

Polls and Elections

Dixie's Kingmakers: Stability and Change in Southern Presidential Primary Electorates

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Recent presidential primaries have taken place against the backdrop of a secular realignment in the South, a shift that carries important consequences for nomination politics. In this article, we use statewide exit polls to trace changes between 1988 and 2008 in the Southern Democratic and Republican primary electorates. We find that the Democratic electorate has grown strikingly more liberal, more racially diverse, and less heavily Protestant over the last 20 years. Meanwhile, the Republican Party has solidified into a conservative, almost exclusively white primary electorate. We also identify a growing partisan gender gap in the region. The findings suggest that it will be increasingly difficult for a centrist white Democrat, such as Jimmy Carter or Bill Clinton, to use the South as a launching pad to the nomination. In addition, the growing polarization of the parties' Southern primary electorates will likely continue to widen the ideological distance between the major presidential nominees.

The distinctiveness of the South is a prominent feature of the American political landscape, and its contours have regularly been evident in postreform presidential nomination politics.¹ In 1976 and 1992, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton used their status as Southern governors to their advantage, turning their relative conservatism into an asset

1. In this study, the South consists of the 11 former Confederate states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.

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in a region where Democrats were less liberal than elsewhere in the country. On the Republican side, the decidedly conservative tilt of the GOP primary electorate has helped solidify victories for candidates such as Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. And in 2008, the regional appeal of former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee allowed him to string together five Southern victories, delaying John McCain's eventual claiming of the nomination. Often decisive, the role played by Southern voters in presidential primaries has always been substantial.

All of these contests have taken place against the backdrop of a secular realignment in the South, as white voters have steadily abandoned the Democratic Party in favor of the GOP (Black and Black 2002). Yet for all that is known about the realignment's effect on voting behavior and the outcomes of general presidential elections (e.g., Hillygus and Shields 2008), we know relatively little about the consequences for nomination politics. Just as the politics of the New South has altered the strategic landscape of the fall contests (e.g., Schaller 2006), it has also brought about major changes in the parties' primary electorates, voters who serve as powerful gatekeepers—and potential kingmakers—on the road to the White House. And because the South's primary voters have consistently been integral to the fortunes of both parties' eventual nominees, their changing composition has important implications for the future of presidential electoral politics.

In this article, we trace changes in the Southern Democratic and Republican primary electorates between 1988 and 2008 to explore the implications of the regional realignment for nomination politics. Using a series of statewide exit polls, we show that the Democratic electorate has grown strikingly more liberal, more racially diverse, and less heavily Protestant over the last 20 years. Meanwhile, having undergone the bulk of its transformation by the end of the Reagan era, the Republican Party had by 2008 solidified into a conservative, almost exclusively white primary electorate. We also identify a growing partisan gender gap in the South.

These changes have implications for both parties. On the Democratic side, it appears less likely that a centrist white Democrat will be able to use the South as a launching pad to the nomination, as did Carter and Clinton. No longer is there a distinctly conservative flavor to the preferences of the Democratic electorate, because those voters have left the party for the GOP. At the same time, the growing proportion of minorities in the Democratic electorate produces opportunities for a candidate such as Barack Obama, who in 2008 secured major, and essential, victories in the South on the strength of overwhelming support from black voters. The homogeneity of the GOP, on the other hand, means that Republican candidates with a distinctive conservatism may continue to prove successful in the South.

One of the critical effects of these changes is that whereas the South used to be a region that induced more similarity in the parties' nominees—owing to the relative conservatism of the Democratic electorate—this no longer is the case. The continuing polarization of the Southern Democratic and Republican parties suggests that the ideological distance between the major presidential nominees will continue to widen. Political activists, in the form of primary voters, exert a centrifugal influence on presidential candidates (Miller and Schofield 2008), pulling them away from the median general election voter. The GOP may be the beneficiary of this ideological re-sorting among the

region's Democratic and Republican primary voters, though the party will need to emerge from its current state of disarray before that can happen. The principal disadvantage of Southern Democrats in the contemporary era—and, by extension, the national Democratic Party—is their consistent selection of presidential nominees who are perceived by Southern general election voters as more ideologically distant from them than Republican nominees (Hayes and McKee 2008).

Party Coalitions and Presidential Primaries

The secular realignment in the South began with the Democratic Party's embrace of civil rights legislation in the 1960s. As conservative whites shed their Democratic affiliation and moved into the Republican Party, the GOP has become increasingly strong region-wide (Black and Black 2002; Shafer and Johnston 2006). For example, George W. Bush in 2000 and 2004 won every Southern state, and since the 1990s, the GOP has dramatically increased its share of statewide offices (Hayes and McKee 2008).

While this trend has been well documented, the transformation of the parties' primary electorates has undergone much less empirical scrutiny. But we argue that this is critical, because the ideological composition of primary electorates yields insight into both the balance of power in general election contests and the broader implications of realignments. Realignments result in the reshuffling of the social groups that make up political parties' coalitions (Petrocik 1981, 1987), and coalitional change can perhaps be most easily seen in the makeup of a party's primary electorate.

Primary electorates represent the base of a party—the activists and committed partisans who are intensely involved and engaged in politics. Their views constitute the core of the party platform, which candidates and party leaders must attend to as part of coalition maintenance. In American presidential politics, primary electorates play an important role as gatekeepers, determining which candidates have sufficient support within each party. Candidates design strategies that are intended to appeal to the elements of the party's coalitions who are known to participate in party primaries. For example, evangelical voters in Iowa's caucuses are often targeted by GOP aspirants, as they represent about 60% of the Republican electorate.² Indeed, primary voters often act as kingmakers—especially in the South, where over the years strong support in a string of Southern states has secured presidential nominations for both party's candidates.

