Political Realignment in the South

A nation as large and diverse as America must certainly face a multitude of social and political problems. From debates over war and national security to disagreements over social security and healthcare coverage, the clash of ideas and ideologies on this country's socio-political stage never ends. However, despite the emergence of hundreds of new, controversial issues over the past few decades, no issue has remained as persistently relevant and explosive as race. Perhaps owing to America's history as a nation of immigrants, willing and forced, segments within our population remain distinct, holding individual ideologies and values. Though some may deny that racism still exists in this country, and indeed one rarely encounters its most explicit, institutionalized forms today, our nation is far from color blind. On the political front, our differences remain profound. In 2004, about 69 percent of African American voters identified with the Democratic party whereas only 35 percent of the total electorate fell into this category (Winneg and Jamieson, 581). Clearly, there is a difference in the manifestations of political beliefs among black and white voters. This difference becomes especially sizable in the South (identified here as the 11 states of the old Confederacy), where white voters have significantly moved away from the Democratic party in favor of the Republican party since the early 1960's. Once dominant in the South, the Democratic party no longer controls the majority of southern states because a massive party realignment occurred between 1964 and 2000. Having supported civil rights in the 1960's, busing to achieve integration of public schools in the 1970's, and affirmative action in the 1980's, the Democrats no longer reflected the racial attitudes of the majority of the white southern electorate. Many factors played a role in this ideological realignment, but the Democrats lost the South not simply because of liberal agendas or ideological rifts, but because of the concrete issue of race.

To analyze the intricacies of this realignment argument and to prove its racial nature, this discussion must begin by assaying the fallout from the Civil War. Whether for ideological or, as historians often argued today, pragmatic reasons, President Abraham Lincoln abolished slavery with his Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln was a Republican, the South considered slavery vital to its way of life, and thus support for Republicans in the South shrunk drastically after the Civil War. Though subsequent realignments occurred (1896, 1932, etc.), Democrats continued to dominate southern politics until about 1964. In that year, a significant turning point for political parties in America, about 66 percent of southerners officially considered themselves Democrats. This number dwindled slowly and dropped to 36 percent in 2000 (Flanigan and Zingale, 74). The change began with what Hanes Walton deems "bold legislation" of the Johnson Administration, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Open Housing Act of 1968. The Democratic Johnson administration strongly supported these bills and by doing so "remade the historic character of the Democratic party on race" (Walton, 37-38).

While some of the southerners that left the Democratic party became Republicans, many more chose to not officially identify with either party. While the Democratic party lost about 30 percent of its southern base between 1964 and 2000, only about six percent of this 30 percent felt ideologically inclined to join the Republican party. On the other hand, the number of independents in the South jumped from 15 percent in 1964 to 38 percent in 2000 (Flanigan and Zingale, 74). Some political scientists contend that southerners left the Democratic party because of an overall ideological shift, not specific grievances regarding race (Knuckley, 5, 11). However, this data shows that ex-Democratic southerners felt hesitant to officially join the Republican party even after leaving the Democrats, effectively defeating Knuckley's argument that southerners had an ideological rift with the Democrats. Given this data, a more logical

argument would conclude that southerners felt unable to continue their support for the Democrats given the party's changed stance on racial issues (it had once supported slavery but had now become liberal on issues of race), yet they did not shift to the Republican party because they still did not agree with Republican ideology. An ideological rift did not occur, simply a disagreement with the Democrats on the vital issue of race which caused southerners to leave the party and become, by and large, independents. It is important to clarify here that although southerners who left the Democrats did not become Republicans in name, a realignment did occur because they overwhelmingly voted Republican from that time onwards. We must remember that though their ideology may not have been aligned with that of Republicans, their votes have taken Democrats out of power in the South and brought Republicans into power. Evidence for this lies in the fact that, as of 2003, Democrats had lost 64 percent of southern governorships, 59 percent of Senate seats and 56 percent of House seats that they held in 1951 (Black, 1006).

If racial attitudes alone split the majority of white southerners from the Democratic party, then this discussion must address the manifestations of racial attitudes both before and after the realignment. Racial attitudes in the South trace back to "some of the nation's most pivotal moments: the writing of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, the events triggering the Civil War, and the wrenching abandonment of Jim Crow" (Valentino and Sears, 673). These events left racial attitudes "deeply ingrained" in the minds of southern voters. Using these assumptions, Valentino and Sears seek to prove two things. First, "white Southerners' votes and partisanship have become increasingly aligned with their racial attitudes since the Civil War. No similar increase exists for whites elsewhere in the country." Second, "regional attitudes have a significantly stronger impact on white Southerners' partisanship than elsewhere.

Moreover, this regional difference is not due simply to nonracial conservatism" (675). Their findings prove both of these hypotheses true. They find that "symbolic racism" (measured by a four-question agree/disagree survey gauging attitudes of whites towards blacks), remains highest in the Deep South. More significantly, symbolic racism has fallen in all other parts of the country since 1994, but has actually risen in the Deep South (678). Valentino and Sears also note that though support for Jim Crow has declined nationwide since 1990, it remains highest in the Deep South.

These data indicate that racial attitudes remain most significant in the South, however, how can we prove that overall ideology did not also change and lead to the realignment? In the same survey, Valentino and Sears find party ideology in the South to be surprisingly similar to the North and West throughout the years of the realignment. They conclude:

> Jim Crow or "old fashioned" racism has diminished drastically, but the South has retained slightly more of it than the rest of the country …White Southerners have consistently been more ideologically conservative than other whites over this period, but there has been no change in the size of that difference … Changes in these differences are therefore unlikely to account for the white Southern realignment over the past three decades. (678)

By this account, we can reasonably conclude that though the ideology of Southern Democrats of old remains more conservative than their counterparts in other parts of the country, this difference alone cannot account for their increased support for the Republican party. The Democratic party's changed stance on race drove white southerners away, even though on other issues, the Democrats remained a suitable choice.

Can just one single issue cause such a major shift in party identification, even if it is race? This thesis is supported by data from at least one other recent major realignment, that of Hispanic voters in California. In 1994, California's Proposition 187, which the state's Republican party supported, passed with 59 percent of the vote. California's Hispanic voters

were overwhelmingly opposed to the proposition because of its anti-immigrant underpinnings (Bowler et al, 148-149). As recent events have shown us, immigration is a racial issue, and Bowler et al declare that the majority of Hispanics considered the proposition a racial issue (150). Before it passed, more Hispanic voters identified with the Republican party than Democrat, but this scenario was reversed after Proposition 187 passed (156-157). This example adds further proof to the theory of party realignment caused by the issue of race.

Though it may seem difficult to believe that one issue alone could cause voters to change their party identification, race is one example powerful enough to do it. Southerners have always been more ideologically conservative than voters in other parts of the country, but this ideology alone is insufficient in explaining their exodus from the Democratic to the Republican party since the early 1960's. Had the civil rights movement not brought the issue of race to the forefront, Democrats may have still held control over the South. Southern Democratic candidates remain adequately conservative to garner support from the southern white electorate, but their party's stand on the one issue of race continues to drive white voters toward Republicans. Ideology is important in determining voter identification, but some issues may at times override ideological leanings. Race, given its historically significant status in the foundations of the American social fabric, remains the foremost of such issues.

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