

From Strom to Barack: Race, Ideology, and the Transformation of the Southern Party System

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The southern party system has undergone a dramatic transformation since the 1960s, a transformation that has affected both the electoral bases of the parties and their leadership. This transformation has involved two related trends—a shift in the racial composition of the Democratic Party at the mass and elite levels and an ideological realignment that has produced a much wider gap between the ideological orientations and policy preferences of Democratic and Republican leaders and voters. In the South, to an even greater extent than in the rest of the nation, the Democratic Party has become increasingly dependent on the support of nonwhite voters. Meanwhile, despite the growing size of the nonwhite electorate in the South, the Republican base has remained overwhelmingly white. The growing dependence of the Democratic Party in the South on African-American and more recently Hispanic votes has contributed to the party's increasing liberalism because African-American and Hispanic voters tend to strongly support activist government. And this trend has also contributed to the growing conservatism of the Republican base as conservative whites have continued to flee the Democratic Party for the GOP. As a result, the two-party system in the South now consists of a Democratic Party dominated by nonwhites and white liberals and a Republican Party dominated by white conservatives.

The American party system has undergone a dramatic transformation over the past sixty years, and the South has played a major role in that transformation. One of the most important characteristics of the party system during the 1950s and 1960s was the ideological diversity of both major parties. The Democratic Party, though leaning toward the liberal side of the ideological spectrum, included a large and influential conservative wing based mainly in the South. The Republican Party, though leaning toward the conservative side of the ideological spectrum, included a large and influential moderate-to-liberal wing based mainly in the Northeast.

In the American electorate of the 1940s and 1950s, the most important political cleavages were based on class, religion and region rather than ideology (Lazarsfeld et al. 1948; Berelson et al. 1954; Campbell et al. 1960). After capturing the presidency for the Democratic Party in 1932 in the midst of the worst economic crisis in American history, Franklin Roosevelt forged a coalition that dominated American politics for more than three decades. White southerners were a key component of that coalition, along with northern white ethnics, union members and blue collar voters. Roosevelt carried all eleven states of the old Confederacy by landslide margins in each of his

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four victorious elections, and Democrats continued to hold almost all federal, state and local elected offices in the region during Roosevelt's entire presidency.

Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal policies resulted in a dramatic expansion in the role of the federal government in many areas of American life. Yet from the standpoint of the average voter, and certainly the average southern voter, the appeal of the Democratic Party during those years was based less on an ideology of governmental activism than on the concrete benefits that the New Deal provided to those who had been hard hit by the Great Depression—benefits such as public works projects, rural electrification and agricultural price supports—and the association of Republicans with hard times and the Democrats with prosperity (Kennedy 1999).

More than two decades after Roosevelt's first election, in surveys conducted by the American National Election Studies between 1952 and 1960, the twin themes of group benefits and the goodness or badness of the times dominated Americans' responses to a series of open-ended questions asking what they liked or disliked about the two major parties. In contrast, references to the parties' ideological positions or policies were relatively rare (Campbell et al. 1960, chapter 10).

Despite Republican Dwight Eisenhower's decisive victories in the 1952 and 1956 presidential elections, Roosevelt's New Deal coalition remained largely intact. Democrats enjoyed a large advantage in party identification in the national electorate during those years. According to the ANES surveys, Democrats and independents leaning toward the Democratic Party made up 54 percent of the electorate during the 1950s while Republicans and independents leaning toward the Republican Party made up only 39 percent.

The Democratic advantage was much larger among voters belonging to the three groups that formed the core of Roosevelt's electoral coalition: northern white Catholics, northern white blue collar voters and, especially, southern whites. According to the ANES data, during the 1950s Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents outnumbered Republicans and Republican-leaning independents by 68 percent to 24 percent among northern white Catholics, by 59 percent to 33 percent among northern white blue collar voters and by a whopping 75 percent to 19 percent among southern whites.

The Demise of the New Deal Party System

The first cracks in FDR's coalition began to emerge not long after his death in 1945. Not surprisingly, the issue that produced those cracks was race. In 1948, South Carolina Governor J. Strom Thurmond led a walkout of southern delegates from the Democratic National Convention following the