This is what has made the South a central part of the dynamic of American presidential primaries. The region's voters are typically more conservative than their non-Southern counterparts (Valentino and Sears 2005). That, of course, is why the Democratic Party instituted Super Tuesday in 1988. In the hopes of giving a candidate less aligned with the liberal wing of the party a better chance at getting elected, party leaders thought that a regional primary would likely produce a candidate who could do better in a general election, but the effort did not succeed (Norrander 1992). And this dynamic has meant that certain candidates have been able to tap into Southern voters

2. See <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/primaries/results/epolls/#IAREP>.

because of their ability to target particular elements of their party's coalition. Carter's victory in 1976 was aided by his popularity among Southerners. Jesse Jackson, for example, won the state of Louisiana in 1984 and 1988, in large part because the state's Democratic primary electorate is heavily African American. Huckabee's success in 2008 came from his Southern roots as well as his standing as an evangelical and his message of conservative populism that resonated with many Southern voters.

But the continuing realignment in the South means that there have been major changes in the composition of the primary electorates. And as these electorates have changed, this means that the kinds of candidates who can succeed in the region likely will change. Our central aim here is to probe the kinds of changes that have occurred in the Southern Democratic and Republican primary electorates and explore the implications for presidential politics.

Data

The data employed in this study come from primary exit polls conducted by CBS News/*New York Times* (1984-1988), the Voter News Service (1992-2000), and the National Election Pool (2004-2008). The main analysis consists of a state-level comparison of the characteristics of Southern primary voters in 2008 and 1988. Fortunately, nearly every Southern state held a primary in those two years. With a few exceptions, we have exit polls from each of these contests, which is not the case for most elections over the last two decades.³

Because of the sequential system of presidential primaries, it is important to note that the composition of the parties' electorates in each state could be affected by more than the long-term trends we are concerned with. Turnout from year to year can respond to whether an incumbent is running for his party's (re)nomination, how many candidates appear on the ballot, whether the contests are competitive, how early in the process the state held its primary, differences in mobilization efforts by the candidates, and the occurrence of competitive down-ballot campaigns, among other factors.

We undertake three strategies to deal with these potential complications. First, neither of the years on which we train most of our attention—1988 and 2008—featured an incumbent running for reelection. Thus, both parties held open primary contests, which reduces the concern that any differences we find are attributable solely to changes in turnout resulting from the absence or presence of a competitive race. Second, we examine every Southern state separately, rather than pooling them all into a single regional analysis. To the extent that the patterns of change in primary electorates are consistent across states, we will

3. With 1988 as the first official Super Tuesday year, 10 of the 11 former Confederate states held primaries on the same day. Both the Democratic and Republican nomination contests were competitive in 1988, and in 2008, this was also true. On the Democratic side, only South Carolina is excluded, because in 1988 the Palmetto State did not hold a Democratic primary. For the GOP, North Carolina and South Carolina are not analyzed. In 2008, there was no Republican exit poll for North Carolina, and in 1988, ABC News conducted an exit poll for South Carolina that does not appear to be methodologically consistent with the CBS News/*New York Times* polls. (For example, the age categories in the ABC News poll are not comparable to the CBS/*New York Times* polls, and there is no weight variable.)

have more confidence that the findings are the product of a long-term regional realignment, not short-term, election-specific factors. Third, to ensure that our findings are not products of anomalous aspects of either 1988 or 2008, we also investigate trends in each election between 1984 and 2008 for three Southern states. If these several empirical investigations produce similar results, we can have greater confidence that our findings are not caused by variation in the timing of state primary dates or other short-term factors.

In the analyses that follow, we examine the composition of the Democratic and Republican primary electorates along several dimensions, including ideology, race, sex, and religion. Because the questions used to measure these variables are consistent in the exit polls, and since the state samples are large,⁴ the emergence of clear and consistent differences gives us confidence that there has been meaningful change. In the secondary analysis of these variables—covering a longer span of elections for Georgia, Tennessee, and Texas—we present, for clarity and aesthetics, only a select portion of the data.

The Democratic and Republican Electorates in 2008 and 1988

Tables 1 and 2 present data on key characteristics of the Southern Democratic and Republican primary electorates, comparing 2008 with 1988. Each column represents a state (Alabama through Virginia), and the row cells show the percentage of voters falling into different categories for several different variables, as well as the change between the two election years. For clarity of presentation, we do not present the distribution for every characteristic within each category, though those data are available from the authors upon request.

Beginning with the Democratic primary electorate in Table 1, the most notable change between 1988 and 2008 is the dramatic leftward shift.⁵ Every state but Louisiana saw double-digit growth in the proportion of self-identified liberals participating in the primary contest. The average increase was 16.5 percentage points. The growth in liberals is not confined to a subset of states, but occurred in both the Deep and Peripheral South,⁶ with Georgia and Florida seeing the largest increases. Whereas in 1988, no state saw even

4. The number of cases ranges from 440 (1988 Tennessee Democratic primary) to 2,316 (2008 North Carolina Democratic primary).

5. We do not report traditional measures of statistical significance because of data limitations. The 2008 exit poll data remain available only at the aggregate level, which means we do not have measures of variance necessary to conduct the appropriate statistical tests. Confidence estimates for the 1988 data, which we do have at the individual level, however, suggest that the differences we emphasize are almost certainly significant. For example, consider Table 1, which shows that 24% of the Alabama Democratic electorate in 1988 identified as liberal, compared to 38% in 2008. The 95% confidence interval around the 1988 estimate ranges from 21% to 26%. Given that the sample size in 2008 is similar, we can be confident that 38% is indeed statistically distinguishable from the 1988 figure. These patterns are similar in other states. Still, we take care not to emphasize the precise magnitude of change nor the presence or absence of change in any single state. Instead, our focus is whether, in totality, the results paint a compelling, and consistent, picture of stability and change in the Democratic and Republican primary electorates.

6. We make the common subregional distinction between the Deep South states of Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina and the Peripheral South states of Arkansas, Florida, North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.

