

NEW ISSUES, NEW LOYALTIES, AND THE POLITICS
OF CLASS AND RACE IN THE TWO-PARTY SOUTH

A Case Study of Tennessee Voting,
1976-1992

By

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Throughout the history of the United States, the two-party political system, a phenomenon unintended and even feared by the founding fathers, has been considered the hallmark of American democracy. Competition between two institutionalized, ideologically coherent, and relatively durable political organizations became the vehicle for representative and responsible government in the constitutionally fragmented Madisonian system. As Samuel Lubell illustrated in his study of politics during the New Deal era, the two parties have frequently shared a "sun and a moon" relationship, consisting of "a dominant majority party, which stayed in office as long as its elements held together, and a minority party which gained power only when the majority coalition split."¹ Politics during the New Deal era certainly fit this description. In the wake of the worst depression in the nation's history and a thoroughly discredited Republican administration, the Democratic party in 1932 supplanted traditional partisan loyalties with a class-based coalition of northern urban workers, union members, immigrants, Catholics, blacks, and southern whites. The addition of new cohorts of voters to the historically solid Democratic base in the South led the Democratic party, which had elected only two presidents since the Civil War era, to five straight executive terms. Scholars considered the New Deal coalition as evidence of a realignment, defined as a relatively durable shift in the underlying pattern of partisanship in the electorate that results in a reversal in status of the majority and minority parties.²

In the postwar period, however, the New Deal coalition began to crack. Its disintegration was due mainly to the efforts of liberal northerners in the 1950s to push the Democratic party toward a pro-civil rights position. The agitation of these mostly middle-class, young Democrats from the North disrupted the partnership between the northern and southern wings of the party in which southern Democrats had supported class-based legislation in exchange for autonomy over southern race relations.³ The creation of a biracial electorate in the South through federal intervention undermined Democratic party rule by introducing new and divisive racial issues that cut across traditional party lines. The result was the demise of Democratic hegemony in the so-called Solid South and the end of the one-party system that had dominated southern politics since the end of Reconstruction. Demographic change and social turmoil in the 1960s over Vietnam and civil rights added to dissension within the Democratic party to provide the necessary ingredients for the development of two-party competition.

The political landscape in the "New" South reflected both the nationalization of southern politics and the persistence of historically southern ideological undercurrents of economic populism and social conservatism. Reforms in the presidential nomination process, which produced ideologically polarized candidates, allowed right-leaning Republican presidential nominees to defeat their liberal Democratic competitors in the South with conservative positions on the

largely symbolic issues of national politics - race, abortion, religion, and patriotism. In congressional, state, and local contests, however, where campaigns revolved around specific issues of policy, benefits, and constituent service rather than broad ideological conflict, southern Democratic candidates successfully appealed to the populist tendencies of their local electorate.

Beginning in the late 1960s, scholars began applying the language of realignment to the massive transformation of southern party loyalties. The Goldwater phenomenon of 1964 and the Wallace third-party movement of 1968 offered the initial symptoms. The landslide election of Republican Richard Nixon in 1972 seemed to indicate that the formerly Democratic South was now solidly Republican. In subsequent elections from 1976 to 1992, however, patterns of southern partisanship and voting in sub-presidential contests called into question this premature conclusion of realignment. The decline in Democratic party identification among southern whites translated into increasing numbers of Independent voters rather than Republican party gains. Republican presidential dominance in the 1980s was marred in the South by widespread ticket-splitting that allowed southern Democrats to maintain a strong presence in congressional and gubernatorial races while the Republican party reigned in presidential politics. Most importantly, the election of a southern Democrat to the White House on two separate occasions - in 1976 and in 1992 - demonstrated the inadequacy of realignment language in describing the new dynamics of southern politics.

In a case study of one southern state, this thesis traces voter choice in the period from 1976 through 1992 in an analysis of the rise of two-party politics in the South. The social, economic, and political transformation of the South had fundamental implications for national politics; freed from the hindrances of one-party rule, the South became a critical political arena for the ideological battles between the two major parties. The penetration of two-party competition on all electoral levels in the South "nationalized" political debate; however, the regions's unique historical legacy ensured that distinctively southern ideological forces continued to shape partisan politics. Tennessee is a logical choice for this analysis as part of the Peripheral South - whose other states include Arkansas, Florida, North Carolina, Texas, and Virginia - where two-party competition in the South first took hold. Tennessee is also considered a "Composite of the South."⁴

Durable regional divisions between a mountain Republican enclave in the East, whose loyalties dated back to Unionist sentiment in the highlands during the Civil War secession conflict, Middle Tennessee, whose strong class-based voting divisions were molded by the New Deal, and rural agrarian West Tennessee, whose Democratic loyalties were severely challenged during the civil rights era by the race issue, provide a complex mosaic of southern political sentiment.

This thesis explores southern voting behavior on still another level of analysis. An examination of the electoral behavior of particular demographic groups - specifically, the

key swing group of lower income voters - in the southern electorate best demonstrates the manifestations of political and social change. A case study of presidential voting from 1976 to 1992 in selected precincts from a metropolitan county in Tennessee provides sufficiently homogeneous units of analysis from which to draw conclusions about southern voting behavior in general during this time. Because of its particularly strong Democratic tradition, evidence of increased two-party competition in Davidson County, home of the state capital Nashville, was particularly indicative of the extent of the southern transformation. The continuing success of southern Democrats in the developing two-party competition of sub-presidential contests, coupled with the emergence of a Republican presidential stronghold in the South, provides an excellent perspective from which to examine three issues: change and continuity in southern political attitudes and ideology, the nature of realignment in southern partisanship and voting, and the significance of the South in presidential politics.

The Demise of the Solid South: Swing Voters and Split Tickets

Although the South was a crucial element in the broadly based New Deal coalition, its political climate remained distinct from other regions of the country. The lingering effects of military defeat, an outdated agrarian economy, and a

racial caste system hindered the development of democratic political participation and legitimate two-party competition that had generally characterized the American political system outside the South. In his 1949 landmark analysis, Southern Politics in State And Nation, V.O. Key identified several distinctly southern institutions - disfranchisement, malapportionment, elite factional rule within a one-party system, and the "Jim Crow" system of racial segregation - that sustained the conservative Democratic unity in the Solid South. The entire system, as Key asserted, "revolves around the position of the Negro."⁵ The overriding preoccupation with race stifled debate of the potentially divisive issues that sustained partisan divisions in the rest of the nation. Without national party competition, Democratic factions - transient groupings with little ideological coherence, issue consistency, or responsibility to a particular constituency - assumed the roles of political parties within each state. These rotating groups of "in" politicians dominated political leadership unchallenged by a durable organization of "outs" who could represent lower income viewpoints.⁶ Once elected, southern politicians frequently showed more inclination for personal gain than for public good; the resulting policy inertia further solidified status quo, top-heavy politics. Thus Key painted a dismal picture of the South as a region isolated from national politics whose elitist one-party system operated at the expense of a large group of non-participating "have-nots" of both races.

Yet Key did not rule out the potential for political

evolution in the South. He predicted that if the conservative elite monopoly on political power could be broken, and if black southerners could be allowed to participate in political life, "the underlying southern liberalism will undoubtedly be mightily strengthened."⁷ For Key, urbanization, industrialization, and legal dismemberment of the southern racial caste system were the necessary ingredients for political change that could replace the crippling institutions of the South with invigorated two-party competition. The result would be the formation of economically-based political coalitions - similar to partisan divisions in other regions of the country during the New Deal - that would provide a long-needed partisan vehicle for the "have-nots" of both races.

Writing in 1949, Key could hardly have predicted that such a period of sweeping social and political transformation was only a few years away. In their book, Southern Politics and the Second Reconstruction (1975), Numan V. Bartley and Hugh D. Graham chronicled the demise of the Solid South that began slowly in the decade after World War II. The emerging two-party competition initially took shape along class lines. The 1950s witnessed the election of New Deal style Democrats like Senators Estes Kefauver and Albert Gore of Tennessee through campaigns that highlighted economic concerns over racial fears and united lower class white voters and blacks. In a Republican breakthrough in 1952, presidential candidate Dwight Eisenhower established the Republican party as the party of economic conservatism in the South by adding affluent white urban and

suburban voters to its traditional base of mountain Republicans, resulting in an Eisenhower victory in four Peripheral South states - Florida, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. As Bartley and Graham asserted, the South during this period began to demonstrate "New Dealish inclinations" within a nascent two-party framework that could challenge the elite leadership of the Democratic party if turnout among lower income whites and blacks increased.⁸

The political and social turmoil unleashed during the civil rights era, however, prevented the kind of class-based, biracial coalition-building that Key proposed. Beginning with the Supreme Court desegregation ruling in 1954 through the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the focus of southern politics shifted sharply back to race. Federal attempts to legislate social change in the South drove a wedge between blacks and poor whites, who felt most threatened by black advancement. The resulting extreme segregationist opposition among southern Democrats produced an ironic Republican coalition of blacks and affluent white moderates who feared the potential economic damage of "massive resistance" policies that were enacted by Democratic state legislatures to delay integration. In the presidential election of 1956, Eisenhower ran best in black precincts, which in some cities recorded a 75% or higher Republican vote, and in upper-class white precincts, similar to his 1952 showing.⁹

The 1960 and 1964 presidential elections saw the southern black vote return to the Democratic party, and particularly in

1964, a dramatic increase in southern white defection. The Kennedy and Johnson administrations established the national Democratic party as the champion of minority rights, abandoning previous efforts by the national Democratic organization to balance a growing commitment to civil rights with the maintenance of southern Democratic support. Johnson himself recognized the political consequences of his support for the Civil Rights Act of 1964, confiding to an aide that he had "delivered the South to the Republican party for a long time to come."¹⁰ In the 1964 presidential race, arch-conservative Republican candidate Barry Goldwater ran impressively in the South in a campaign based on opposition to civil rights. Despite a national landslide victory by Democrat Lyndon Johnson, Goldwater scored an unprecedented victory in all five Deep South states - Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina - while earning a majority of white support in every southern state except Texas. Only in the Peripheral South - Arkansas, Florida, North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia - did New Deal style loyalties and concern for the fate of social programs like Tennessee Valley Authority and social security among lower-income whites override racial tensions.¹¹

By 1964, a racially polarized electorate had clearly emerged in the South. The national Democratic commitment to civil rights allowed Republicans to add rural, working-class southern whites to their base among the middle and upper class, thereby posing a serious challenge to the Democratic party in presidential politics in the South.¹²

While the Republican party made substantial gains at the presidential level, and to a certain degree in congressional and state politics, the three-way presidential race of 1968 indicated that the new southern political divisions did not fit neatly into a two-party system. Republican Richard Nixon won a narrow plurality of 34.7 percent of the southern vote, carrying the Peripheral South with the support of economically conservative affluent urban whites. The segregationist American Independent candidate George Wallace found his base among defecting rural and working-class white Democrats, winning the Deep South and 34.3 percent of the southern vote overall. The liberal Democratic candidate Hubert Humphrey found support mainly among blacks and other minorities, who earned him 31.0 percent of the southern vote and the electoral votes of Texas.¹³ This three-way pattern seemed likely to continue in 1972, as Wallace ran impressively in several Democratic primaries until he was wounded in an attempted assassination in May. Nixon inherited the Wallace vote in the general election and scored a smashing conservative victory over the liberal Democratic candidate George McGovern.