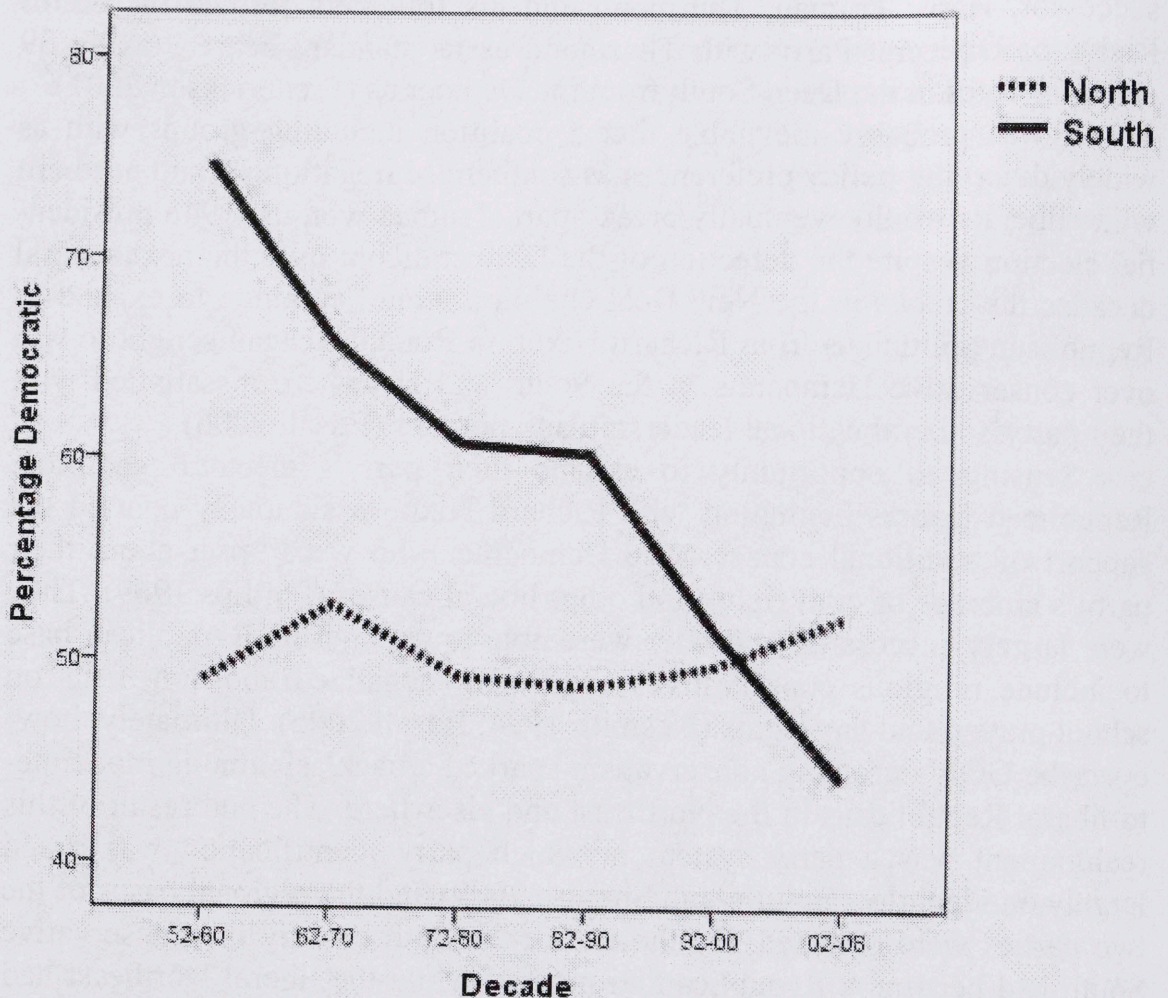
adoption of a fairly mild civil rights plank introduced by Minneapolis Mayor and liberal firebrand Hubert Humphrey. Rather than endorse Roosevelt's successor, Harry Truman, Thurmond and his followers formed the States Rights or Dixiecrat Party with Thurmond as its standard-bearer, taking 39 electoral votes in the Deep South from the Democrats (Frederickson 2001).

It was probably inevitable that a coalition including groups with as widely diverging policy preferences as southern segregationists and northern white liberals would eventually break apart. Truman won the 1948 presidential election despite the defection of the Dixiecrats but over the next several decades the cracks in the New Deal coalition would continue to expand as Republican politicians from Richard Nixon to Ronald Reagan sought to win over conservative Democrats in the South and elsewhere dissatisfied with their party's liberal national leadership and policies (Edsall 2006).

Sensing an opportunity to expand their party's electoral coalition, Republican leaders beginning with Richard Nixon assiduously courted the support of traditional conservative Democrats who were upset about their party's embrace of civil rights and other liberal causes (Phillips 1969). They were largely successful, and later were able to expand the Republican base to include religious conservatives opposed to legalized abortion, bans on school prayer, and gay rights (Nesmith 1994; Edsall 2006). Ultimately, however, the GOP's growing conservatism sparked a backlash among moderate-to-liberal Republicans in the Northeast and elsewhere. The end result of this realignment was a party system in which party identification was based largely on ideology (Bafumi and Shapiro 2009) and the regional bases of the two parties were reversed. By the end of the 20th century the conservative South had become a Republican stronghold while the liberal Northeast had become the most Democratic region of the nation (Black and Black 2007).

The results of the regional realignment of the American party system can be seen in Figures 1 and 2. Figure 1 displays the trends in Democratic identification (Democratic identifiers plus independents leaning toward the Democratic Party) among all voters in the South and the North from the 1950s through the 2000s. Figure 2 displays the same trends for white voters in the South and the North. Both figures show a dramatic decline in Democratic identification among southern voters over these six decades. In contrast, the percentage of Democratic identifiers has remained fairly stable outside of the South.¹ By the first decade of the 21st century, the percentage of Democratic identifiers in the South was well below the percentage in the rest of the country. Among white southern voters, the gap was very large—about 15 percentage points. By the end of this time period, Republicans outnumbered Democrats by close to a two-to-one margin among southern white voters.

