’s Republican party, just as the two Georges—the archconservative Wallace and the uberliberal McGovern—found themselves in the same Democratic Party in 1972,” wrote Harvard Professor Steven Pinker in 2014.28

Perhaps the lesson is that party politics is a series of compromises, of brief unity interspersed with division. Civil Rights legislation split the previously cohesive Democratic Party; today, actions (or lack of actions) against the Affordable Care Act are causing rifts between Tea Party members and the Republican Party leadership.

And party division has written much of our nation’s history. Dissenting party members delayed White South’s move to the Republican Party in congressional elections, but such dissention also sowed the seeds for our nation’s second party, the Democratic-Republicans. The same men who collaborated to draft the Constitution later fought over the Constitution’s interpretation. The same men who cavorted in the traditional Democratic Party later fought and splintered over the Civil Rights Movement.

Where will the next split be? One can only speculate, but in 1964, a year of tremendous change for both parties, Barry Goldwater emerged from the Republican primary as the winner with only 38% of the popular vote, suggesting the party disharmony that would later lead to its new conservative stance. Today, a year and a half before the 2016 election, no Republican candidate is polling more than 12.5% in early primaries, a historic low even at this point.29

Another split may be imminent, but one thing appears certain: it will not involve the White South, who, excluding Florida, supported Republican candidate Mitt Romney in 2012 with over 80% loyalty. In the Deep South, Republican Party loyalty often exceeds 90% of the population.30

After decades of realignment, it seems the Democratic “Solid South” has become the Republican “Solid South.”
Appendix

In forming my conclusion, I came upon several interesting stories that unfortunately did not end up in my paper. Below is a summary of my favorite (#28 in the endnotes):

Take an issue, any issue, in today’s politics, and one will likely already know what the electoral voting map looks like. Almost like a kid given a coloring book with strict instructions, politicians today seem to know that the South should be red, the Northeast blue, the Coasts blue, and the Midwest a mostly red. One of the biggest assumptions in this paper is that the White South always voted as a unit, as a majority, and, while there were sometimes differences between the Peripheral and Deep South, more often than not this has been the case.

In a fascinating opinion piece for the *The New York Times*, Harvard Professor Steven Pinker traces this geographical/ideological divide back to British settlers of colonial America. The North was first inhabited by English farmers and the South by Scots-Irish herders. The very nature of these two occupations may have led to the ideological divide: since the livelihood of sheep herders can be stolen in a second, the herders developed a “culture of honor” with strong retaliation for theft. Farmers, on the other hand, could afford to be “less belligerent.” Perhaps it is also, as Pinker proposes, an extension of Hobbes’s theory: without a strong government presence, such as the “Wild West” or Old South, people are prone to attacking each other, leading to the same type of “culture of honor.”

Notes


17. Ibid., 248.


20. Ibid.


23. Ibid.


30. Ibid.

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