Nixon's southern appeal reflected a convergence of cultural themes - racial animosity, patriotism, traditional morality, law and order, and distrust of liberal elites - that were effective Republican weapons against the chaotic backdrop of civil rights and social turmoil. As Kevin Phillips asserted in Boiling Point: Democrats, Republicans, and the Decline of Middle-Class Prosperity (1993), the 1960s cultural upheaval was "simply too

intense to permit a national party committed to left-liberal elites and their values to retain small-town, rural, and suburban presidential voters of moderate to conservative outlook who were Democrats largely because a century earlier their families had worn Confederate gray."¹⁴ By 1972, the former Solid South was characterized by a volatile white electorate whose future voting loyalties remained unclear. The emergence of southern liberalism and class-based partisan divisions that V.O. Key had predicted would follow the enfranchisement of blacks had failed to materialize; instead, cross-cutting racial and cultural issues and hostility toward the national Democratic party combined to mold a conservative Republican coalition of southern whites on the presidential level. Nixon's "New Majority" represented "a quite traditional southern triumph, under a new partisan label, of her more dominant social conservatism over her game but historically outweighed populism."¹⁵

Nixon's stunning success in capturing over three-fourths of the white vote in 1972 seemed to indicate a critical realignment in the South. V.O. Key described the necessary conditions for such a phenomenon as "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 pre-existing cleavage within the electorate."¹⁶ Southern political behavior during the presidential elections of 1964,

1968, and 1972 appeared to fit this description. Voter turnout had increased dramatically among poor whites and blacks after the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965; the number of voters in the election of 1968 was nearly three times what it had been twenty years before. While much of the increase was due to large registration drives, the salience of racial issues to southerners was an important factor. The three-way splintering of the electorate in 1968, and the successful Republican appeal to southern whites of all economic levels in the Nixon landslide of 1972, certainly spelled the end of the Solid Democratic South, and the beginning of a new Republican era in presidential politics.

Despite such obvious change, this Republican ascension in southern politics was incomplete. Though Republican candidates had some success on the state level, winning five of ten Senate elections and one of three gubernatorial contests in 1972, overall most sub-presidential Republican candidates were unable to ride the Nixon coattails to victory. The Wallace voters that Nixon inherited generally remained loyal to the Democratic party in state and local contests. Off-year congressional elections in 1974 reconfirmed a strong Democratic presence on the state level; previous Republican victories were overturned in the Tennessee gubernatorial race, a Senate contest in Florida, and numerous positions in state legislatures in the Rim South.¹⁷ For many southern whites, casting a Republican vote in presidential elections and Democratic votes in other races seemed a logical reconciliation of the divergent ideological

preferences of southern Democrats and the national party organization. The emergence of a split-ticket trend in southern politics confounded the assertions of some analysts that a Republican realignment had occurred. A pattern of party defection was also a national trend that in the 1980s produced an even more important phenomenon - the split outcome of a Republican president and a Democratic Congress.

Changing patterns of partisan identification in the South also thwarted the development of a Republican majority. Although the Democratic party lost much of its white base in the civil rights era, the loss did not translate directly into Republican gains. The number of white Independents in the South jumped from 18 percent in 1960 to 33 percent in 1976, while Republican party identification remained a constant 21 percent of the southern white electorate.¹⁸ The decline in Democratic party identification among white southerners was partially offset by overwhelming majorities of black southerners who identified themselves with the Democratic party. Thus the changing composition of the southern electorate still left the Republican party with numerically inadequate bases in state politics and a dependency in presidential contests upon a key group of lower income white swing voters. These voters had abandoned the Democratic party in the presidential races of 1968 and 1972, but continued to support the populist campaigns of state level Democrats, who were able to maintain a successful biracial coalition in congressional, state, and local contests. A split-level division in partisan strength and ambiguous trends

in party identification among white southerners left the realignment issue unresolved in the 1970s.

The New Deal Revisited: The Exceptional Case of 1976

Scholars disagree over which factors enabled the Democratic party to rise from the electoral ashes of the disastrous 1972 presidential campaign and recapture the White House in 1976. The success of Jimmy Carter, a single-term Georgia governor and virtual political unknown, was due in no small part to his support in the South, a region that had emphatically demonstrated its distaste for non-southern Democratic presidential candidates in the 1968 and 1972 elections. Carter won 54.5 percent of the southern vote (compared to his 50.1 percent showing nationwide) and carried ten of the eleven former Confederate states, except Virginia.¹ Some political observers pointed to a changed political environment in the mid-1970s that was more favorable to moderate Democrats. Severe economic stagflation caused by raised oil prices and Vietnam-related federal debt fueled class resentment among lower income whites who had defected from the Democratic party to Nixon in 1972. Moreover, the legacy of Watergate and a general public revulsion with political leadership enhanced Carter's "anti-politics" campaign, allowing him to avoid taking specific positions on many divisive social

and cultural issues. Carter was also an astute campaigner. Recognizing the implications of a primary-centered nominating process, he campaigned early and heavily to establish himself as the sole moderate-to-conservative option to his more liberal Democratic contenders, who divided the loyalties of the left wing of the party.² Other scholars emphasized the role of candidate and other short-term factors - Carter's "southernness," his image as a Washington outsider, and his southern Baptist background - that temporarily halted Republican growth in the region. A combination of these explanations best describes the "Democratic Interlude"³ of 1976, an election whose results recalled traditional New Deal style patterns of voting yet still reflected newer trends in the southern electorate that had been developing since 1964.

After the events of the 1960s firmly established the image of a culturally liberal national Democratic party, its majority status in terms of the southern white presidential vote disappeared, though it did gain the vast bulk of the southern black vote. The impact of the conservative white exodus from the Democratic party was particularly clear in the overtly ideological contest between Nixon and McGovern in 1972. By 1976, however, economic issues assumed a much greater political significance after both voters and candidates in the mid-1970s shifted their attention away from the turmoil of racial issues. With this abatement of the race issue, a major obstacle that separated lower income whites and blacks within the Democratic party was reduced. The 1976 presidential election saw a return

of class voting among southern white voters, especially in urban areas, as many low income white Democrats who had favored Wallace in 1968 and Nixon in 1972 returned their loyalty to the party that still nominally claimed their partisan allegiance. Carter won 44 percent of the middle class white vote in the South, compared to 51 percent of the working class vote. In southern urban areas, the difference was more striking - Carter gained 69 percent of the working class vote.⁴ As Lamis asserted in The Two-Party South (1990), "the power of traditional Democratic party allegiance joined with the abatement of the race issue to bring back these once-disgruntled Democrats."⁵

Carter also embodied the combination of traditional and progressive themes that a new breed of moderate Democratic candidates on the state level had used successfully to appeal to the potent biracial Democratic coalition in the early 1970s. In Florida, Arkansas, South Carolina, Georgia, and even Mississippi, voters generally sided with racially moderate "New South" Democrats in low-keyed gubernatorial campaigns that called for racial harmony and change.⁶ In his presidential campaign, Carter emphasized his roots in the rural South yet spoke out in favor of civil rights and black interests. Carter also balanced his traditional conservative message to all southern whites with a direct appeal to low income voters - a "populist promise of tax reform" aimed at shifting tax burdens to big business and special interest groups.⁷

Carter's diverse appeal enabled him to win massive black

support and sufficiently large segments of white support to carry most of the South. Survey data indicate that a major factor in Carter's success was his ability to attract both racially liberal whites and strong segregationists, a marked contrast to the limited liberal appeal of Humphrey and McGovern. In 1968, Humphrey carried 50 percent of white voters who favored desegregation but only 20 percent of those who were conservative at all on the issue. Carter, on the other hand, won 46-47 percent of the racially liberal, the intermediate, and the strong segregationist white vote, and 48 percent of both those who thought racial change was proceeding too fast and those who thought the pace was about right.⁸ Carter's "neutralizing of the racial issue as a liability among southern white voters" enabled him to regain enough support from defected Democrats to carry ten southern states.⁹ By tapping the ideological wells of traditional southern culture and economic populism, Carter was able to unite a broadly based coalition of blacks and whites, civil rights leaders and segregationists, liberals and evangelists.

In Tennessee, the regional nature of partisanship and voting persisted. Carter received 65 percent of the Middle Tennessee vote, historically a Democratic stronghold in the state, 56 percent of the West Tennessee vote, and 49 percent of the East Tennessee vote, a traditional Republican base.¹⁰ Republican voting in East Tennessee did decline slightly due to support for Democratic economic policies among poorer whites. Analysis of Davidson county precinct results (see Essay on

Method and Sources) reflects the return of economically based voting patterns among southern whites and the primacy of economic issues over racial differences in vote choice (see Table 1). Both Carter and Senate candidate James Sasser, who ran against Republican incumbent William Brock, campaigned as moderate Democrats employing a "straddling" strategy - a blend of conservative and liberal themes and a conscious avoidance of racial issues - to appeal to the diverse biracial Democratic coalition.

TABLE 1:
VOTE IN DAVIDSON COUNTY BY RACE AND INCOME LEVEL, 1976

| | <u>President</u> | | <u>Senate</u> | |
|--------------------------|------------------|----------------|------------------|-----------------|
| | <u>Carter(D)</u> | <u>Ford(R)</u> | <u>Sasser(D)</u> | <u>Brock(R)</u> |
| <u>Black voters:</u> | | | | |
| Low income | 91.5% | 7.9% | 92.1% | 7.4% |
| Middle income | 94.7% | 4.8% | 94.1% | 5.4% |
| Upper income | 95.6% | 4.1% | 94.4% | 5.5% |
| <u>White voters:</u> | | | | |
| Low income | 67.0% | 31.7% | 64.3% | 35.0% |
| Lower-middle | 59.3% | 39.4% | 55.2% | 44.0% |
| Upper-middle | 38.3% | 60.2% | 39.9% | 59.5% |
| Upper income | 28.6% | 70.2% | 24.6% | 74.8% |
| Davidson County | 61.3% | 37.5% | 57.7% | 41.5% |
| Tennessee | 55.9% | 42.9% | 52.5% | 47.6% |

Source: Compiled by the author (see Essay on Method and Sources).

In a pattern characteristic of New Deal style class voting, both candidates received the support of over 90 percent of voters in black precincts and fared best among low and lower-middle income voters in white precincts. Sasser, like other southern Democratic politicians in 1976, clearly benefited from the standard-bearing populist candidacy of Jimmy Carter. Unlike previous election years, the Democratic presidential candidate polled slightly higher than the senatorial candidate across the state. Nashville overall reflected the strong Democratic tradition of the middle Tennessee region, providing both Democratic candidates with higher percentages than they received across the state. Throughout the South, the 1976 elections reaffirmed the presence of class-based voting divisions, an indication that moderate candidates and traditional partisan loyalties had rallied defecting lower income white voters back to the Democratic party.

Although the Democratic party certainly revived itself in the mid-1970s, several uncertain trends in southern political behavior remained that kept alive scholarly debate over a Republican presidential realignment. As mentioned earlier, the Democratic majority among white voters in terms of partisanship was severely eroded by 1976, though a comparison between raw party identification and partisan tendencies demonstrates that the decline was not as steep as some realignment scholars suggested. In 1976, 47 percent of white southerners declared

themselves to be Democrats, 35 percent considered themselves Independents, and 18 percent identified themselves as Republicans.¹² When those Independents who admittedly "lean" toward either the Democratic or the Republican party are included among that party's ranks, the picture changes. In 1976, 56 percent of white southerners possessed Democratic partisan tendencies, while 29 percent indicated Republican partisan tendencies, leaving only 16 percent of the southern white electorate in the true Independent category.¹³ The existence of a potential Democratic majority among white southerners underscored the extent of white defection from the party in terms of actual voting. That Carter was only able to win 47 percent of the overall white vote in the South and a majority of white support in only three states, his home state of Georgia, Arkansas, and Tennessee, indicated the weakness of the Democratic party among white southerners, even under the favorable conditions of the 1976 election. Plainly, Carter's victory in the South relied heavily on strong support among black voters.