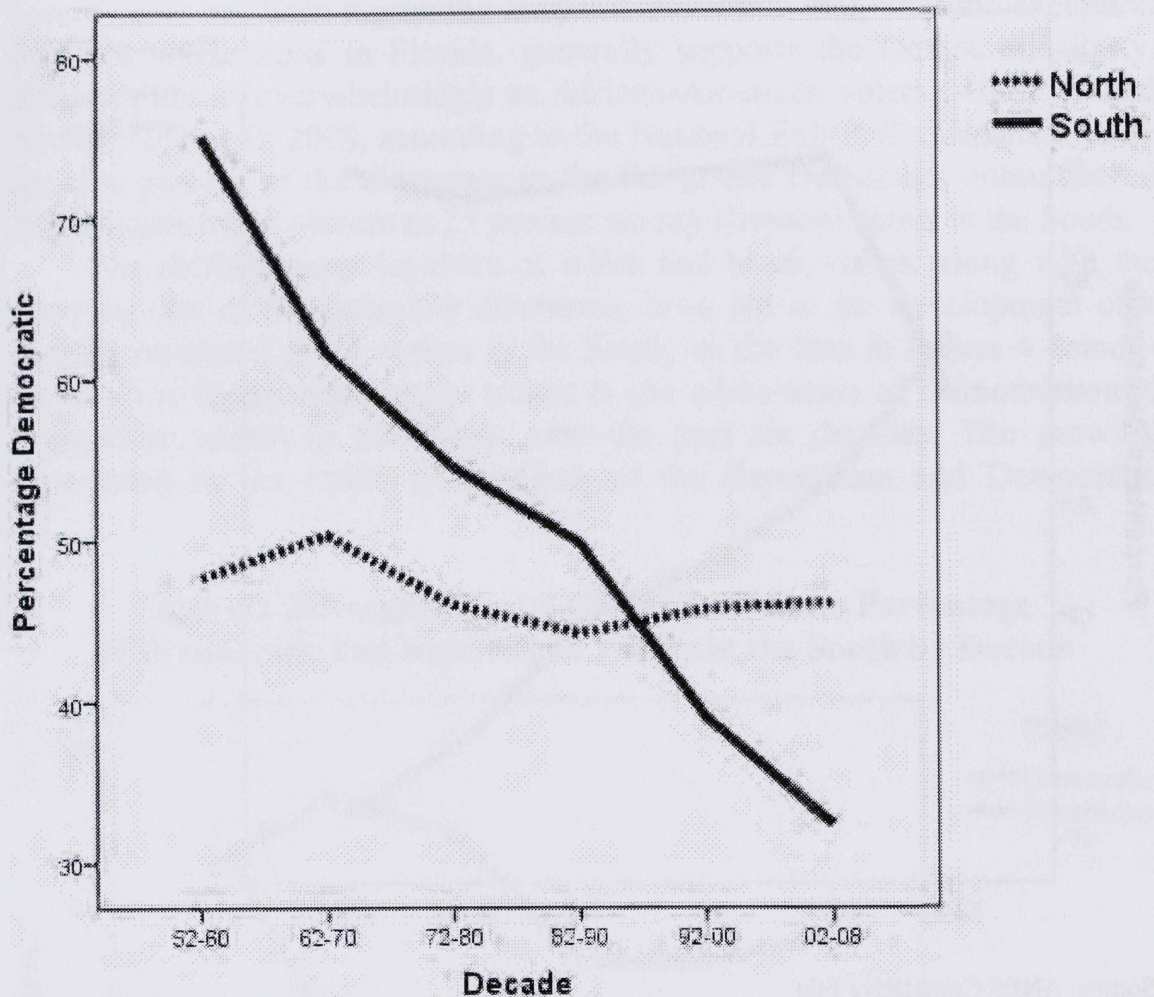
**Figure 1. Realignment of the Southern Electorate:
Party Identification of Northern and Southern Voters by Decade**



Source: ANES Cumulative File.

The pattern of change that is seen in Figures 1 and 2 clearly does not fit the theory of critical realignment set forth by Walter Dean Burnham and other party realignment theorists (Burnham 1970; Sundquist 1983; Key 1955). The movement of southern white voters from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party did not occur rapidly following a critical election in which the parties took clearly opposing positions on the realigning issue. In fact, this shift appears to have been well underway before the 1964 election in which the national parties for the first time took clearly contrasting positions on the crucial issue of civil rights. Instead, the movement of southern white voters appears to be consistent with V.O. Key's concept of secular realignment—a shift that takes place gradually over a series of elections (Key 1959). However, while this shift was gradual, the end result was a radical change in the southern party system.

**Figure 2. Realignment of the Southern White Electorate:
Party Identification of Northern and Southern White Voters by Decade**