TABLE 1
The Changing Composition of the Southern Democratic Primary Electorate, 2008 vs. 1988

<i>Characteristic (percent)</i>	<i>AL</i>	<i>AR</i>	<i>FL</i>	<i>GA</i>	<i>LA</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>NC</i>	<i>TN</i>	<i>TX</i>	<i>VA</i>
Ideology										
Liberal 2008	38	36	51	47	31	36	42	41	38	50
Liberal 1988	24	16	27	26	25	24	23	24	24	32
<i>Change</i>	+14	+20	+24	+21	+6	+12	+19	+17	+14	+18
Race										
Black 2008	51	16	19	51	48	50	34	29	19	30
Black 1988	45	13	17	35	37	45	29	27	22	34
<i>Change</i>	+6	+3	+2	+16	+11	+5	+5	+2	-3	-4
Hispanic 2008	4	2	12	3	4	<1	2	3	32	5
Hispanic 1988	<1	1	1	<1	<1	1	<1	<1	10	<1
<i>Change</i>	+3	+1	+11	+2	+3	0	+1	+2	+22	+4
Gender										
Female 2008	60	60	59	63	60	58	57	59	57	57
Female 1988	53	52	53	52	52	53	52	53	52	52
<i>Change</i>	+7	+8	+6	+11	+8	+5	+5	+6	+5	+5
Age										
45 or older 2008	62	67	72	53	68	61	65	61	56	59
45 or older 1988	53	57	63	48	52	55	56	52	48	52
<i>Change</i>	+9	+10	+9	+5	+16	+6	+9	+9	+8	+7
Education										
College Grad 2008	35	39	46	52	34	35	44	35	42	57
College Grad 1988	27	20	33	35	30	23	34	32	32	42
<i>Change</i>	+8	+19	+13	+17	+4	+12	+10	+3	+10	+15
Religion										
Protestant 2008	76	77	49	67	53	76	69	75	49	57
Protestant 1988	81	83	52	78	48	78	81	77	67	72
<i>Change</i>	-5	-6	-3	-11	+5	-2	-12	-2	-18	-15
Party ID										
Democrat 2008	82	78	79	77	83	71	76	76	66	70
Democrat 1988	77	66	73	76	76	75	76	72	69	73
<i>Change</i>	+5	+12	+6	+1	+7	-4	0	+4	-3	-3
Independent 2008	13	18	17	19	12	17	19	20	25	22
Independent 1988	18	27	22	19	15	15	18	21	26	21
<i>Change</i>	-5	-9	-5	0	-3	+2	+1	-1	-1	+1
Total cases 2008	1,006	1,008	1,501	1,097	1,183	1,667	2,316	1,345	2,048	1,245
Total cases 1988	1,344	945	1,494	1,323	1,403	1,322	1,441	440	1,647	1,290

Note: Data are weighted. Data for 1988 are from CBS News/New York Times exit polls and 2008 data were accessed from CNN's Web site: <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/>. Protestant includes the category "other Christian."

one-third of its Democratic electorate identifying as liberal, by 2008, all but Louisiana had an electorate that was more than one-third liberal. Florida and Virginia had majority liberal electorates.⁷ This ideological shift in the Democratic electorate is one of the major

7. It is likely that without the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the subsequent exodus of many African Americans from the New Orleans area, the proportion of liberals in Louisiana would have been even higher in 2008.

TABLE 2
Stability and Change in the Southern Republican Primary Electorate, 2008 vs. 1988

<i>Characteristic (percent)</i>	<i>AL</i>	<i>AR</i>	<i>FL</i>	<i>GA</i>	<i>LA</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>TN</i>	<i>TX</i>	<i>VA</i>
Ideology									
Conservative 2008	72	67	61	67	71	63	73	72	65
Conservative 1988	64	56	53	63	62	61	61	61	60
<i>Change</i>	+8	+11	+8	+4	+9	+2	+12	+11	+5
Race									
Black 2008	4	2	3	2	4	1	2	2	3
Black 1988	2	3	2	2	3	2	2	3	2
<i>Change</i>	+2	-1	+1	0	+1	-1	0	-1	+1
Hispanic 2008	2	2	12	2	5	<1	2	10	2
Hispanic 1988	<1	<1	5	<1	1	<1	<1	3	1
<i>Change</i>	+1	+1	+7	+1	+4	0	+1	+7	+1
Gender									
Female 2008	47	49	44	48	49	47	47	49	47
Female 1988	47	55	49	49	51	53	48	48	51
<i>Change</i>	0	-6	-5	-1	-2	-6	-1	+1	-4
Age									
45 or older 2008	67	65	75	60	69	71	60	64	63
45 or older 1988	56	57	66	46	46	57	54	47	51
<i>Change</i>	+11	+8	+9	+14	+23	+14	+6	+17	+12
Education									
College Grad 2008	41	42	50	51	43	38	43	49	56
College Grad 1988	41	38	35	42	39	28	39	41	48
<i>Change</i>	0	+4	+15	+9	+4	+10	+4	+8	+8
Religion									
Protestant 2008	91	89	60	81	62	85	87	76	74
Protestant 1988	87	79	64	82	53	84	86	75	79
<i>Change</i>	+4	+10	-4	-1	+9	+1	+1	+1	-5
Party ID									
Republican 2008	78	69	80	77	87	84	73	78	76
Republican 1988	58	62	79	59	75	58	70	69	70
<i>Change</i>	+20	+7	+1	+18	+12	+26	+3	+9	+6
Independent 2008	18	22	17	18	11	13	22	21	21
Independent 1988	36	34	18	31	18	24	24	27	25
<i>Change</i>	-18	-12	-1	-13	-7	-11	-2	-6	-4
Total cases 2008	833	901	1,516	974	681	613	1,189	1,579	719
Total cases 1988	825	478	1,389	975	881	810	465	1,276	981

Note: Data are weighted. All data for 1988 are from CBS News/New York Times exit polls and 2008 data were accessed from CNN's Web site: <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/>. Protestant includes the category "other Christian."

consequences of the realignment that has taken place over the last 20 years (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998).

The evolution of the Southern Democratic primary electorate is also evident in its changing racial composition. As whites have shifted their party allegiance, the Democratic electorate has become increasingly diverse. In 8 of the 10 states, the proportion of

African American voters has grown, with an average increase of 6.3 percentage points. In 1988, not one state had a majority black Democratic primary electorate, but in 2008, African Americans constituted a majority in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and South Carolina.⁸ While Barack Obama's candidacy no doubt played a part in the increase, we will show that the upward trend in minority representation began well before 2008.

As the proportion of African Americans has grown, so has the Hispanic share of the electorate, though the increase is largely concentrated in Florida and Texas, both of which saw double-digit increases. Twenty years ago, Hispanics in Texas represented 1 in 10 Democratic primary voters. Today, they make up nearly one in three.