An analysis of ideology and party identification further emphasizes the ideological diversity among Democratic identifiers that hindered united Democratic support for a presidential candidate. In The Vital South (1992), Earl and Merle Black divided the white southern electorate into three groups on the basis of partisanship and self-placement on an ideological continuum.¹⁴ (Because of the overwhelmingly Democratic partisanship and policy preferences of black

southerners, they were considered separately.) The core Republican group consisted of all Republicans and conservative Independents and claimed 27 percent of southern voters in 1976. Core Democrats, who included a sizable group of liberal Democrats, a larger group of moderate Democrats, and the small number of liberal Independents, claimed 31 percent of the electorate. Finally, the swing group of white voters, comprised of conservative Democrats and moderate Independents, made up 22 percent of the southern electorate. The Blacks then examined how each group scored on thermometer ratings of a variety of political groups, symbols, and issues.

The composition of these three groups reveals important characteristics of southern white voters. Republican partisans demonstrated greater ideological cohesiveness than their Democratic counterparts - all Republican identifiers were classified as core Republicans, while Democratic identifiers were divided between the core Democrat and swing groups. Moreover, scores on the political scales underscored the contrast in ideological unity between Republicans and Democrats.¹⁵ A great majority of core Republicans rated conservatives, the military, and the importance of religion very warmly. They also adopted strong conservative positions on school prayer, affirmative action, national defense, and government responsibility for jobs. The portrait of core Republicans revealed a broad conservative consensus; few issues split these bedrock Republicans, or deterred their support for Republican presidential candidates, as indicated by their 80 percent support for Gerald Ford in 1976.

In contrast, core Democrats demonstrated both liberal and conservative preferences. As expected, they rated highly liberals, blacks, and civil rights leaders, but also conservatives, religion, and the military. Core Democrats favored liberal positions on government services and government responsibility for jobs but they joined core Republicans in rejecting affirmative action and quotas. The values of core Democrats explained their support for a centrist, populist candidate like Carter, who earned 71 percent of the core Democrat vote, but they also revealed Republican opportunities, particularly if a Democratic candidate adopted liberal positions across the board. In their rejection of racial preference in job hiring, core Democrats demonstrated attitudes in direct opposition to the interests of southern blacks, the other segment of the Democratic coalition, and to the policies of the national Democratic party.

Finally, swing voters gave mixed reviews of political symbols, rating Democrats over Republicans, but also conservatives over liberals. Their policy preferences, however, indicated a clear conservative advantage. Swing whites supported individual responsibility for jobs, opposed racial quotas and affirmative action, and held conservative positions on school prayer and minorities. Despite the substantial number of Democratic partisans in the swing group, Carter won only 46 percent of their vote in 1976. In contrast to the internally divided Democratic party, the Republican party possessed a more solid, albeit smaller, core group of southern

white voters and enjoyed greater success in attracting swing voters, even when a moderate southern Democrat headed the opposition ticket.

In Tennessee, the sharp contrast between the results of the 1976 elections and the 1978 Senate and gubernatorial races illustrated the tenuous position of the Democratic party even on the state level. Comparative analysis of Davidson County precinct returns in the 1978 Senate and gubernatorial races demonstrated improved Republican success in state politics, particularly in the Peripheral South (see Table 2). Republican incumbent Senator Howard Baker won re-election with an impressive showing among low and lower-middle income voters who had given a majority of their support to Sasser in 1976. In a more significant race, Lamar Alexander captured the governor's seat for the Republican party in a campaign centered around personal characteristics of the candidates and a corruption controversy about the outgoing governor, Democrat Ray Blanton. Alexander was able to successfully portray Democratic candidate Jake Butcher as a slick businessman while selling himself as a "man of the people."¹⁶ In Davidson county, Alexander's electoral coalition closely resembled Baker's, though he polled slightly higher among white precinct voters of all income levels. One interesting finding is that Davidson County voted less Democratic in 1978 than the state overall, a reversal of 1976. The difference is probably best attributed to conditions of the 1976 elections in Davidson County - the buoying effect of Carter's candidacy to southern Democratic

contenders from historically strong Democratic areas, and to Sasser's hometown advantage in Nashville. The victories of Baker and Alexander were indications of the vitality of two-party competition in Tennessee by the late 1970s. A larger middle class, a more urbanized population, the presence of a regional Republican base contributed to Republican gains in Tennessee and Peripheral South states.

TABLE 2:
VOTE IN DAVIDSON COUNTY BY RACE AND INCOME LEVEL, 1978

| | <u>Senate</u> | | <u>Governor</u> | |
|----------------------|------------------|-----------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| | <u>Eskind(D)</u> | <u>Baker(R)</u> | <u>Butcher(D)</u> | <u>Alexander(R)</u> |
| <u>Black voters:</u> | | | | |
| Low income | 87.8% | 12.0% | 88.6% | 11.0% |
| Middle income | 87.7% | 11.9% | 87.8% | 11.8% |
| Upper income | 89.8% | 9.4% | 87.4% | 12.3% |
| <u>White voters:</u> | | | | |
| Low income | 45.2% | 50.5% | 44.5% | 54.7% |
| Lower-middle | 34.8% | 61.5% | 37.6% | 62.3% |
| Upper-middle | 29.5% | 67.1% | 30.8% | 69.1% |
| Upper income | 21.8% | 74.8% | 21.8% | 78.0% |
| Davidson County | 44.2% | 52.9% | 43.5% | 56.2% |
| Tennessee | 55.5% | 40.3% | 55.6% | 44.0% |

Source: Compiled by the author.

Carter's election in 1976 did not stop the rising tide of Republicanism in both presidential and state politics by the late 1970s. The Democrats' less-than-impressive showing among

southern whites demonstrated that the region could be receptive to Republican candidates even when they ran against moderate Democrats. As Thomas and Mary Edsall asserted in Chain Reaction (1991), the importance of short-term factors - Carter's southernness, the primacy of economic issues in 1976, and the taint of Watergate - hid the dismal cumulative effect of years of unpopular racial and economic positions on the status of the Democratic party in the South. "Major gains in the Senate ... and a razor-thin presidential victory in 1976 gave the Democrats false comfort ... the party operated on the premise that the public response to Watergate constituted de facto assent to a liberal Democratic agenda."¹⁷ Once elected, Carter could no longer avoid the divisive issues that he had deftly sidestepped during the campaign. Under the watchful eye of national Democratic leadership, the policies of the Carter administration inevitably reflected more social liberalism than the economic populism that had formed the basis of his southern biracial coalition. Carter's emphasis on the rights of women and minorities was not welcomed in the South, while his perceived "sell-out" of the Panama Canal and the Iranian hostage situation cost him dearly.

By 1980, in the face of double-digit inflation, high unemployment, and a paralyzing hostage crisis, the unpopular incumbent president could not hold together the delicate biracial Democratic coalition needed to win any southern state other than his home state of Georgia. As one scholar noted, "When the white South saw Carter as being just another liberal

Democrat, albeit with a southern accent, the brief Democratic revival in southern presidential politics was quickly extinguished."¹⁸ Alienated lower income whites and evangelists were among the key Democratic defectors lured to the Reagan camp by promises of a restoration of national pride and a return to traditional American values. Reagan's landslide electoral victory was not only a serious setback to the national Democratic party; the election of 1980 reaffirmed the pattern of Republican dominance on the presidential level and raised anew the prospect of a Republican realignment that would eventually permeate all levels of electoral competition in the South.

The 1976 presidential election demonstrated that a combination of certain factors - a moderate southern candidate, a sagging economy, and a discredited incumbent administration - could unite the disparate elements of the crucial Democratic southern coalition behind the Democratic presidential contender. Yet the election also revealed the fundamental weakness of the Democratic party in the South. To win the votes of southern whites, Carter portrayed himself as a "traditional" southerner, a position ultimately at odds with the interests of the other component of the southern Democratic coalition - recently enfranchised blacks - and with the socially liberal orientation of the national Democratic party leadership. Once Carter was in office, this schism became painfully evident. Internal division had also emerged in among Democrats outside the South. By the late 1970s, three factions

were discernible within the Democratic party: the old populist New Dealers of the northern urban working class who, like most southern Democrats, emphasized traditional values over social change; the New Leftist champions of minority rights, who sought government-sponsored social reform to achieve economic equality of race and gender; and the well educated, centrist neo-Liberals, who shared the civil rights attitudes of the New Left, but who downplayed ideology in favor of a more technocratic, free market approach to social problems.¹⁹ The divergent interests of these groups made a cohesive coalition a challenging goal for Democratic presidential contenders in the 1980s.

During the Reagan and Bush years, many elements of the Democratic party were attracted to Republican candidates (urban northern workers became known as Reagan Democrats), but the greatest defection came from southern whites. As the most conservative faction of the Democratic party, these voters were naturally the most susceptible to the Republican appeal, particularly as the evolving primary-centered nominating process produced an increasingly polarized Democratic and Republican presidential candidates. The philosophical consistency between conservative southern Democrats and Republican presidential contenders led many observers to the logical assumption that these voters would eventually transfer their allegiance completely to the Republican party. However, Democratic persistence in both partisanship and sub-presidential politics indicated that the Democratic party still commanded a

strong presence in the South, an appeal that continued to delay the much-speculated Republican realignment.

A New Presidential Stronghold: Republican Growth in the 1980s

The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 dramatically accelerated the Republican advances on the presidential level that had begun in 1964. The two terms that Reagan served as president saw southern support for Democratic presidential candidates sink to new lows. In the conservative climate of the South, the emerging middle and urban working classes in particular found Reagan's emphasis on strong national defense, lower taxes, and less government intervention appealing. Reagan's opposition to "welfare statism"¹ - the redistribution of federal tax revenues downward to low income groups through programs like the New Deal and the Great Society - played on racial tensions in the South, since such programs were perceived by many whites to disproportionately benefit minorities. Southern blacks, accordingly, grew increasingly dissatisfied with the extensive reductions of government aid and services during the Reagan administration. Despite this racial division, Reagan's widespread personal popularity in the South and the rest of the nation led him to two executive terms and played a significant role in the succession of his vice-president, George Bush, to the presidency in 1988.

Republican presidential strength among southern whites increased during the Reagan years. In all three elections in the 1980s, Democratic presidential candidates were unable to win a southern state in the general election except for Carter's home state of Georgia in 1980. While the election was close in a number of southern states in 1980, the number of white voters supporting the Democratic party in presidential elections continued to decline. The nomination of northern liberal Democrats to the presidential ticket in 1984 and 1988 further contributed to Democratic unpopularity in the of the South.