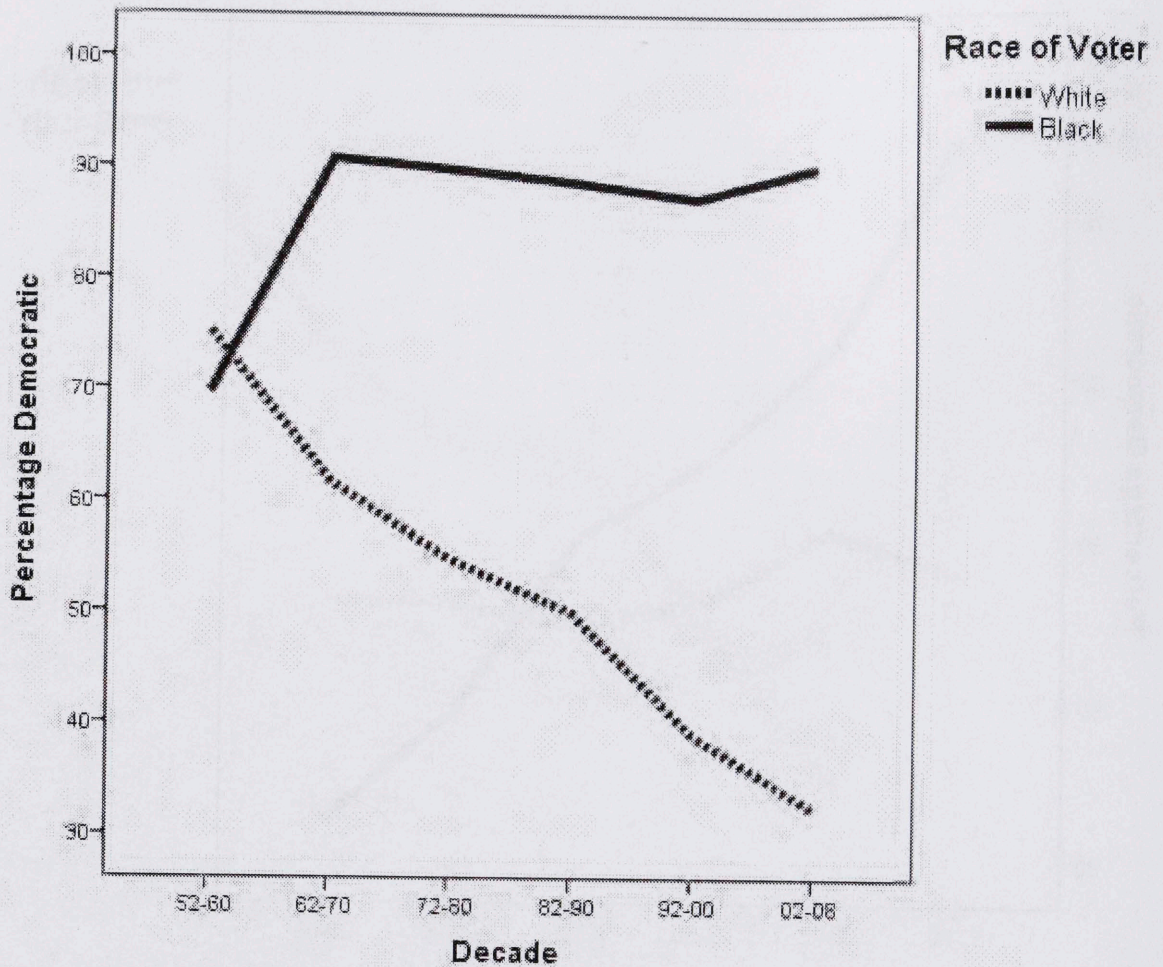
Source: ANES Cumulative File.

The Growing Racial Divide in Southern Politics

The other side of the story of party realignment in the South, along with the steady decline in Democratic identification among southern whites, is the emergence of a large and overwhelmingly Democratic African-American electorate (Tate 1993). After 1932, African-American voters began to abandon their traditional loyalty to the Republican Party and join Roosevelt's New Deal coalition (Key 1949). Still a significant minority of African-American voters remained loyal to the party of Abraham Lincoln, and the vast majority of African-Americans in the South were effectively disenfranchised until the 1960s. As a result, as recently as the early 1960s, the Democratic electoral coalition in the South remained overwhelmingly white.

Figure 3 displays the trends in Democratic identification among southern white and black voters over the past six decades. In the 1950s, the

Figure 3. The Growing Racial Divide: Party Identification of White and Black Southern Voters by Decade



Source: ANES Cumulative File.