The exit polling data also show across-the-board growth in the proportion of female voters between 1988 and 2008. In every state, women became a more prominent part of the Democratic electorate. An electorate that was majority female in 1988 has become even more so in the years since. Some of this is no doubt a "Hillary effect," as support for Clinton's candidacy in 2008 likely increased the representation of women in the Democratic primary. It is not clear whether the magnitude of this difference will prove to be short-lived or persistent. But as we will show, there is also evidence that the feminization of the Democratic electorate began even before 2008.

Table 1 also shows three other notable trends. As measured by the percentage of the electorate with a college degree, Democratic voters have become more educated, something that is not surprising given the important economic and social changes that have occurred in the region in recent years. The electorate has also aged and, at the same time, has undergone some amount of religious conversion, with fewer voters identifying as Protestant. There is some evidence for the growing secularization of the Democratic electorate, though in some states, such as Texas, the decline in Protestant identification has come with an increase in Catholic affiliation.⁹ Finally, we present data on trends in party identification, which shows that 6 of the 10 states saw increases in Democratic identifiers, but four states saw no change or small decreases.

While the story within the Democratic electorate has been of change, the Republican electorate has shown much more stability since 1988. This is not to say that the GOP has not undergone a transformation in the South. But much of the shift that occurred following the civil rights movement and the Reagan years took place before our inquiry begins. Amid the stability, however, there remains evidence of important change even in the last 20 years.

Looking first at the data on ideology, we see a consistent increase—an average of about 7.8 percentage points—in the conservative share of the electorate. The increase is less than half the size of the growth in liberals on the Democratic side, but that is not especially surprising given the relative ideological cohesiveness of the Republican Party. The overall levels of conservatism underscore the striking ideological homogeneity. By

8. Although not shown in the table, in 2008, South Carolina's Democratic primary electorate was 55% black (see <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/primaries/results/epolls/#SCDEM>).

9. For example, Texas saw an increase in the percentage of Catholics from 21% in 1988 to 33% in 2008, largely a function of Hispanic growth.

2008, in these nine Southern states, at least 6 out of 10 Republican primary voters called themselves conservatives. And in four states (Alabama, Louisiana, Tennessee, and Texas), conservatives accounted for 7 in 10 voters.

As the Democratic Party has become increasingly racially diverse, the Republican electorate has remained overwhelmingly white and non-Hispanic. The largest increase in the percentage of African American voters is in Alabama, where the black percentage grew from 2% to 4%. In none of the Southern states does the percentage of black Republican primary voters even rise to 1 in 20. Even as several states have seen an increase in the number of Hispanics, the magnitude of the increases are relatively small. The largest increases, as on the Democratic side, are evident in Florida and Texas.

In concert with the growth in the female share of the Democratic electorate, the data in Table 2 suggest an increasing partisan gender gap. Whereas the Democratic electorate in 2008 was majority female, the Republican electorate in every state is majority male, and increasingly so. While the gap between the proportion of men and women in the Republican electorate is not dramatic, a comparison across the parties reveals that Southern women have begun to select into the Democratic Party. We cannot make any definitive statements with these data about the reasons for this shift, but they demonstrate yet another dimension along which the parties are polarizing.

In contrast to the Democratic primary electorate, we see strong evidence of a partisan realignment. The number of Republican primary voters who identify with the Republican Party has increased substantially in most Southern states.¹⁰ In the Deep South states (Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi), we find the largest increase in the percentage of Republican identifiers. And minus Arkansas, in every Southern state, well over 7 out of 10 GOP primary participants are Republicans. The decline in the proportion of independents participating in the party's open primaries is also notable, with four states seeing double-digit decreases and several others showing smaller, but meaningful, change. As the GOP brand has improved its position in the South, its primaries have become increasingly populated by partisans.

Finally, in every state, the Republican primary electorate has a higher percentage of Protestants versus the number for the opposing Democratic primary electorate. And unlike the pattern of decline shown in the Democratic primary electorate, in most Southern states, the percentage of Protestant Republican primary voters has grown. As in the Democratic electorate, primary voters are now older and more educated. The aging of the Republican electorate has been more pronounced; for example, six states had double-digit increases in the percentage of Republican primary voters 45 and older. The graying of the Republican primary electorate is further evidence of the maturation of the Republican realignment in the South (see Hayes and McKee 2008). The increases in education are generally smaller than on the Democratic side, but significant nonetheless, largely owing to recent changes in Southern society (Black and Black 1987).

10. It is worth noting that almost every Southern state holds open primaries (the exceptions include Florida, Louisiana, and North Carolina), which means that there are negligible costs for partisans to participate in the opposing party's primary.

A Closer Look at Georgia, Tennessee, and Texas

One concern about the conclusions we draw from Tables 1 and 2 is that we cannot be sure that changes between 1988 and 2008 are not attributable to unusual circumstances in one or the other election year. This is especially an issue on the Democratic side. The historic candidacies of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, their protracted primary battle, and the pronounced enthusiasm among their supporters had significant effects on the composition of primary electorates across the country. If the changes we identified in Tables 1 and 2 are simply products of “jump-shifts” in 2008—rather than representing gradual change over time—then our conclusions about the evolution of the region’s primary electorate would be suspect.

To address this concern, we present data on the ideological, racial, and gender composition of three states—Georgia, Tennessee, and Texas—for which we have exit polling data from 1984 through 2008.¹¹ If the results in the tables are indeed representative of trends in the Republican and Democratic electorates, then gradual change should be evident over the last six elections. If the patterns are simply products of the unusual circumstances of 2008, then the data would show stability until 2004 and sudden change in 2008.

While not necessarily representative of the South as a whole, these states vary along dimensions that are conceptually important for the political development of the region. Georgia is a traditional Deep South state with a large African American population. Tennessee is a Peripheral South state with a larger proportion of white voters. And Texas is a Southern “mega state” (Black and Black 2002) that has seen rapid growth in the last three decades, particularly with the expansion of the Hispanic population. So, while we make no claims that the patterns we discuss in each state are necessarily predictive of the entire South, their diversity should illuminate the developments that have occurred in states with differing characteristics.