Like the rest of the nation, the South in the 1980s experienced a policy-based swing to the ideological right. National objectives like invigored American enterprise, tax reduction, and increased defense spending became increasingly important to the industrialized, urbanized, and middle class South. As one scholar stated, "economic recovery, a strong defense, reviving patriotism, religious emphasis, strong leadership...struck a responsive chord among white southerners."² At the same time, Reagan's particular brand of traditional conservative themes on social and cultural issues was well-suited to the bulk of white southerners. Much of Reagan's rhetoric constituted what scholars called racially coded language - words such as "states' rights", "special interests", "big government", and "quotas" - that seemed to target government-initiated racial change.³ While Reagan did not make overt appeals to racial prejudice, his language was directed directed at the growing numbers of white southern

Democrats who felt cheated by national Democratic programs that sought to redistribute economic and status benefits to minorities. A prominent official of the 1980 campaign described the evolution of Republican strategy:

You start off in 1954 by saying "Nigger, nigger, nigger." By 1968 you can't say "nigger" - that hurts you. Backfires. So you say stuff like forced busing, states' rights, and all that stuff. You're getting so abstract...you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things are totally economic things and a by-product of them is [that] blacks get hurt worse than whites. And subconsciously maybe that is part of it.⁴

Reagan's racially-tinged Southern Strategy used tactics reminiscent of those used by Nixon in 1972 to consolidate his New Majority among lower status southern whites. In both instances, Republican presidential candidates made a direct effort to undermine New Deal style cleavages by portraying the policies of their Democratic opponents as antithetical to traditional southern middle and working class values.

The alienation of working and lower-middle class white southern voters from the Democratic party was also a product of more fundamental changes in southern culture and society that led to an "embourgeoisement of working and lower-middle classes" - an identification with the rising middle class around a conservative consensus.⁵ Postwar industrialization

and urbanization ended the political dominance of the agrarian elite; the landscape of the New South featured an entrepreneurial suburban white middle class and an urban working class. The new shared interest in free market forces and economic individualism of these new urban classes worked against class politics and instead fostered a conservative unity among white voters. By 1984, 50 percent of the southern white middle class professed conservative tendencies, while only 18 percent designated themselves as liberals. Similarly, many working class whites - 47 percent - considered themselves conservative; only 17 percent called themselves liberal. In contrast, 48 percent of black southerners identified themselves as liberals; only 21 percent classified themselves as conservatives.⁶ While racial issues provided the impetus for the estrangement of southern whites from the national Democratic party, broader differences in political attitudes separated southern whites from the more liberal Democrats in other regions of the country. As one scholar noted, a "broad ideological misfit, rather than simply a preoccupation with race, holds more promise as the reason why the southern white population became more Republican."⁷ The increasing size and political influence of the ideologically united white middle and working classes provided a golden opportunity for Republican advances among the ranks of traditional Democrats.

While ideological unity and racially-tinged policy issues overcame class distinctions among white southerners, actual differences in economic prosperity segregated the interests of

low income whites and blacks within the Democratic coalition. In their book, Politics and Society in the South (1987), Earl and Merle Black argued that while the financial well-being of most southerners improved in the postwar era, great disparity persisted between the rates of poverty among southern blacks and whites. The resulting divergent policy preferences of lower income whites and blacks, particularly the "enormous divergencies between the two races' taxing and spending priorities"⁸ and vastly different positions on such issues as affirmative action and government responsibility for standards of living contributed to the failure of a biracial coalition. On federal expenditures for food stamps, welfare, aid to minorities, aid to large cities, unemployment reduction, and student loans - all programs in which blacks were prominent beneficiaries - whites favored less government spending while blacks favored more. The Edsalls also argued that lower income whites had a vested interest in opposing government-sponsored economic redistribution. As federal programs that sought to distribute social and economic benefits largely to minorities increased in the 1970s, the resulting tax burden fell upon whites, especially those in the lower income tax brackets who were also most affected by an increased competition for jobs, changing social interaction with blacks, and busing for racial equality in schools. The disproportionate imposition of the costs of these programs upon the working classes produced powerful resentment that was "increasingly amplified and channeled by the Republican party."⁹ The result was an

increase of internal division within the southern wing of the Democratic party.

Blacks and whites also differed on social issues. By the 1970s, most white southerners had come to accept the basic legal changes brought about by desegregation and the civil rights movement. The abatement of the race issue allowed moderate state level Democrats to unite winning biracial coalitions in the early 1970s, a combination that prolonged Democratic dominance in sub-presidential politics. However, southern whites and blacks continued to disagree on many policy issues involving "the intermediate color line" - affirmative action, busing, quotas, neighborhood desegregation.¹⁰

Resistance to racial change was most pronounced in the least formally educated whites. While most white southerners by the 1980s could be characterized as preferring a form of race relations that was "in between" strict segregation and total desegregation, even among this group strong majorities opposed busing and federal regulation of equal employment practices, preferred all-white neighborhoods, and believed that blacks should "help themselves rather than relying on the federal government."¹¹ Continued white opposition to specific extensions of civil rights measures indicated the persisting historical legacy of segregationist ideology among southern whites of all classes.

The various short term factors that contributed to Reagan's 1980 electoral landslide are well known. Carter's low job approval ratings stemmed from double-digit inflation,

recession, and high unemployment, as well as the perception that the president was paralyzed by the Iranian hostage crisis. The 1980 race also offered a clearer ideological contrast between the two candidates than in 1976. Though he was actually a westerner, Reagan seemed to have more "southern appeal" than his native southern Democratic opponent, particularly among religious fundamentalists, whose vote Reagan courted assiduously. Like Carter in 1976, Reagan appealed to the populist, anti-establishment impulses of southerners dissatisfied with the current administration. However, Reagan strategists kept low income voter distrust of Republican economic elites in check with "populism's other face - cultural, religious, racial, and nationalist."¹² The Republican Southern Strategy - appealing to white southerners while writing off the black vote - forced Carter to campaign hard in the region that had been a solid foundation of electoral support in 1976.

The 1980 results were decidedly mixed for the South, despite the apparent ease of the Reagan victory in the ten of the eleven states in the region. Although Reagan won overwhelmingly in Florida, Virginia, and Texas, his margin of victory in many states was less than a percentage point. In Tennessee, for example, Reagan won by less than 40,000 votes. While the presence of a moderate southern Democrat did diminish the Republican margin of victory, an examination of race and ideology reveals more significant Republican trends in the 1980 presidential election. Carter again received over 90 percent

of the southern black vote, but his share of the southern white vote dropped to 36 percent in 1980 from 48 percent in 1976.¹³

An analysis of ideological divisions within the two parties indicates that Reagan received most of his support from conservative white voters. By 1980, core Republicans had replaced core Democrats as the largest voting bloc of southern voters by a margin of 40 percent to 35 percent. Like Ford before him, Reagan performed well among his party core, capturing 80 percent of the core Republican vote. He also won over 60 percent of the swing vote and a significant 32 percent of the core Democratic vote.¹⁴ In comparison to Carter's 1976 coalition, Reagan's superior performance among swing voters and the core of the opposition party, while earning a more unanimous majority in his own core, revealed greater partisan loyalties among Republican identifiers. Reagan also received overwhelming majorities from whites who espoused conservative positions on federal taxes, defense spending, government services, and civil rights.

In the 1984 election, Reagan's narrow margin in the South was transformed into a popular landslide. In retrospect, the prospects of a northern liberal Democrat like Walter Mondale in the conservative southern climate seemed bleak if not futile. However, many prominent Democratic party officials initially expressed high hopes for rebuilding a biracial coalition in the South after a Democratic resurgence in congressional and gubernatorial contests in the early 1980's. To achieve a southern victory, Mondale needed to capitalize upon expected

increases in voter registration among black southerners and attract a minority of southern white support comparable to Carter's 1976 and 1980 performances. However, Mondale lacked many of Carter's attracting qualities - he was not a southerner, and he was not a moderate. The past experience in the South of northern liberals like Humphrey in 1968 and McGovern in 1972 bode ill for the Mondale campaign. Moreover, the Democratic challenger faced a tremendously popular incumbent who had substantial appeal to southern whites. Other decisions made during the campaign - the nomination of Geraldine Ferraro for Vice President, a pledge to increase taxes, and the appointment of a highly controversial southern Democrat to a high campaign position - further sealed Mondale's fate among white southerners.

Similar to the Republican victories in 1968 and 1972, Reagan's southern finish was even stronger than his national margin of victory. The Republican incumbent improved his performance from 50.8 percent of the southern vote in 1980 to 61.4 percent in 1984.¹⁵ His 72 percent share of the southern white vote was even more staggering; not since the election of 1972 had a Democrat polled so poorly in the South. Clearly, the combination of a liberal northern Democrat and a conservative Republican was devastating to Democratic presidential prospects in the South. By the 1984 election, Republican strategy assumed southern support as part of the Republican base in terms of voting patterns and ideological disposition. As the Blacks noted, economic recovery from the

1982 recession revived Reagan's popularity and triggered "a sizable expansion in the core white Republicans at the expense of core white Democrats."¹⁶ Reagan received strong majorities from core Republicans and swing voters and improved his standing among the smaller group of core Democrats, who by 1984 numbered a mere 25 percent of the southern electorate.

In 1976, Carter received even support from white voters across the South. Reagan, however, was more popular among white voters in Deep South states than those of the Peripheral South in his two victories. Many analysts claimed that the rise of Reverend Jesse Jackson, a black Democrat, to national prominence within the party, coupled with subtly racist Republican rhetoric during the campaign, further alienated southern whites in Deep South states that continued to be preoccupied with race. Yet Lamis argued that racial tensions caused by Jackson's presence on the political scene were "merely a continuance of those evident in the Southern Democracy throughout the Civil Rights era."¹⁷ The Deep South had provided the strongest base of support for the segregationist candidacies of Goldwater in 1964 and Wallace in 1968; it was little wonder that Reagan's continuation of New Majority politics enjoyed success among white voters in these states. Racial prejudice undoubtedly was a critical factor in the vote choice of some southerners regardless of region; however, race as the sole explanation of the 1984 landslide among southern whites diminishes the importance of a pervasive conservative consensus on a strong national defense, lower

taxes, limited federal regulation and spending, and the preservation of traditional American values. As another scholar asserted, "to place such emphasis on the racial issue underestimates the depth and breadth of Reagan's appeal to white southerners."¹⁸

The Republican party had also made significant gains in the Peripheral South, particularly in congressional, state, and local contests. Support for Republican presidential candidates in the Peripheral South was due mainly to the sources of the party's grassroots expansion - mountain Republicanism, urban Republicanism, and interstate Republicanism. Mountain areas in states like Tennessee and North Carolina had provided the Republican party with a solid base of support since the Civil War. Urban centers and smaller towns traversed by interstate highways possessed a growing white middle class and were more likely to attract outside industry and non-southern immigrants. These three bases of Republican growth were more prevalent in the Peripheral South than in the Deep South in the mid-1980s.