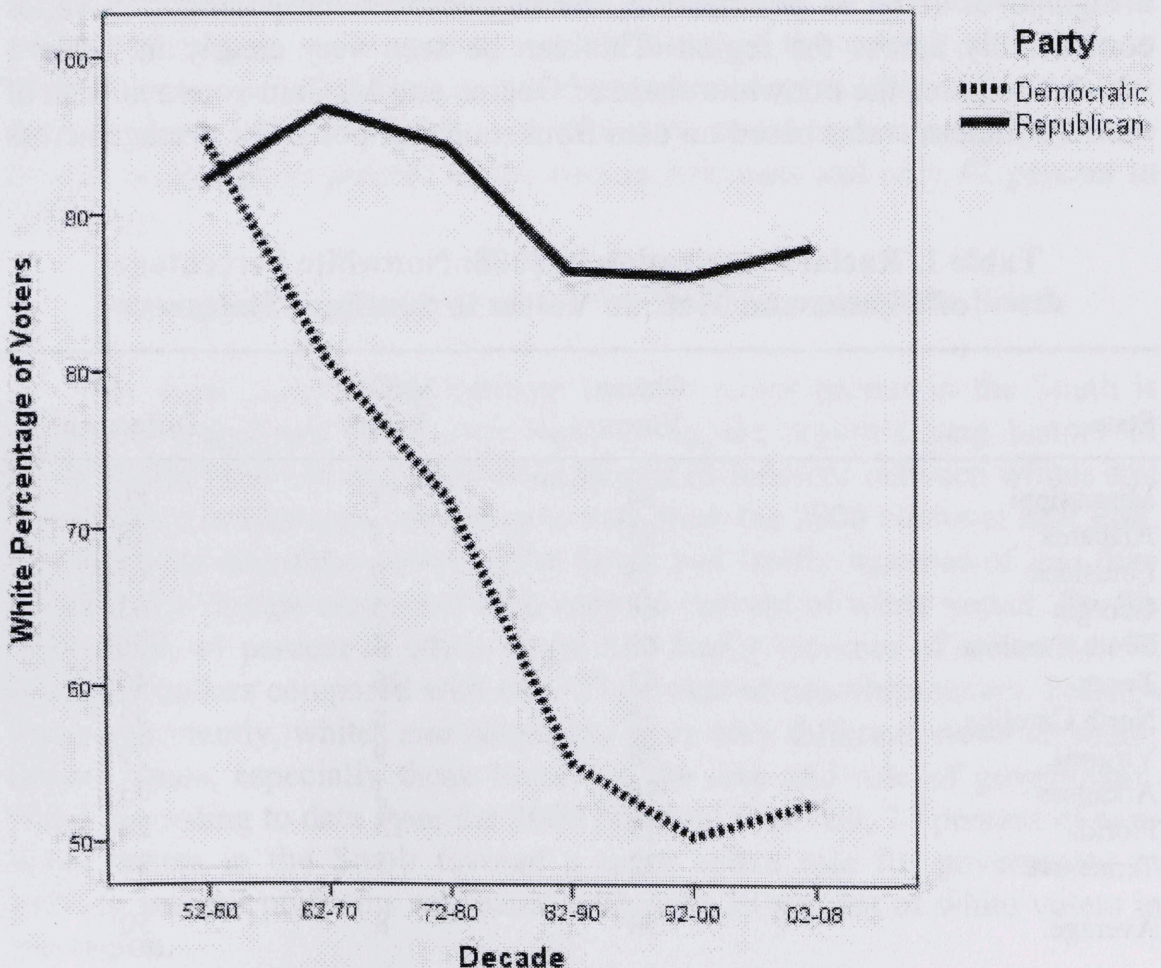
percentage of southern white voters identifying with the Democratic Party was actually slightly higher than the percentage of southern black voters identifying with the Democratic Party. However, that changed dramatically in the 1960s as the national Democratic Party under the leadership of President Lyndon Johnson fully embraced the cause of civil rights while the national Republican Party positioned itself for the first time in its history as the defender of white supremacy in the South (Dallek 1998; Middendorf 2006). This rapid shift in the party loyalties and voting tendencies of African-American voters does appear to much more closely fit the critical realignment model. And this shift has been quite durable. For the past five decades, close to 90 percent of southern black voters have identified with or leaned toward the Democratic Party.

The result of these shifts in white and black party identification, as Figure 3 shows very clearly, has been a growing racial divide in party

identification in the South: an overwhelmingly Democratic black electorate along with an increasingly Republican white electorate. Added to this mix in recent years has been a growing Hispanic electorate that, with the exception of Cuban-Americans in Florida, generally supports the Democratic Party, although not as overwhelmingly as African-American voters (Abrajano and Alvarez 2010). In 2008, according to the National Exit Poll, Hispanics made up nine percent of the electorate in the South and Democrats outnumbered Republicans by 48 percent to 25 percent among Hispanic voters in the South.

The shifting party loyalties of white and black voters, along with the growing size of the nonwhite electorate, have led to the development of a racially polarized party system in the South, as the data in Figure 4 demonstrate. This figure displays the trends in the white share of Democratic and Republican voters in the South over the past six decades. The growing divergence in the racial composition of the Republican and Democratic

Figure 4. Diverging Racial Coalitions: White Percentage of Democratic and Republican Voters in the South by Decade



Source: ANES Cumulative File.

electoral coalitions is very clear in this figure. While the nonwhite share of the overall electorate has grown from five percent in the 1950s to 30 percent in the 2000s, the nonwhite share of the Republican electorate has barely increased. In the first decade of the 21st century, the GOP remained an overwhelmingly white party with non-Hispanic whites making up close to 90 percent of voters who identified with or leaned toward the Republican Party. In contrast, the data in this figure show that over the past several decades the Democratic Party in the South has become increasingly dependent on the support of nonwhite voters. The white share of Democratic voters has fallen from 95 percent in the 1950s to barely 50 percent today.

It is only the overwhelming support of nonwhite voters that has allowed the Democratic Party to remain somewhat competitive in the South in recent elections. This was very clear in 2008. Barack Obama received 46 percent of the popular vote in the South in 2008 according to the National Exit Poll and carried three southern states—Florida, Virginia and North Carolina. But he received only 30 percent of the white vote in the South, losing the white vote in every state by at least 20 points.

While the two-party system in the South as a whole is characterized by a high level of racial polarization, the degree of racial polarization varies considerably across the region. This can be seen very clearly in Table 1 which compares the nonwhite share of Obama and McCain voters in each of the 11 southern states based on data from state exit polls. On average across

Table 1. Racial Polarization in 2008: Nonwhite Percentage of Obama and McCain Voters in Southern States

State	Obama Voters	McCain Voters	Difference
Mississippi	84	4	80
Alabama	83	5	78
Louisiana	76	9	67
Georgia	68	5	63
South Carolina	60	4	56
Texas	62	16	46
North Carolina	50	8	42
Virginia	48	9	39
Arkansas	36	3	33
Florida	43	15	28
Tennessee	32	5	27
Average	58	8	50

Source: State exit polls.

the region, nonwhites made up 58 percent of Obama voters versus only eight percent of McCain voters, a difference of 50 percentage points. But the nonwhite share of Obama voters varied widely, from only 32 percent in Tennessee and 36 percent in Arkansas to 83 percent in Alabama and 84 percent in Mississippi. In contrast, the nonwhite share of McCain voters was much less variable. Florida and Texas, with their large Hispanic electorates, were the only two states in the South in which nonwhites made up more than 10 percent of McCain voters.