Figure 1 plots the longitudinal trends in ideology for each election in which a primary was held.¹² The Democratic electorate is profiled on the left-hand side, the Republican electorate on the right. Looking first at the Democratic plots, in every case, the proportion of liberals in the electorate has increased, while the percentage of moderates and conservatives has fallen slightly. Despite the geographic and cultural variation in the three states and the region, all have seen nearly identical changes in their Democratic electorates. The ideological shift has been most pronounced in Georgia, and

11. These are the only states for which CBS News/*New York Times* exit polling data are available for the entire range of possible elections. Exit polls for each election were also conducted in Florida, but we omit it for three reasons. First, the 1984 poll was conducted by ABC News, unlike our other surveys. Second, unlike the open primaries conducted in Georgia, Tennessee, and Texas, Florida conducts closed primaries in which only registered partisans can vote in their party’s primary. And third, Florida is the least “Southern” of the former Confederate states, with a large percentage of residents who are not native born or native to the region (Colburn 2008).

12. Exit polls in both the Democratic and Republican primaries were conducted in 1988, 1992, 2000, and 2008. In 1984 and 2004, Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush faced no opposition in their reelection bids, and in 1996, Democratic incumbent Bill Clinton did not have a serious primary challenger. As a result, in 1984 and 2004, only Democratic primary voters were surveyed, and in 1996, only Republican primary voters were interviewed.

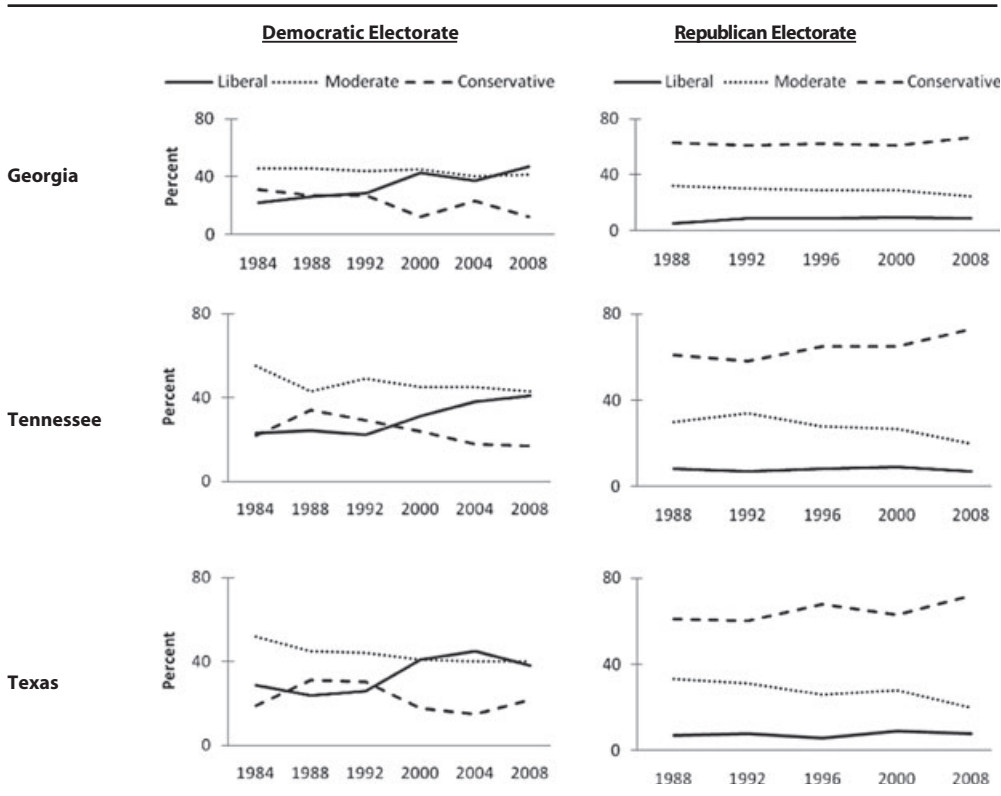


FIGURE 1. Ideology in the Georgia, Tennessee, and Texas Presidential Primary Electorates, 1984-2008.

while the changes were somewhat smaller in Tennessee and Texas, the patterns are the same. Critically, it is clear that the leftward shift in the Democratic electorate has been occurring for the last 20 years, and is not simply attributable to the circumstances of the 2008 contest. As the national Democratic Party has moved left, so has its Southern party-in-electorate.

The right side of the figure shows that the consolidation of the Southern GOP as a conservative party has continued into the first elections of the twenty-first century. Decidedly conservative throughout the time series, the GOP moved even slightly farther right in 2008, with small increases in each state. While the proportion of liberals in the Republican primary electorate has remained small but steady, the percentage of moderates has declined, suggesting that erstwhile middle-of-the-road voters are increasingly identifying as conservatives.

Figure 2 presents similar plots showing the change in the percentage of white, black, and Hispanic voters in the electorate. Again, the increase in the minority share of the Democratic electorate is not attributable only to Obama's candidacy. The decline in the proportion of white voters, and the increase in black voters (and Hispanic voters in Texas), began several elections earlier, demonstrating that the change is part of a larger realignment. And though the data in the Republican half of the figure are limited to just