Perhaps the best explanation for the continuing failure of Democratic presidential candidates in the South lay in the ideological divisions between the southern and northern wings of the party. Democrats who had to formulate liberal positions to win the necessary support of more ideologically activist, New Left voters in the primaries found themselves out of tune with southern conservative Democrats, whose views were more similar to Republican social and cultural values. Republican presidential candidates were therefore better positioned to

unite a conservative white majority by attacking Democratic candidates from the right. Southern Democrats responded with the introduction of Super Tuesday to the primary season in the 1988 election, a move that catapulted southern voters into the national spotlight in the Democratic nominating process. By coordinating the primaries of all eleven states except South Carolina, southern leaders hoped to increase the influence of more moderate southern Democrats on the nomination, provide an early boost in delegates to a southern Democratic contender, encourage greater southern participation in the Democratic primary process, particularly among voters who had defected from the Democratic party to vote for Reagan, and compel candidates of both parties to campaign more vigorously in the South and adopt southern policy preferences.¹⁹

However, the results from Super Tuesday, rather than resolving the many difficulties that the Democratic party had faced in the South in previous elections, highlighted the fundamental racial division within the party that continued to plague its presidential prospects. Relying heavily on near-unanimous black support, Jesse Jackson carried Virginia and all four Deep South states that participated in the mass primary and emerged as the leader in terms of delegates. Tennessee Senator Albert Gore, Jr., the other southern hopeful, won Arkansas, North Carolina, and his home state, putting him second behind Jackson in the delegate count. Michael Dukakis, a neo-Liberal Democrat from Massachusetts and the leading contender for the nomination, won only Florida and Texas,

arguably the two least "southern" states because of their large populations of non-southern immigrants. Instead of increasing southern influence upon the Democratic candidate selection, racially polarized southern Democrats had given a plurality of their delegates to a candidate who had no chance of capturing the nomination. Black support for Jackson devastated the nomination prospects of Gore, who needed a southern sweep to stay in the race. Dukakis, the only candidate with realistic national appeal, came in third in the South. The massive Democratic primary also failed to increase white participation, an indication that many defected Democrats intended to remain with the Republican party in 1988. In fact, Super Tuesday escalated New Left tendencies within the Democratic party by raising Jackson to national prominence and assuring him a more significant role at the national Democratic convention. Results from Super Tuesday illustrated the isolation of southern Democrats from the national Democratic party, as well as the problematic racial cleavage within the southern wing of the party.

The rest of the 1988 campaign was business as usual for the Republican party. George Bush mounted a "classic southern Republican challenge to a 'national' Democrat."²⁰ Through aggressive attacks on Dukakis for being soft on crime, for favoring racial "quotas," for opposing a mandatory Pledge of Allegiance in public schools, and for being "a card-carrying member of the ACLU," Bush sounded the familiar Republican themes of law and order, race, patriotism, and distrust of

liberalism. Combined with apparent economic prosperity and renewed American strength abroad, these conservative themes enabled Bush to sweep the South with 58.3 percent of the popular vote and 67 percent of the white vote.²¹ Over 90 percent of core white Republicans, 58 percent of white swing voters, and nearly one fourth of core white Democrats supported the Republican candidate. By the late 1980s, the Republican party had clearly established a southern stronghold in presidential politics.

A case study of voting in the state of Tennessee during the 1980s provides a window through which to examine the extent Republican advances in the South. The regional divisions in Tennessee politics initially acted as barriers to partisan defection; the persistence of Democratic enclaves made the 1980 election much closer in Tennessee than in the rest of the South (see Table 3). Despite a decline in Democratic support in every region of the state from the 1976 election, Carter still won 57 percent of the Middle Tennessee vote and 51 percent of the West Tennessee vote.²² Reagan's victory consolidated a traditional base in the eastern portion of the state, which saw the largest decrease in Republican support. In 1984, however, Republican voting had expanded well beyond the East into the traditionally Democratic Middle and Western regions. The most significant Democratic decline - from 57 percent to 45 percent - came from the party's Middle Tennessee stronghold.²³ In the 1988 election, Bush made further gains in the West and carried the four most populous counties in the state. The

spread of Republican presidential voting into urban centers like Nashville and Memphis in formerly Democratic parts of the state further eroded regional distinctions in Tennessee voting. Like other states in the Peripheral South, increasing urbanization and a growing white middle class fostered Republican growth on the presidential level among low and lower-middle income Democrats susceptible to Reagan's Southern Strategy. However, the 1988 Republican presidential victory indicated that the attraction of these voters to the Republican party was not inevitable. Survey results indicated that Bush only held 43 percent of the "Reagan Democrats" in Tennessee that had renounced their party loyalties in the 1984 election.²⁴ Clearly, the "common man" popularity of Ronald Reagan was not matched by his wealthy, Yale-educated successor. Results in other states indicated a similar decline.

A precinct analysis of the 1980, 1984, and 1988 presidential elections in Davidson County illustrates Republican inroads even in a traditionally Democratic region. As Table 3 shows, the county was decidedly more Democratic than both the state of Tennessee and the South in general in the 1980 presidential election. By 1984, however, its Democratic advantage was reduced considerably. Voting patterns in white and black precincts in Davidson county confirmed a relative loss of Democratic support on the presidential level, though black voters were still overwhelmingly Democratic. The greatest shift in partisan strength occurred between the 1980 and 1984 elections and among voters in low income white

precincts. The 15.5 percent decline in Democratic voting among this group was the largest suffered by the Democratic party, though the lower-middle and upper income white precincts also demonstrate a significant decline. While class distinctions continued to play a role in white precinct voting patterns, voting differences between income groups had narrowed by 1984. In that election, all income levels gave Reagan a majority of their support, an indication of increasing conservative unity among southern whites that was replacing traditional class-based coalitions. The change in Tennessee voting between the 1980 and 1984 elections was a reflection of shifting partisan strength in the state and in the South; on both levels, Republican voting surged to near 60 percent of the electorate and remained relatively stable through the 1988 election.

TABLE 3:
PRESIDENTIAL VOTE IN DAVIDSON COUNTY
BY RACE AND INCOME LEVEL, 1980-1988

| | <u>1980</u> | | <u>1984</u> | | <u>1988</u> | |
|----------------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------|------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| | <u>Carter(D)</u> | <u>Reagan(R)</u> | <u>Mondale(D)</u> | <u>Reagan(R)</u> | <u>Dukakis(D)</u> | <u>Bush(R)</u> |
| <u>Black voters:</u> | | | | | | |
| Low income | 97.0% | 1.6% | 96.2% | 3.7% | 91.3% | 7.7% |
| Middle income | 96.5% | 2.3% | 95.2% | 3.8% | 94.9% | 4.3% |
| Upper income | 95.6% | 4.1% | 95.3% | 3.7% | 96.5% | 3.2% |
| <u>White voters:</u> | | | | | | |
| Low income | 62.2% | 34.8% | 46.7% | 52.8% | 50.4% | 49.4% |
| Lower-middle | 47.9% | 48.8% | 33.8% | 65.2% | 34.5% | 65.1% |
| Upper-middle | 42.3% | 53.9% | 28.5% | 71.2% | 29.9% | 69.4% |
| Upper income | 29.4% | 66.6% | 23.5% | 76.0% | 19.3% | 80.2% |
| Davidson County | 61.2% | 38.8% | 47.7% | 52.3% | 47.2% | 52.3% |
| Tennessee | 48.4% | 48.7% | 41.6% | 57.8% | 41.5% | 57.9% |
| South | 44.8% | 50.8% | 42.6% | 61.4% | 40.9% | 58.3% |
| Southern whites | 37.0% | 63.0% | 28.0% | 72.0% | 32.0% | 68.0% |

Source: Compiled by the author.

Davidson county voting patterns in 1984 and 1988 indicate that while presidential Republicanism in white precincts did not fade entirely with the exit of Ronald Reagan from national politics, Democratic support did increase among lower income white voters than in other income groups. In contrast, Republican voting among upper income whites soared to 80.2 percent, an apparent reflection of the growing trends in Republican economic policy during the 1980s towards legislation

that favored the wealthier segments of the Republican coalition. Surprisingly, Bush actually increased the Republican share of black voters of all income levels. One possible explanation for the increase was a slight decline in black turnout due to perceived mistreatment of Jesse Jackson's 1988 campaign efforts by national Democratic officials.

Republican dominance of presidential politics during the 1980s re-ignited a debate among scholars over whether a Republican realignment had indeed occurred in the South. Some analysts pointed to trends in southern partisanship as evidence of a "dealignment" - a major shift occurred in patterns of party identification, but neither party gained majority status as a result. Instead, the number of Independent voters skyrocketed. By 1988, 41 percent of the southern electorate were classified as Democrats, 22 percent claimed to be Republicans, and 37 percent called themselves Independent voters. Among southern whites, partisan dealignment was even more striking; the Democratic and Republican parties claimed 35 percent and 26 percent of southern whites, respectively, while Independents numbered 39 percent.²⁵

However, a consideration of partisan tendencies indicated significantly less dealignment than was suggested by party identification alone. If Independents who reportedly "lean" toward one party or the other are included among the ranks of that party, dramatic Republican gains become evident. In 1984, the Democratic party claimed the partisan tendencies of only 50 percent of the southern electorate, while Republican strength

soared to 38 percent.²⁶ Among white voters only, the Republican party enjoyed an actual plurality over the Democrats - 45 percent to 43 percent - while pure Independents were reduced to 12 percent of the southern white electorate. This Republican advantage among southern whites was a marked improvement from 1976, when the Democratic party enjoyed a 56 percent to 29 percent margin in partisan tendencies. Reagan's first term saw Republicanism among whites rise to relative parity with Democratic party strength, while in the overall southern electorate, the Democratic lead had decreased significantly. If partisan tendencies are considered to be a more accurate reflection of the actual vote than mere party identification, it appeared that the Democratic party maintained a slight majority of the southern electorate, though the margin narrowed considerably during the 1980s.

The complexity of the new southern electorate explained why the Republican party did not experience greater success in state and gubernatorial contests. One explanation stems from the source of Republican presidential popularity. A key reason for massive southern defection from the Democratic party was alienation from the liberal northern wing. With the exception of 1976, the Democratic party had consistently nominated northern liberals as presidential candidates since 1968; therefore, southern white defection on the presidential level was more easily understood. In sub-presidential contests, however, the Republican party lost this advantage. Most state level southern Democrats were moderate to conservative and

frequently distanced themselves from the national party organization. In addition, congressional contests and especially gubernatorial races centered around pragmatic issues and specific constituent concerns rather than the symbolic ideological battles that the Republicans exploited so successfully in presidential races. Insulated from national politics, southern Democrats were able to appeal to traditional partisan loyalties that favored the Democratic party. As the Blacks pointed out, "it is unrealistic...to expect the Republicans to win consistent and full-fledged support for their statewide candidates from independents who have no party leanings."²⁷ Considering that Republican success in winning the support of Independent voters played a major role in their presidential victories, partisan competition for Independent voters significantly weakened Republican prospects on the state level.

Another obstacle to Republican advances in sub-presidential elections was Democratic incumbency. Between 1966 and 1984, half of all Senate campaigns involved incumbent Democrats, most of whom were moderate or conservative and therefore difficult to attack from the right. While southern governorships offered more open-seat opportunities than senate races, gubernatorial races focused on a narrower range of issues and offered little opportunity for standard conservative appeal. Incumbency also benefited Republicans, especially Republican senators who, unlike Republican governors, were not constrained by confrontations with Democratic legislatures. In both races,

Republican candidates were most successful in the Peripheral South, where Republican identifiers were more numerous and the black proportion of the population was smaller. In the Deep South, the inability of Republican candidates to overcome historic Democratic loyalties forced them to rely more on short term factors and disunity among the Democratic party.