The results displayed in Table 1 indicate that the party systems in the five Deep South states—Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia and South Carolina—are characterized by extreme racial polarization. In these states and especially in Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana, the two-party system consists of an overwhelmingly white Republican Party and an almost as overwhelmingly black Democratic Party. The party systems in the Rim South states are not quite as polarized along racial lines, although nonwhites made up the large majority of Obama voters in Texas and about half of Obama voters in Virginia and North Carolina. Arkansas, Florida and Tennessee had the least racially polarized party systems. However, that is not necessarily good news for Democrats in those states. In Arkansas and Tennessee, nonwhites make up too small a share of the overall electorate to allow Democratic candidates to be competitive in most statewide elections. In fact, these were two of Barack Obama's worst states in the region—Obama won only 39 percent of the vote in Arkansas and only 42 percent in Tennessee.

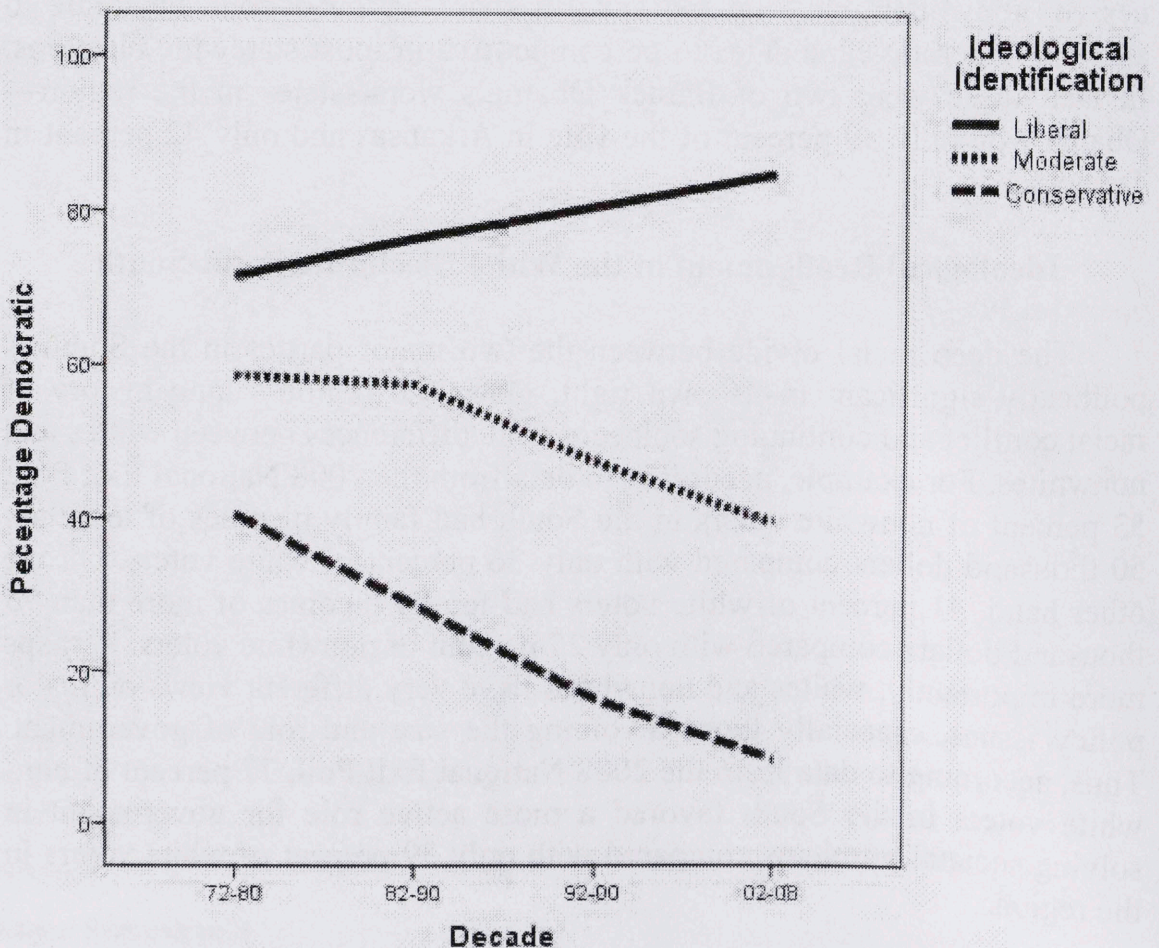
Ideological Realignment of the White Electorate in the South

The deep racial divide between the two major parties in the South is politically significant in its own right, given the region's long history of racial conflict and continuing socioeconomic differences between whites and nonwhites. For example, according to data from the 2008 National Exit Poll, 53 percent of nonwhite voters in the South had family incomes of less than 50 thousand dollars compared with only 36 percent of white voters. On the other hand, 41 percent of white voters had family incomes of more than 75 thousand dollars compared with only 27 percent of nonwhite voters. Perhaps more importantly, whites and nonwhites have very different views on major policy issues, especially those involving the size and role of government. Thus, according to data from the 2008 National Exit Poll, 77 percent of nonwhite voters in the South favored a more active role for government in solving societal problems compared with only 39 percent of white voters in the region.