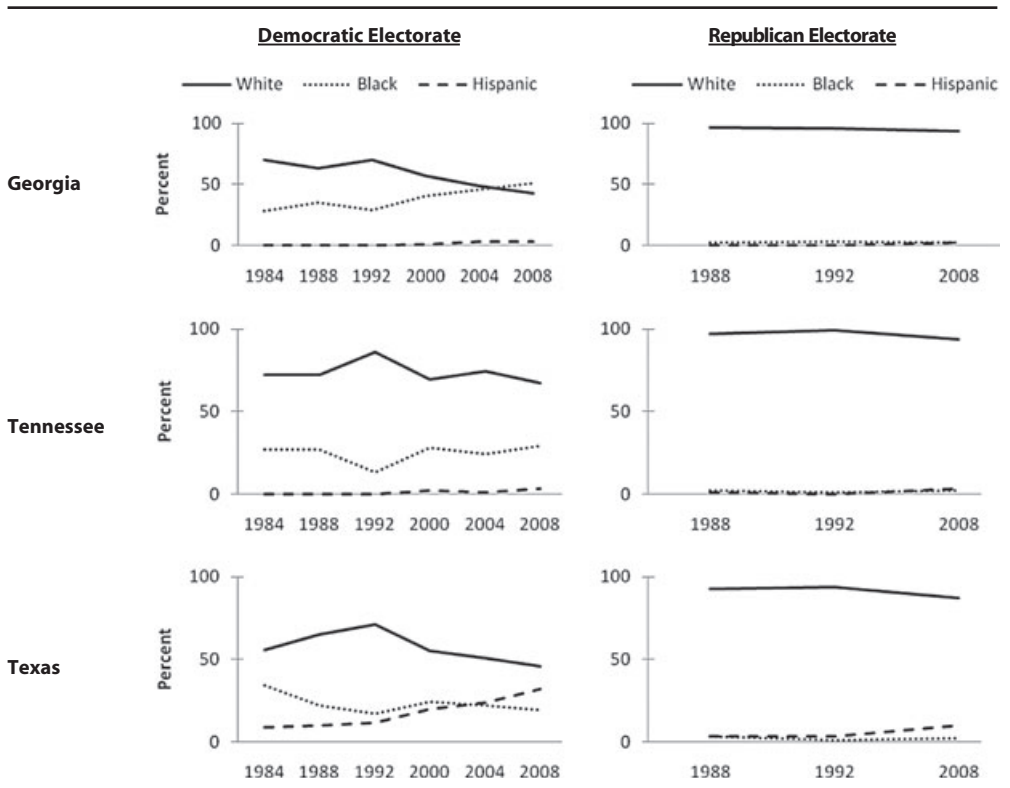


FIGURE 2. Race in the Georgia, Tennessee, and Texas Presidential Primary Electorates, 1984-2008. Note: Exit polls for the 1996 and 2000 Republican primaries did not include questions about respondents' race.

three elections (the GOP exit polls in 1996 and 2000 did not include a question about the respondent's race), there is no mistaking that the Republican primary electorate is as white as it is conservative.

Finally, in Figure 3, we trace the evolution of the gender gap. While the most pronounced difference in the gender split in the Democratic Party occurred in 2008, the figures make clear that the gap is not simply evidence of a Hillary Clinton effect. In all three states, the female share of the electorate began to grow in 2000 and, with the exception of 2004 in Texas, has continued to expand since. At the national level, research has shown that women are more likely to identify with the Democratic Party and vote for Democratic candidates (Kaufmann and Petrocik 1999), but this represents the first evidence to our knowledge of the extent to which this gender gap is evident in Southern primary electorates. There is considerably more stability on the Republican side, with the slight advantage for males remaining relatively constant throughout the time series.

In the end, the results from these three states confirm and amplify the findings from Tables 1 and 2. The Democratic primary electorate has gradually grown more liberal, more racially diverse, and increasingly the venue for primary participation among Southern women. The Republican electorate, on the other hand, has consolidated into an overwhelmingly conservative, white group that is more likely to draw in men than

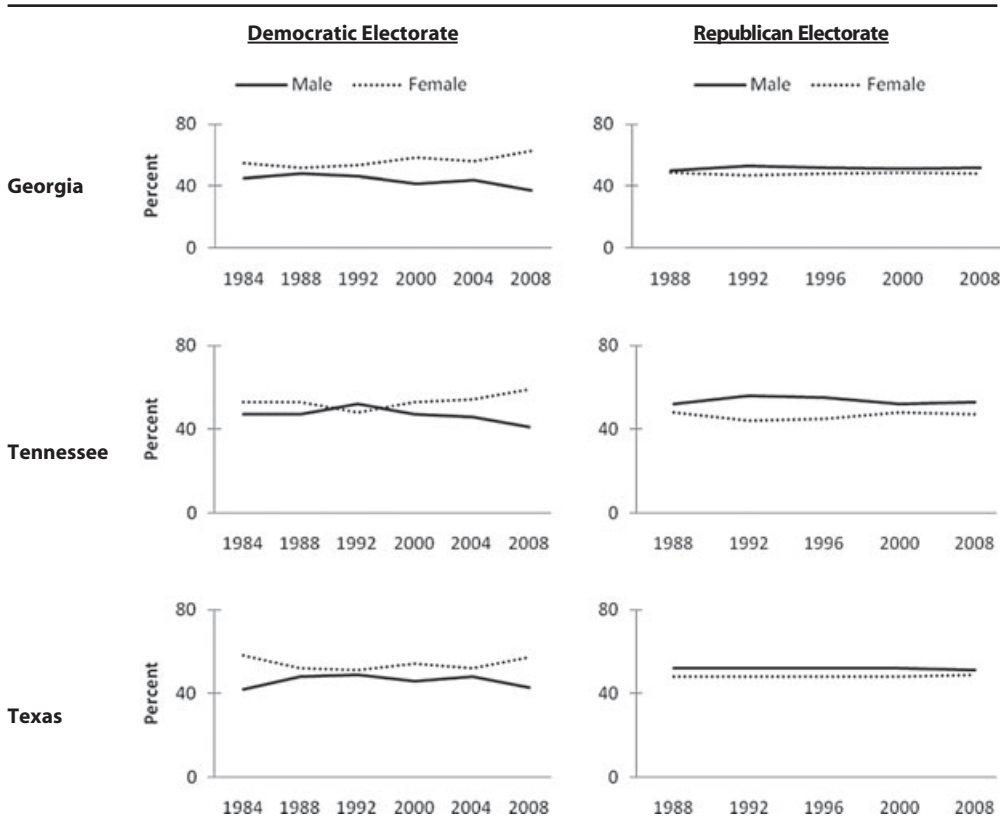


FIGURE 3. Gender in the Georgia, Tennessee, and Texas Presidential Primary Electorates, 1984-2008.

women. These changes are the result of a secular realignment and cannot be attributed to the unusual circumstances of the 2008 Democratic primary. We turn now to a discussion of the implications for presidential nomination politics.