An analysis of voting patterns of Davidson County precincts in Tennessee statewide elections in 1982 confirms the existence of genuine two-party competition outside of presidential contests in the Peripheral South state. The 1982 Senate election pitted incumbent Democratic Senator James Sasser against conservative Republican congressman Robin Beard from West Tennessee. Beard launched a hostile right-wing offensive against Sasser on social issues such as busing, abortion, and foreign aid.²⁸ Sasser defended his conservative voting record in the Senate, which as the New York Times pointed out in an editorial, shared marked similarity with arch-conservative Senator Jesse Helms from North Carolina. Beard's "outdated conservative demagoguery" backfired, and Sasser cruised to a 61.8 percent to 38.2 percent victory.²⁹

The race typified the strategy of many southern Republican senatorial candidates to lure working class whites and religious fundamentalists from their Democratic moorings. Sasser's successful defense was due mainly to his ability to portray himself as a centrist Democrat, and to the faltering national economy. Results from Davidson County precincts indicated that Sasser's 1982 coalition closely resembled that of his 1976

election - lower income whites and blacks. Sasser was able to significantly increase his share of the vote from upper income white precincts by more than 10 percent, perhaps because many upper class whites were repelled by Beard's vicious attacks against Sasser during the campaign.

Another Tennessee Republican was more successful in 1982. Governor Lamar Alexander won an easy re-election over challenger Randy Tyree, the mayor of Knoxville. According to the Blacks' observations about Republican prospects in gubernatorial races, Alexander's success might be somewhat unusual. The Republican did enjoy the benefits of incumbency and a relatively successful first term. His opponent also tried to make the election a referendum on the national economy, an unwise tactic considering the more localized issue content of gubernatorial races. Alexander's victory further emphasized the arrival of genuine two-party competition to Tennessee.

In a post-election interview, Alexander identified a key problem that many Republicans faced in statewide southern elections by pointing out that Republicans who focus their campaign on national debates "run on the wrong issues." Regarding the campaigns of Republicans for state and local offices, Alexander pointed out that "they run...for the state legislature, talking about the unbalanced federal budget, when most people care more about sewers, jobs, better schools, health care of the children down the block."³⁰ While Republican presidential candidates were particularly adept at singling out symbolic "hot button" issues upon which to base their

conservative appeal to the nation, state level Democrats seemed more in tune with the everyday, practical concerns of their constituents.

The results from the 1984 and 1986 elections in Davidson County exemplified the divergent trends of presidential and statewide politics (see Table 4). While Reagan scored a landslide popular victory over Mondale in the presidential contest, Democratic congressman Albert Gore, Jr., scored an even more impressive victory over Republican Victor Ashe, a state legislator from Knoxville, for an open Senate seat. As Table 4 shows, Gore received majority support from black and white voters of every income level. His performance among white voters, given Mondale's meager share of the white vote, was particularly striking. Gore not only consolidated the familiar elements of the Democratic coalition; he also made substantial gains among voters in the upper income brackets. The popularity of Gore's father, a three-term Senator from Tennessee, and Gore's own eight years in the House of Representatives, during which he established a reputation of being particularly responsive to his Middle Tennessee constituents, undoubtedly contributed to his high levels of support from Davidson County. Throughout the campaign, Ashe tried to link Gore to national Democratic figures, such as the presidential candidate. Gore sidestepped the liberal slam by claiming that Ashe was relying on "outdated" ideological labels and instead stressed his positions on the environment and other technological issues.³¹ While Gore was one of the few southern Democrats who vocally

supported Mondale, he also recognized the political liability of the liberal label.

In 1986, Democrat Ned McWherter regained the governorship for the Democratic party in a solid victory over Republican and former governor Winfield Dunn. McWherter's victory marked the return of the lower income white voters who had defected to the Alexander camp. The campaign was characterized by its lack of sharp ideological differences between the conservative Democrat and the moderate Republican. The two candidates represented the centrist trends in both parties in state elections by the late 1980s. Southern Republicans gradually abandoned symbolic conservative rhetoric in an attempt to broaden their base to Democrats and Independents who did not necessarily share the sentiments of the nationally prominent right wing of the Republican party, and southern Democrats continued to combat Republican state level advances by blurring distinctions between the traditional and progressive themes used to unite a diverse coalition of blacks and low income whites.

TABLE 4:
VOTE IN DAVIDSON COUNTY BY RACE AND INCOME LEVEL, 1984-1986

| | <u>1984 - Senate</u> | | <u>1984 - President</u> | | <u>1986 - Governor</u> | |
|----------------------|----------------------|----------------|-------------------------|------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| | <u>Gore(D)</u> | <u>Ashe(R)</u> | <u>Mondale(D)</u> | <u>Reagan(R)</u> | <u>McWherter(D)</u> | <u>Dunn(R)</u> |
| <u>Black voters:</u> | | | | | | |
| Low income | 96.9% | 2.0% | 96.2% | 3.7% | 86.5% | 13.5% |
| Middle income | 96.7% | 2.3% | 95.2% | 3.8% | 88.2% | 11.3% |
| Upper income | 96.0% | 2.6% | 95.3% | 3.7% | 91.6% | 8.4% |
| <u>White voters:</u> | | | | | | |
| Low income | 74.1% | 20.7% | 46.7% | 52.8% | 57.6% | 42.4% |
| Lower-middle | 65.0% | 30.4% | 33.8% | 65.2% | 36.6% | 63.4% |
| Upper-middle | 60.4% | 36.0% | 28.5% | 71.7% | 36.5% | 63.5% |
| Upper income | 51.5% | 44.1% | 23.5% | 76.0% | 22.1% | 77.9% |
| Davidson County | 72.7% | 23.7% | 47.7% | 52.3% | 53.9% | 46.1% |
| Tennessee | 60.7% | 33.8% | 41.6% | 57.8% | 54.3% | 45.7% |

Source: | Compiled by the author.

Tennessee is a good example of the complexity of modern southern politics. The description of Tennessee by one scholar - "a dealigned electorate, one characterized by widespread ticket-splitting and by a willingness of self-identified partisans to cross party lines when casting their ballots" - could well describe many other southern states that witnessed the many successful Republican challenges to Democratic dominance by the late 1980s.³² The absence of a clear majority status for either party in Peripheral South states forced both parties to adopt strategies to win over non-party members, and continuing decline in regional distinctions

suggested that similar partisanship patterns would soon develop in Deep South states. The improving vigor of southern politics suggested that Key's prediction of a healthy political evolution in the South might yet be realized.

Despite the long awaited arrival of two-party competition in state level contests, Republican hegemony in presidential politics continued to fuel the realignment debate. However, many scholars began to question the application of the term to southern politics because of the underlying continuities in southern attitudes during the 1980s. The Blacks asserted that white middle class emphasis on limited government regulation, lower taxes, and economic individualism - themes that Reagan and Bush used to build their conservative presidential coalition in the South - represented "important continuities with the traditionalistic political culture."³³ The combination of conservative themes with more liberal views on the use of federal resources to stimulate economic growth reflected a conservative-modern philosophical blend that was shared by a large portion of southern whites. Other continuities connected the modern political climate in the South to its conservative legacy. Despite a surge in the black registration rate from 29 percent in 1960 to 62 percent in 1970, a corresponding increase in white registration from 61 to 69 percent yielded a net gain for white voters.³⁴ The sustained numerical superiority of southern whites assured that blacks would continue to have limited political leverage, even in Deep South states. Finally, racist appeals, while no longer used overtly, persisted in more

subtle forms in national politics. The dynamics of partisanship, ideology, and voting in the New South defied the electoral classifications assigned to previous historical eras; new perspectives on the nature of political change were required to understand the evolution of southern politics in the post-civil rights era.

Shifting Fortunes: The Populist Revolt of 1992

The 1992 election witnessed yet another remarkable resurrection of the Democratic party. After a rollercoaster campaign, Governor Bill Clinton of Arkansas recaptured the White House for the Democrats with a 43 percent plurality of the national popular vote, compared to 38 percent for incumbent George Bush and 19 percent for independent candidate Ross Perot.¹ Bush's loss marked only the fourth time in the twentieth century that an elected incumbent president was defeated in a general election. The Democratic feat was even more surprising given that Bush's approval ratings soared to historic heights after the 1991 Persian Gulf War and deterred many prominent Democrats from seeking the 1992 nomination for fear of becoming another Democratic sacrificial lamb. Neither was Clinton an ideal Democratic opponent, as he was the governor of a small and economically beleaguered state and the subject of numerous personal controversies, including marital infidelity, marijuana use, and draft evasion.

By 1992, however, the country found itself in the grips of a prolonged and debilitating recession that led to a dramatic nosedive in Bush's popularity. The recession had particularly severe political consequences for the Republican administration because it affected large numbers of white collar, highly skilled middle class workers who had provided crucial support to Republican presidential candidates in the 1980s.²

Unemployment, poor economic performance, and a fear of increased foreign economic competition were the key issues that led to the Republican downfall, followed by the federal deficit and rising health care costs. The 1992 race was complicated by the off-again, on-again candidacy of Ross Perot, whose singular focus on administrative irresponsibility and government gridlock as explanations for the massive federal deficit underscored Clinton's call for change in direction for the country. The popularity of the billionaire-turned-populist - the independent candidate actually led both major party candidates in the polls before his unexpected withdraw in July - reflected a widespread alienation of most American voters from the political "establishment" in Washington. Though November exit polls indicated that Perot's last-minute re-entry lured voters from both major party candidates, some observers suggested that his role as a "halfway house" for protest voters contributed to the defection of alienated Bush supporters to the Clinton camp.³

By the general election, a pervasive sentiment for change in the American public outweighed Republican attacks on Clinton's moral values and character and produced a Democratic

victory. Although the Persian Gulf victory and savage attacks on Clinton's character and marital infidelity were especially potent weapons for Bush in the conservative southern climate, Clinton responded with an equally relentless assault on the national economic performance, aiming his message at lower-middle status whites - a critical swing group in the South. As the Edsalls argued, southern whites of low to moderate income in the 1980s shared in a middle class ethos of economic individualism and entrepreneurial ambition. Republican rhetoric in 1980 and 1984 fostered these values by sounding the virtues of a free market economy and fiscal conservatism and denouncing Democratic social programs that called for a large government bureaucracy and massive spending. During the latter half of the decade, however, efforts to curb "government excess" were extended to familiar and popular federal programs and services. Kevin Phillips, a former Republican political analyst, argued that while reducing government regulation was a boon to the wealthy investing class that supported the Republican party, cutting vital government programs hurt the average income Republican voter.⁴ The resulting economic polarization between rich and poor was exacerbated by across-the-board tax cuts in the 1980s. While the tax reform decreased the burden on the richest Americans, for those in the working and middle classes, reductions on the federal level were offset by increased state and local taxes.

The recession of the early 1990s brought economic disparities within the Republican party to the surface, creating

tensions that made the Republican southern coalition vulnerable to the class-based campaign of a centrist southern Democrat. By promising tax breaks to the "forgotten middle class" who had suffered the most from the combined blow of federal cutbacks and the recent economic downturn, Clinton attempted to combine a referendum on the national economy with a direct appeal to a key element of the Republican southern presidential stronghold. Clinton made substantial inroads into the Republican coalition by winning pluralities of independent voters, moderates, suburbanites, and first-time voters, all important elements in the 1988 Bush victory.

The 1992 election marked the long-awaited arrival in the South of healthy partisan competition in presidential politics. As Table 5 indicates, Clinton and his running mate, Albert Gore, Jr., were victorious in four southern states - Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, and Tennessee. Clinton won handily in his home state of Arkansas; the other states gave narrower victories to the Democratic candidate. Outcomes were fairly close throughout the South, though Bush fared better in Deep South states like Alabama, Mississippi, and South Carolina, where he won handily. Overall, the Republican monopoly on southern presidential voting was broken; electoral outcomes throughout the region were ultimately determined by the particular political conditions of each state.