Racial polarization has contributed to a widening ideological divide between supporters of the two major parties in the South. However, another major development contributing to this trend has been an ongoing ideological realignment among white voters in the region. The decline in Democratic identification among southern whites has not affected all types of white voters equally. Instead, it has been concentrated among those white voters whose policy preferences are most at variance with the positions of the national Democratic Party—those who consider themselves conservatives.

Figure 5 displays the trends in party identification since the 1970s among southern white voters who identified themselves as liberal, moderate and conservative on the ANES ideology scale. Unfortunately we cannot go back earlier than the 1970s because the ANES did not begin asking the ideology question until 1972. Nevertheless, the results show a dramatic difference based on ideology. There has been a sharp decline in Democratic

Figure 5. Ideological Realignment of the Southern White Electorate: Trends in Party Identification of Southern White Voters by Ideology

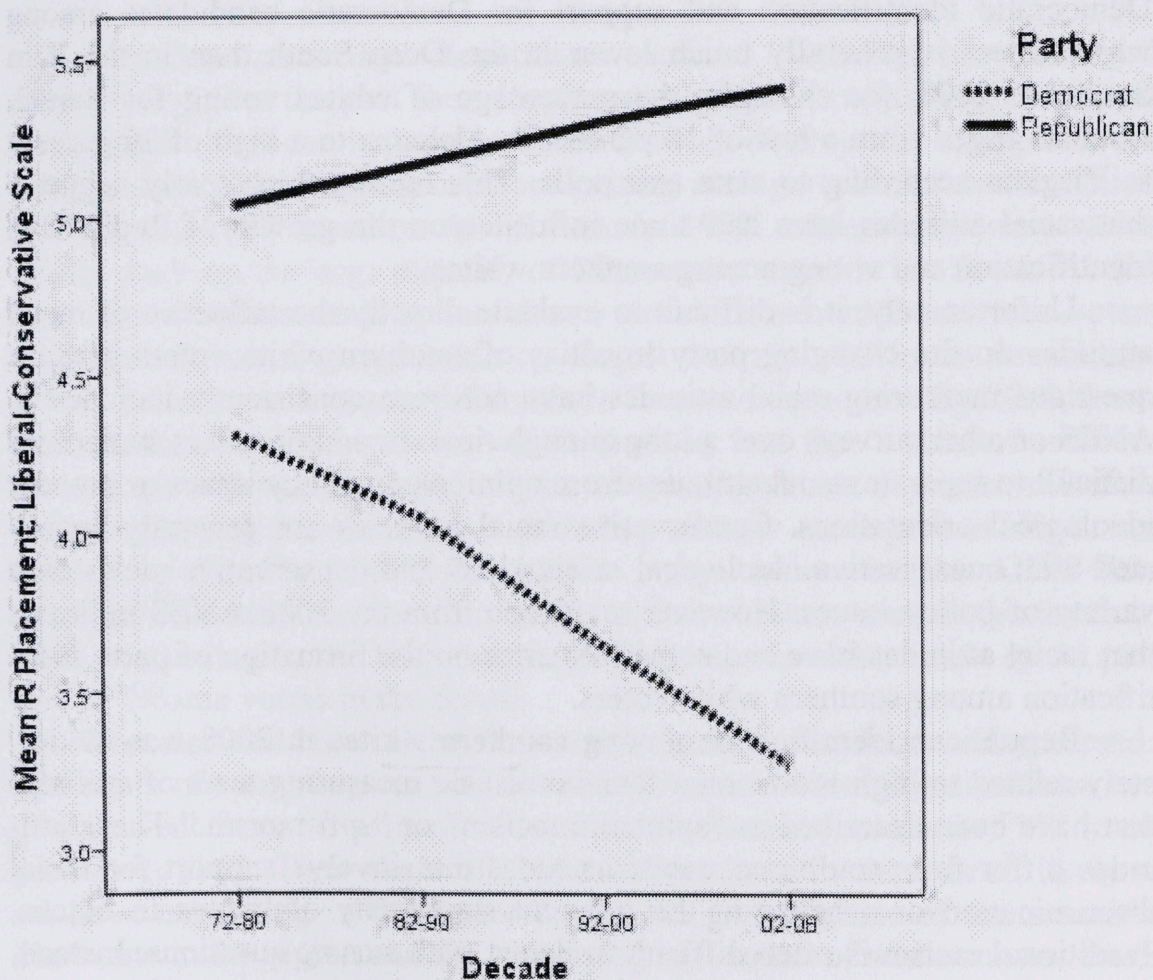


Source: ANES Cumulative File.

identification among conservative whites but a much smaller decline among moderate whites. Among liberal whites, identification with the Democratic Party has actually grown since the 1970s.