The Significance of Southern Primary Electorates: 2008 in Context

In their tour de force of the South's presidential politics, Earl and Merle Black state that "[t]he southern party system is still in transition" (1992, 357). Black and Black's (1992) analysis of the Southern presidential electorate ends with the 1988 election, and thus the findings in our study make it readily apparent that much has changed over the last 20 years. A hallmark of partisan change in the South is the growing ideological polarization of the Democratic and Republican presidential primary electorates. Every Southern state since 1988 has experienced considerable re-sorting along ideological lines, as the Democratic electorate has become more liberal and the Republican electorate even more conservative. This development has powerful implications for nomination and general election contests within the South and nationally.

In retrospect, the rise of Bill Clinton almost looks like the second coming of Jimmy Carter—a Southern moderate with appeal in and outside the region. Perhaps Clinton will be remembered as the last Southern Democrat whose centrist positioning enabled him to dominate the region's primaries and prove competitive in the general election. In this respect, the post-Clinton years may mark a turning point in Democratic nomination politics. To be sure, Southern Democratic primaries are crucial for securing the party's nomination, because the preferences of Southern Democratic primary voters are now more in sync with national Democrats (e.g., Pew Research Center 2004). Perhaps ironically, as the Southern Democratic primary electorate has come to reflect the views of the Democratic electorate as a whole, winning Southern primaries has become more important for securing the nomination, but less important with respect to mounting a competitive general election campaign in the South.

Ideally, we would like to demonstrate the longitudinal convergence of voter preferences among Democratic primary voters in and outside the South, but because of the data currently at our disposal, we concentrate our attention on the important changes that have taken place in only the South.¹³ To be sure, a valuable extension of this analysis would track change in the non-South over the same time period and draw further implications for the strategic imperatives facing aspirants for the parties' nominations.

Nonetheless, in addition to other scholarship on the growing convergence between the South and the rest of the country (Shafer and Johnston 2006), the performance of candidates in the South and non-South since the 1996 presidential election provides strong evidence that regional distinctions show a declining influence on Democratic primary voter preferences. In 2000, the Tennessean Al Gore swept the Southern Democratic primaries and dominated Northern primaries, but he was subsequently shut out of the South in the general contest. The 2004 candidacy of John Edwards highlights the progressive march of the Southern Democratic primary electorate. No longer could a native son of the South best a Northern liberal below the Mason-Dixon line. John Kerry won every Southern primary with the exception of Edwards's home state of South Carolina. But Kerry, like Gore, failed to win a single Southern state in the general election. The conservative-to-moderate white Southerners who lifted Jimmy Carter in 1976 have long since left the Democratic fold for the Republican Party. In 2008, the lone Southerner on the Democratic side, Edwards, placed third in the South Carolina primary, taking less than 18% of the vote.

The 2008 primary season is notable for another reason. Unlike 1984 and 1988, when Jesse Jackson was not seen as a viable alternative by the vast majority of white primary voters, Barack Obama's strong appeal among African Americans, coupled with his respectable showing among whites, made the South his firewall for beating back

13. One possibility would be to pool survey respondents from every state in both 1988 and 2008, divide them into South and non-South, and then compare the characteristics of primary voters in the two years. This analysis is prohibited because we are working only with aggregate data from 2008, as well as the variation in primary dates and other factors mentioned earlier, which would make it difficult in a pooled analysis to separate long-term from short-term effects on the composition of the electorates. Because of the added confidence provided by a state-by-state comparison, as we show in Tables 1 and 2, we restrict the analysis here only to Southern states.

the late surge of Hillary Clinton. The centrality of descriptive representation could not be any clearer: Obama won 7 of the 11 Southern primaries, losing the four states with the smallest percentage of African American Democratic primary voters (Arkansas, Florida, Tennessee, and Texas). Thus, we contend that it is the disproportionately large percentage of black Democratic primary voters that gave Obama a decided edge in Southern contests. We have no reason, however, to expect that African American Democratic primary voters outside the South were any less enthusiastic and supportive of their party's eventual nominee. Given the political events that have transpired since the Clinton presidency, have we finally witnessed the day when a centrist white Southern Democratic candidate is now unpalatable to the majority of Southern Democratic primary voters?

In contrast to the evolving nature and influence of the Southern Democratic primary electorate, the Southern Republican primary electorate's remarkable cohesiveness routinely delivers the presidential nomination. Black and Black point out that in the postreform era, 1976 was the only "instance in which a majority of Southerners preferred the losing candidate" (1992, 273). In fact, from 1980 through 2004, every Republican nominee swept the region's primary contests. Proud of its "first in the South" status, since 1980, South Carolina's Republican primary has proven pivotal in selecting the GOP's standard-bearer.¹⁴ For the first time since Reagan's insurgent campaign against Ford in 1976, 2008 was truly divisive.

Although former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee won five contests in the South, it was the sequence of John McCain's six Southern victories that helped propel him to victory. In a highly fractured field that included two "flawed" Southerners—a suspect conservative-populist in Huckabee and Tennessean Fred Thompson, who appeared to find campaigning a burden (e.g., Nagourney 2008)—McCain was the primary beneficiary in South Carolina. McCain won a plurality with just 33.2% of the vote, while Huckabee garnered 29.8% and Thompson won 15.6%. In the next contest in Florida, the least traditionally Southern state, McCain won again, a victory that essentially secured his nomination. It appears that circumstances and timing were incredibly fortuitous for McCain—a candidate who, from all indications, did not excite the rank-and-file Southern Republican primary voter.

Although 2008 is something of an aberration in the typical pattern of Southern Republican primary contests, with McCain's back-to-back victories in South Carolina and Florida, Dixie again proved pivotal to selecting the Republican nominee. The Republican primary electorate lacked the kind of candidate it prefers to unite behind—an economic, social, and foreign policy conservative, the formula for overwhelming support. Perhaps this is not surprising, as the 2006 midterm elections and President Bush's historically low approval made it apparent that the 2008 election would shape up to be an extremely favorable year for Democrats. In this political environment it would be curious to witness the emergence of a strong Republican candidate in a decidedly Democratic cycle.

14. With the exception of Georgia in 1992, from 1980 to 2008, South Carolina has been the first Southern state to hold its Republican primary.