TABLE 5:
PRESIDENTIAL VOTE IN THE SOUTH, 1992

| | <u>Clinton</u> | <u>Bush</u> | <u>Perot</u> |
|-----------------------------|----------------|-------------|--------------|
| <u>Deep South</u> | | | |
| Alabama | 41% | 48% | 11% |
| Georgia | 44% | 43% | 13% |
| Louisiana | 46% | 42% | 12% |
| Mississippi | 41% | 50% | 9% |
| South Carolina | 40% | 48% | 12% |
| <u>Peripheral South</u> | | | |
| Arkansas | 54% | 36% | 11% |
| Florida | 39% | 41% | 20% |
| North Carolina | 43% | 44% | 14% |
| Tennessee | 47% | 43% | 10% |
| Texas | 37% | 40% | 22% |
| Virginia | 41% | 45% | 14% |
| South | 42% | 43% | 16% |
| Southern whites | 34% | 48% | 18% |
| Southern blacks | 82% | 12% | 6% |
| Nation | 43% | 38% | 19% |

Source: Compiled from Associated Press and Voter Research and Surveys data, printed in The New York Times, Thursday, November 5, 1992, B9.

Florida and Texas presented interesting cases. Both states were hotly contested until the eleventh hour, when they went to Bush. Also, Perot polled significantly better in Florida and Texas than any other state in the South. The Perot vote may have narrowed Bush's margin of victory in Florida by siphoning

conservatives dissatisfied with the state's high unemployment during the Bush administration.⁵ Exit polls indicated that in Texas, Perot's home state, his exceptionally strong performance hurt both candidates equally.⁶ Though Bush nominally claimed Texas as his home state, whether Bush or southerner Bill Clinton had more regional appeal was difficult to determine. Most importantly, Bush was forced to campaign heavily in these two electoral goldmines that had given him landslide victories in 1988. The extra effort needed to shore up the cornerstones of the Republican southern base may have diverted valuable resources from other battleground states.

Despite the improved showing of the Democratic candidate in the South, the votes of a majority of white southerners still eluded Clinton. Throughout the region, Clinton received 34 percent of the southern white vote, compared to 48 percent for Bush and 18 percent for Perot. The South was the only region of the country in which Bush won a plurality of the white vote. Clinton won the support of 45 percent of white voters in the East to Bush's 36 percent; white voters in the Midwest produced a 39 percent even split between the two major candidates, while in the East, voters gave Clinton a slight 39 percent to 37 percent plurality.⁷ As the individual results of the southern states demonstrated, the composition of the Perot vote was difficult to determine. Support for the independent candidate was weakest in the South, and as the varying levels of the Perot vote among the individual southern states revealed, Perot likely had more of an impact in a the results of a few selected states

than a consistent regionwide effect on the Democratic-Republican balance. If the the Perot vote is divided evenly between Clinton and Bush, the resulting estimated white vote gives Bush a 57 percent to 43 percent majority. Thus Clinton improved Democratic performance among white voters from 1988 levels but failed to match Carter's 47 percent white support in 1976. Clinton's southern coalition reflected the continuing reliance of the Democratic party upon the potent biracial coalition that had served them well in state level politics in the 1970s and 1980s, but had failed to materialize on the presidential level since Carter's 1976 victory.

The first breakthrough in the Clinton campaign came in the Super Tuesday Democratic primary in the South. Trailing behind Paul Tsongas of Massachusetts after the early primaries, Clinton scored a sweeping victory in the southern primaries that allowed him to overtake the Democratic frontrunner in numbers of delegates. Analysis of Davidson County precinct returns indicates that Clinton won heavy support from black voters and a decisive plurality of low income white voters (see Table 6). Tsongas fared best among upper income whites, though he also won pluralities in both middle income categories. A third candidate, Jerry Brown of California, straggled into a third place finish with support in the low teens from nearly every income level of both races. The voting patterns of whites appeared to reflect class-based divisions within the party, as low income voters found Clinton's populist message appealing, while upper income voters favored Tsongas' pro-business economic

conservatism. Bolstered by his strong southern showing, Clinton proceeded to capture the Democratic nomination.

TABLE 6:
DEMOCRATIC PRIMARY VOTE IN DAVIDSON COUNTY
BY RACE AND INCOME LEVEL, 1992

| <u>Black voters:</u> | <u>Clinton</u> | <u>Tsongas</u> | <u>Brown</u> |
|--------------------------|----------------|----------------|--------------|
| Low income | 61.1% | 21.4% | 13.7% |
| Middle income | 69.8% | 15.9% | 11.0% |
| Upper income | 70.2% | 19.3% | 6.6% |
| <u>White voters:</u> | | | |
| Low income | 47.3% | 35.7% | 14.1% |
| Lower-middle | 38.9% | 43.3% | 14.7% |
| Upper-middle | 38.5% | 48.4% | 10.0% |
| Upper income | 27.3% | 57.3% | 13.0% |
| Davidson County | 51.8% | 33.2% | 11.1% |

Source: Compiled by the author.

In 1992, Super Tuesday met the expectations of the Democratic leaders who crafted the mass primary in 1988 by catapulting to the front of the Democratic party a centrist southern candidate. Without the added competition of another candidate with southern appeal - as Jesse Jackson had for black voters in 1988 - Clinton was able to unite southern Democrats of both races. His nomination reflected a growing awareness within the party ranks of the need to nominate a centrist candidate

more palatable to the divergent interests of the party's southern wing.

A comparison between the 1988 and 1992 presidential elections in the South demonstrates Democratic success in renewing two-party competition in presidential politics. Analysis of selected Davidson County precinct returns (see Table 7) reveals that Clinton, like his Democratic predecessors, won overwhelming majorities of black voters of all income levels. Moreover, Clinton made crucial gains among segments of the white electorate that had rejected Dukakis in 1988. Even with the added competition of a third party candidate, Democratic voting increased from 1988 levels among white voters, reflecting a pervasive dissatisfaction with the incumbent Republican administration. The biggest change came from low income whites, whose support for Bush declined precipitously from 1988 to 1992, and from the lower-middle income group, who experienced both a drastic decline in Republican voting and a corresponding jump in Democratic support.

TABLE 7:
PRESIDENTIAL VOTE IN DAVIDSON COUNTY
BY RACE AND INCOME LEVEL, 1988 AND 1992

| | <u>1988</u> | | <u>1992</u> | | |
|--------------------------|-------------------|----------------|-------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| <u>Black voters:</u> | <u>Dukakis(D)</u> | <u>Bush(R)</u> | <u>Clinton(D)</u> | <u>Bush(R)</u> | <u>Perot(I)</u> |
| Low income | 91.3% | 7.7% | 92.8% | 4.2% | 2.0% |
| Middle income | 94.9% | 4.3% | 94.2% | 3.5% | 1.6% |
| Upper income | 96.5% | 3.2% | 94.8% | 3.8% | 0.8% |
| <u>White voters:</u> | | | | | |
| Low income | 50.4% | 49.4% | 54.3% | 33.7% | 11.4% |
| Lower-middle | 34.5% | 65.1% | 43.1% | 46.3% | 10.3% |
| Upper-middle | 29.9% | 69.4% | 34.8% | 53.9% | 11.0% |
| Upper income | 19.3% | 80.2% | 23.7% | 67.0% | 9.1% |
| Davidson County | 47.2% | 52.3% | 52.2% | 37.6% | 9.9% |
| Tennessee | 41.5% | 57.9% | 47.0% | 43.0% | 10.0% |
| South | 40.9% | 58.3% | 42.0% | 43.0% | 16.0% |
| Southern whites | 32% | 68% | 34% | 48% | 18% |

Source: Compiled by the author.

These electoral shifts reflected the accumulative effect of high unemployment and a general disillusionment, fanned by the Clinton campaign, with the conservative economic policies of the Reagan and Bush administrations. Clinton's assiduous courtship of the "hardworking average American" with proposals for increased taxes on wealthier Americans represented a determined effort to expose the inherent divisions between rich and poor in the southern Republican coalition.

The return of class-based divisions within the southern electorate is illustrated even more clearly if the Perot vote is statistically eliminated. Survey data for Davidson County, and for the South in general, indicate that support for the Independent candidate derived from no consistent source. Therefore, an equal division of the Perot vote between the two major candidates permits a useful comparison of 1992 with the two-way races of previous years.⁸ Table 8 displays the actual of Davidson County results in the 1976 presidential election and the estimated vote in a two-way race in 1992. The resulting symmetry between the Carter and Clinton coalitions reveals the same populist formula for victory - heavy black support combined with minority low status white support. Without the Perot vote, a decisive majority for Clinton among low income white voters and a close contest in the lower-middle income group could be projected. Yet in this theoretical comparison, Clinton failed to completely duplicate Carter's support among lower income voters. Perhaps the shortcomings of the Democratic southern coalition were best explained by the controversy surrounding Clinton's personal life. Bush's attack on Clinton's character and patriotism were particularly devastating to the Democratic candidate in the conservative southern climate. Moreover, Clinton's "southernness" did not yield the same political benefits that Carter had enjoyed in 1976, a reflection of the fading regional distinctiveness in southern politics. Another possibility was that Perot's folksy image and homespun rhetoric drew support from would-be Clinton voters in the low-income

white bracket, while his emphasis on serious reduction of the federal deficit detracted support from Bush among well-educated, upper income whites concerned about government gridlock.

TABLE 8:
PRESIDENTIAL VOTE IN 1976 AND ESTIMATED VOTE IN 1992
IN DAVIDSON COUNTY BY RACE AND INCOME LEVEL

| <u>Black voters:</u> | <u>Carter(D)</u> | <u>Ford(R)</u> | <u>Clinton(D)</u> | <u>Bush(R)</u> |
|--------------------------|------------------|----------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Low income | 91.5% | 7.9% | 93.8% | 5.2% |
| Middle income | 94.7% | 4.8% | 95.0% | 4.3% |
| Upper income | 95.6% | 4.1% | 95.2% | 4.2% |
| <u>White voters:</u> | | | | |
| Low income | 67.0% | 31.7% | 60.0% | 39.4% |
| Lower-middle | 59.3% | 39.4% | 48.3% | 51.5% |
| Upper-middle | 38.3% | 60.2% | 40.3% | 59.4% |
| Upper income | 28.6% | 70.2% | 28.3% | 71.6% |
| | | | | |
| Davidson County | 61.3% | 37.5% | 57.2% | 42.6% |
| Tennessee | 55.9% | 42.9% | 52.0% | 48.0% |
| South | 47% | 53% | 50% | 51% |

Source: Compiled by the author. Estimated vote in 1992 is calculated by dividing the Perot vote equally between the Democratic and Republican candidate.

The 1992 election signaled the return of a competitive southern presidential battleground. The cumulative effect of a two-southerner Democratic ticket, a pervasive sentiment that a change in direction for the country was needed, and a crippling

recession broke the Republican hold on several southern states and loosened its grip across the region. Clinton's singular focus on economic issues - government spending on stimulus packages to get the economy moving, and increased taxes on the rich - helped rebuild a New Deal style coalition. Unlike previous Democratic candidates, Clinton was better able to respond to political reality in the South - his attempt to run "a governor's campaign writ large"⁹ was a deliberate break from the disastrous Democratic campaigns of the 1980s. By positioning himself as a moderate Democrat who resisted the influence of interest groups, by sounding a combination of conservative and progressive themes rather than a strictly liberal message, and by neutralizing the familiar Republican tactic of attacking Democrats on social issues and family values with an unrelenting emphasis on the economy, Clinton was able to shed some of the main liabilities of the Democratic party and bring the Democratic ticket more in tune with the southern political climate.