Discussion and Conclusion

We have shown that the Southern Democratic primary electorate is fast shedding its regional distinctiveness. The exodus of conservatives in favor of the GOP primary appears to have brought the party's primary electorate's ideological preferences into closer alignment with national Democrats (Shafer and Johnston 2001). And with the substantial presence of African Americans and a growing number of Hispanics, the party's electorate has grown increasingly diverse. This leftward shift has profound consequences for the viability of Democratic presidential contenders, perhaps making the white Southern Democratic candidate an increasingly improbable nominee in future contests.

With regard to the Southern Republican primary electorate, it is remarkable for its overwhelmingly white composition and super majority of conservative voters. With a nontrivial increase in the number of conservatives, the Southern GOP primary electorate has maintained its position on the right end of the national party's ideological continuum. And because of the timing of the primary calendar—particularly South Carolina's early date—coupled with the usual cohesiveness of Southern Republican primary voter preferences (2008 being an obvious exception), it is imperative that Republican candidates perform well in Dixie. In fact, Southern primary voters routinely decide the party's presidential nominee (Black and Black 1992), and because the South has the greatest number of base Republican states in general elections, the region is the most important at both stages of presidential contests.

The timing of past, present, and most likely future contests ensures that the South's Democratic and Republican primary electorates will continue to exert a dominant role in the selection of presidential nominees. Because of the Southern Democratic primary electorate's move to the left, it is likely that it will continue to choose candidates acceptable to its Yankee counterparts—candidates who most likely hail from outside the South. The contemporary Democratic primary electorate could hardly look more different from its 1972 predecessor, which gave George Wallace a clean sweep of the region's three primaries in Florida, North Carolina, and Tennessee.

By comparison, the Southern GOP's primary electorate is the vanguard of the candidate selection process. Southern Republican primary voters are the national pacesetter. If a Republican candidate cannot win the support of Dixie's kingmakers, he is most likely doomed. On the one occasion in the postreform era when the Southern electorate preferred the candidate who lost the nomination—Ronald Reagan in 1976—the Republican standard-bearer Gerald Ford lost to Democrat Jimmy Carter, who carried every Southern state but Virginia. Since the 1980s, the rise of a Republican Solid South in presidential elections magnifies the importance of running strong in Southern Republican primaries.

So given the present status of the Democratic and Republican primaries, what are the implications for general presidential elections? Modern presidential campaigns are ruthlessly practical in pursuing the goal of winning 270 electoral votes (Shaw 2006), the magic number for occupying the White House. So the more specific question is, how important is the South in the strategies of Democratic and Republican nominees? From the vantage of the GOP, the South's 153 electoral votes account for 56.7% of the

necessary total. Sweeping the region is a realistic possibility, because the states that are not Republican strongholds are otherwise battlegrounds. Thus, it makes good sense for Republican candidates to heed their Southern base but devote the lion's share of their resources to swing states such as Florida.

The South is primarily "red" state country because the typical general election voter is ideologically closer to Republican presidential candidates (Hayes and McKee 2008). This is notable because the average general election voter is actually ideologically closer to the typical Democratic primary voter. Thus, what impedes the Democratic Party in the South, as in the rest of the nation, is the selection of presidential nominees who are viewed as ideologically farther away from general election voters—and this is even more evident in the South.¹⁵ The habitual selection of Democratic presidential candidates who are viewed as too liberal results in the South giving Republican candidates a large and "cheap" share of electoral votes—a head-start in running for the presidency.

With three exceptions, Bill Clinton in the 1992 and 1996 elections (Stanley 2006), and Barack Obama in 2008, Black and Black offer a sobering fact for the Democratic Party: "No Democrat in American history has ever been elected president on the strength of northern electoral votes alone" (1992, 360). But given the continuing polarization of the Democratic primary electorate—resulting in the selection of presidential candidates more distant from the ideological disposition of most Southern general election voters—the reintroduction of Abraham Lincoln's Northern strategy, now under the guise of the Democratic label, is a viable option. In fact, if John Kerry had won Ohio in 2004, then being swept in the South would not have mattered. But Kerry did not opt for "Whistling Past Dixie" (Schaller 2006). He mounted an aggressive campaign in Florida—the nation's largest swing state. Indeed, it would have been foolish for Kerry to have dismissed the Sunshine State; it is too large and competitive.

As Black and Black see it, "The national Democratic party and its presidential nominees have three options for the South in presidential politics. They can completely write off the South, campaign hard in every Southern state, or run in several carefully selected states" (1992, 360). We contend that the third option is the most sensible. As the continuing transformation of its primary electorates attest, the South is by no means a monolithically Republican region. For one of the same reasons that Florida is a battleground—a large in-migration of non-Southerners—North Carolina and Virginia were swing states in 2008. Nonetheless, it is too early to tell whether Barack Obama's

15. Statements about the ideological distance between Democratic and Republican primary voters, general election voters, and the Democratic and Republican presidential nominees are based on analyses of American National Election Studies (ANES) data (1972-2004; see Hayes and McKee 2008) and the National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) (pre-post general election panels for 2000 and 2004). These data refer to the respondents' ideological self-placement and placement of candidates. Unlike the study of Hayes and McKee (2008), which only considers the general election, we analyzed the self-placement of primary voters and general election voters, and their ideological placement of the presidential nominees (Bush, Gore, and Kerry) for the 2000 and 2004 elections with the use of NAES data. We assessed ideological distance for Southern voters (primary and general), Northern voters (primary and general), and all voters (primary and general). Between 2000 and 2004, there is clear evidence of spatial polarization of general election voters vis-à-vis their ideological placement of the respective Democratic and Republican nominees. In the South, North, and hence the nation, in 2004 the Republican presidential nominee was perceived as ideologically closer to the typical general election voter. The ANES employs a seven-point ideology scale, whereas the NAES uses a five-point ideology scale. Upon request, all of these data can be made available.

three Southern state victories were a product of his unique persona and a Democratic tide or the beginning of a more permanent Democratic appeal in the more Yankee-influenced Peripheral South. At least for now, the primacy of the GOP still holds in Southern presidential elections, and with the increasing leftward shift of the Democratic primary electorate, we hesitate to hold our breath for the next Bill Clinton.

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