The New South and the Nation

The period from 1976 through 1992 marked a distinct era in southern politics, an era that witnessed the long-term political consequences of a massive transformation of southern society and culture from the end of World War II through the tumultuous

civil rights years. One critical outcome of this dramatic change was the demise of one-party rule in the Solid South. V.O. Key had predicted that two-party competition would naturally follow the legal dismemberment of the southern racial caste system, the dissolution of rural elite political power, and the modernization of the southern economy. To varying degree, these developments occurred in the post-civil rights era. Certainly the worst abuses of the Solid South were eliminated. Outright segregation was outlawed; black assimilation had penetrated neighborhoods, schools, the job market, and even political offices. Southern politicians no longer used race-baiting and racial demagoguery to maintain their political power; the mass enfranchisement of both blacks and whites ensured that the have-not coalition of low income interests was a force to be reckoned with, particularly in sub-presidential politics.

The liberal biracial coalition that Key had envisioned would follow the breakdown of one-party politics did not immediately materialize. One reason was the nature of racial reform that emerged in the 1960s. Key had not predicted the revolt from black southerners within the South that produced the civil rights movement, and he had discounted the possibility of effective national intervention to reform southern politics.⁷⁷

Indeed, history had dealt the southern wing of the Democratic party an ironic blow. Because of the actions of the national organization, the party of white supremacy in the South had become, against its will, the champion of minority rights. The

eruption of the civil rights movement, while forcing the South to permit black political participation, certainly had not reduced southern preoccupation with race. The issue persisted throughout the 1970s and 1980s as the major stumbling block between what Key had assumed to be the inherent common economic interests of blacks and low income whites.

The political success of the southern biracial coalition was due largely to the ability of state level Democrats to mold a black-white Democratic constituency with a blend of traditional southern conservative themes and values with more progressive, populist-style appeals. In congressional, state, and local races, this classic Democratic format persisted with remarkable strength throughout the 1980s, allowing the party to maintain its presence in southern politics despite Republican dominance in presidential contests and increasing two-party competition on all electoral levels, particularly in the more urbanized and entrepreneurial Peripheral South. In national politics, the issue of race and other divisive social issues were less easily resolved. Social conservatism and economic individualism among southern whites of all classes thwarted the formation of class-based coalitions and real two-party competition in presidential contests. The political pendulum in presidential politics swung from a segregationist white Democratic majority to a lily-white Republican coalition first in 1972, and again during the 1980s. However, the elections of 1976 and 1992 demonstrated that under certain conditions - a sagging economy, a moderate Democratic candidate, and a

discredited Republican administration - the national Democratic party could unite the black and white segments of its southern coalition with a class-based, populist appeal.

On both levels of electoral competition, therefore, the durable partisan vehicle for have-not interests of both races in the South had arrived. If, as the Blacks concluded, the "prospects for political alliances between black and white workers are directly tied to the performance of the southern economy,"¹ they hinge even more on the resolution of the race issue. As long as racially tinged social issues dominate presidential elections in the South, the populist potential of the low income white-black coalition will remain untapped. Only when these groups can overcome racial cleavages to unite around liberal economic objectives will the interests of the "have-nots" be expressed at the polls with sufficient force to affect presidential outcomes.

The rise of two party competition in the South represented another important trend - the nationalization of southern politics. By the 1970s, the crippling institutions of one-party rule no longer isolated the South from national politics. The following decades saw the penetration of issues of national debate into the southern political climate, as the two major parties began competing for the support of southern voters. Such tactics as the Republican Southern Strategy and the introduction of Super Tuesday into the primary process were indications of the growing attention being paid to the South in national contests. Southerners responded in kind with an

evolution of political attitudes away from solely racial considerations.

In an essay entitled "The Future of Southern Politics: New Directions for Dixie," Alexander Lamis examined the responses of northern and southern white voters to a variety of issue questions concerning the fundamental dimensions of liberalism and conservatism.² Southern whites were more conservative than their northern counterparts on other issues involving foreign affairs, race relations, and religion in schools. However, on issues concerning government responsibility in providing services, jobs, and a good standard of living, southern and northern whites displayed a remarkable congruence. Most whites in both regions wanted to maintain current levels of government services. However, they also opposed a government controlled health care system and government responsibility for providing jobs and financial stability.

As Lamis argued, these results must temper assumptions that the South is a region "suffused in a sea of conservatism" and therefore incapable of two-party competition.³ The broad range of political attitudes among southern whites provides a sufficient basis for the partisan politics that have shaped electoral outcomes in the rest of the nation. The cultural, economic, and political evolution of the South has catapulted the region into national prominence as an electoral goldmine. Yet the continuing distinctiveness of southern political attitudes increases the bargaining power of southerners within the larger dynamics of national two-party competition. The

unique historical legacy of the South continues to mold the interplay of its conservative and populist ideological underpinnings in national partisan politics, ensuring its place as distinct political and cultural entity within American society.

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Essay on Method and Sources

The data used in this analysis of southern politics were precinct returns from Davidson County, Tennessee, from the year 1976 through the year 1992. Precincts were classified on the basis of race and median income, generating seven categories: Low, middle, and upper income black voters, and low, lower-middle, upper-middle, and upper income white voters. The process of selecting a precinct to fill one of these categories was as follows. Census tracts that possessed the appropriate demographic characteristics were chosen from census tract maps and statistics published by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census of Population and Housing, Nashville-Davidson County, Tennessee SMSA, Final Reports PHC(1)-139 and PHC-2-252. A tract was classified as "white" or "black" if over 95 percent of the population of the tract fit that racial description. Only tracts that met this stipulation were used, so that the tracts, and therefore, the precincts selected from the tracts, would be sufficiently homogeneous to provide the basis for conclusions about the voting behavior of black and white voters. Maps of these tracts were then compared with maps of voting precincts in order to select precincts that fell in appropriate census tracts. Precincts and tracts rarely coincided, and only those precincts which were clearly within the boundaries of a particular tract were chosen. A total of 18 white precincts and eight black precincts were selected for each election year considered. These precincts were then subdivided into income

categories using median income data from the census tract statistics. Because of a greater availability of white precincts of varying income levels, they were quartiled, while black precincts were triptiled.

For each election, precincts were selected from census statistics and maps closest temporally to the election year (For example, precinct selection for the 1980 election was based on information from the 1980 census and a 1976 census tract map). While black precincts were largely restricted to one geographical area, white precincts were spread throughout the county, and were therefore selected in a pattern that represented all regions of the county. In order to make an accurate comparison over time, only precincts that fell within census tracts whose geographical boundaries and racial composition remained constant throughout the studied period. In some cases, the numerical title of the precinct changed without any substantial alteration in its physical boundaries; therefore there was some discrepancy in the numbering of the precincts from one election year to another. The percentage of votes for a particular candidate in any category of voters was determined by the mean outcomes of the precincts that comprised that category.

Bibliographic Note

The following five works that discuss the rise of two-party politics in the South, the social and demographic forces behind the southern political transformation, and its implications for partisanship and voting were fundamental to my analysis of recent southern political behavior. The first and foremost of scholars on post-World War II politics in the South is V.O. Key. His landmark study, Southern Politics in State and Nation (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), critically analyses the origins and dynamics of the southern one-party system, carefully separating political reality from southern myth. Key's discussion of the limitations of one-party politics also suggests the fundamental social and political changes necessary for the development of for two-party competition. In Southern Politics and the Second Reconstruction (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), Numan V. Bartley and Hugh D. Graham chronicle electoral change in the South in the postwar era. Using extensive precinct return data from twenty-seven southern cities, their political narrative emphasizes the persistence of a distinctively southern racial intransigence despite the "liberalizing" forces of industrialization and urbanization.

In The Two-Party South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), Alexander P. Lamis provides a state-by state analysis of recent presidential, congressional, and gubernatorial elections in the South. Lamis emphasizes both the continuity of the Solid

South heritage and more transient candidate factors and campaign strategies in explanation of the uneven rise of two-party competition. Two works by Earl and Merle Black provide additional perspectives on partisan politics in the modern South. Politics and Society in the South (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987) is a rigorous analysis of social and economic forces that have fueled the postwar transformation of southern politics. In their detailed portrait of the modern South, the Blacks outline the complex patterns in southern partisanship and voting and that have raised the issue of electoral realignment among scholars. The Vital South: How Presidents Are Elected (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) is a lively discussion of the growing importance of the South in presidential elections as a trend setting region for the nation. Based on an analysis of recent southern voting patterns and ideological trends, the Blacks assess the potential campaign strategies and future prospects of Republican and Democratic presidential candidates in the South.

Additional works that round out a collection of readings on the southern political experience in recent times range from general histories to focused analyses of specific trends. Dewey Grantham's The Life and Death of the Solid South (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press 1988) provides a sweeping yet detailed account of the complete history of the Solid South - from its origins during Reconstruction through the dramatic changes in the postwar era that forced its demise. In contrast, Harold Stanley's Voter Mobilization and the Politics of Race

(New York: Praeger Publishers, 1987) addresses the specific phenomenon increased voter turnout among southerners of both races in the 1960s, dispelling the assumption made by most scholars at the time that white mobilization was a racist backlash against the entry of black voters into the electorate. Finally, four works edited by the team of Lawrence W. Moreland, Robert P. Steed, and Tod A. Baker provide excellent chapter discussions of specific issues, states, or events: Party Politics in the South (New York, Praeger Publishers, 1980), Contemporary Southern Political Attitudes and Behavior (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1982), The 1984 Presidential Election in the South: Patterns of Southern Party Politics (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1986), and The 1988 Presidential Election in the South: Continuity Amidst Change in Southern Party Politics (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1991).

Several works that describe change in American party politics in the twentieth century provide a useful setting in which to assess the extents of southern political transformation. Everett C. Ladd's Transformations of the American Party System: Political Coalitions From the New Deal to the 1970s (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1978) traces the formation of the New Deal coalition through its eventual unraveling in the postindustrial era, with specific focus on the Democratic collapse in the South as a reflection of the changing fabric of national politics. In The Changing American Voter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), Norman H. Nie et.al. examine changes in American public opinion, emphasizing

declining partisanship, increased issue voting, and improved voter sophistication in explanation of postwar electoral trends. In contrast, Michael M. Gant and Norman R. Luttbeg's study, American Electoral Behavior (Itasca, IL: F. E. Peacock Publishers, Inc., 1991), argues that the complex relationships between partisanship, political trust, and turnout cast doubt upon definitive explanations of current electoral trends and their future direction in American politics. The End of Realignment? Interpreting American Electoral Eras (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), a fine collection of essays edited by Byron E. Shafer, discusses the usefulness of the endless realignment debate among scholars attempting to explain the changing dynamics of political parties and voting in the modern political era.

Finally, two works examine manifestations of new issues and new coalitions in the domain of public policy and partisan strategies in presidential contests. In Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1991), Thomas B. Edsall and Mary D. Edsall discuss the intersection of divisive issues of race, minority group rights, and taxes with presidential politics. They argue forcefully that Republican presidential success has hinged upon effective Republican portrayals of Democratic liberalism as a philosophy antithetical to core American values and symbols. Conversely, Kevin Phillips' The Boiling Point: Democrats, Republicans, and the Decline of Middle-Class Prosperity (New York: Random House, 1993) details the

cumulative effect of twelve years of Republican fiscal conservatism on the economic well-being of the average American, whose dissatisfaction fueled a populist revolt in the 1992 election.

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