As a result of these trends, the ideological divide between white Democrats and Republicans in the South has widened considerably since the 1970s. Figure 6 displays the trends in the average self-placement of southern white Democrats and Republicans on the ANES seven-point liberal-conservative scale over the past four decades. On this scale, 1 is the most liberal position and 7 is the most conservative position. Over this time period, the gap between the average Democrat and the average Republican has tripled—going from about 0.7 units in the 1970s to 2.1 units in the 2000s. The movement of large numbers of conservative whites out of the Democratic Party and into the Republican Party along with the movement of smaller numbers of liberal whites out of the Republican Party and into the Democratic Party

**Figure 6. The Growing Ideological Divide:
Trends in Average Conservatism of Southern White Voters by Party**



Source: ANES Cumulative File.

has helped to produce a much larger and somewhat more conservative Republican electorate in the South along with a much smaller and much more liberal Democratic electorate.

Ideology vs. Racial Attitudes in the Formation of White Partisanship

Students of southern politics have long recognized the central role of race in the politics of the region (Key 1949). Thus the growing visibility and influence of African-American leaders within the Democratic Party and the growing dependence of Democratic candidates on the support of African-American voters raises an important question about the rise of Republican identification and voting among southern white voters. What role have racial attitudes played in the growing Republicanism of southern whites and to what extent is the influence of ideology a by-product of the influence of racial attitudes? Within the South, Democratic identification and voting among whites is inversely related to the size of the African-American electorate—the larger the African-American share of the vote in a state, the lower the support of white voters for the Democratic Party. As a result, Democratic identification and support for Democratic candidates among white voters is generally much lower in the Deep South than in the Rim South. In 2008, for example, the percentage of whites voting for Barack Obama ranged from a low of 10 percent in Alabama to a high of 39 percent in Virginia according to state exit polls. This relationship clearly suggests that racial attitudes have had some influence on the growth of Republican identification and voting among southern whites.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to evaluate directly the influence of racial attitudes on the changing party loyalties of southern white voters because questions measuring racial attitudes have not been consistently included in ANES or other surveys over a long enough time. In addition, it is sometimes difficult to separate racial attitudes from opinions on policy issues or broader ideological orientations. Conservative racial attitudes are generally associated with conservative ideological orientations and conservative views on a variety of policy issues. However, evidence from the 2008 ANES indicates that racial attitudes have had some influence on the formation of party identification among southern white voters.

Republican identification among southern whites in 2008 was moderately related to high scores on a four-item scale measuring a set of attitudes that have been described as “symbolic racism” or “soft racism.” These attitudes differ from traditional racist attitudes that involve support for racial discrimination or a belief in the inherent superiority of whites to blacks. Traditional racism is often difficult to detect with survey questions. Instead, the items in this scale measure attitudes of denial about the existence of

racial discrimination in the U.S. and resentment about supposed special treatment and benefits that blacks have received. Such “soft racist” attitudes remain quite common among whites in the United States (Tesler and Sears 2010).

The correlation of the racial resentment scale with party identification was .34, which was highly statistically significant ($p < .001$). However, this was identical to the correlation of the racial resentment scale with party identification among northern whites. Moreover, the correlation of party identification with ideology among southern whites was a much stronger .71. The partial correlation of the racial resentment scale with party identification while controlling for ideology was only .20 while the partial correlation of the ideology scale with party identification while controlling for racial resentment was .68. These results suggest that although racial resentment may have been a factor in the growth of Republican identification among southern whites, its influence has been much weaker than that of ideology.

Shifting Party Coalitions

The Democratic and Republican electoral coalitions have changed dramatically over the past four decades as a result of racial and ideological realignment. This can be seen in Table 2 which displays the changes in the relative size of the major groups comprising each party’s electoral coalition in 1972 and 2008 based on ANES data. In 1972, moderate-to-conservative whites made up the large majority of Democratic voters in the South. At that time, liberal whites made up less than a tenth of southern Democratic voters while nonwhites, a group made up almost entirely of African-Americans, made up just over a quarter of southern Democratic voters. By 2008, however, moderate-to-conservative whites made up less than a third of southern Democratic voters with liberal whites comprising almost a quarter of Democratic voters and nonwhites, now including a larger contingent of Hispanics, making up close to half of Democratic voters. Moreover, the ANES data may underestimate the nonwhite share of Democratic voters in the South in 2008. According to the National Exit Poll data, nonwhites made up 54 percent of Obama voters in the South.

The electoral base of the Democratic Party in the South today is made up largely of two groups of voters—nonwhites and white liberals. These two groups went from 36 percent of southern Democratic voters in 1972 to 69 percent in 2008. Their share of southern Democratic voters seems likely to continue expanding in the future due to the growing size of the nonwhite electorate in the region and the continuing movement of white conservatives to the GOP.

Table 2. The Changing Composition of the Democratic and Republican Electoral Coalitions in the South: 1972 vs. 2008

	1972	2008	Change
Democrats			
Nonwhites	27%	46%	+19%
Lib Whites	9%	23%	+14%
Mod/Con Whites	64%	31%	-33%
Republicans			
Nonwhites	7%	7%	0%
Mod/Lib Whites	43%	22%	-21%
Con Whites	50%	71%	+21%

Source: ANES Cumulative File.

The composition of the Republican electoral coalition has changed as well over the past four decades, but not in terms of race. In fact, the nonwhite share of southern Republican voters was identical in 2008 and 1972. Despite the rapid growth in the size of the nonwhite population in the South during these years, the Republican electoral base in the region has remained overwhelmingly white. What has changed, however, is the ideological composition of the Republican electoral coalition. The electoral base of the Republican Party in the South is considerably more conservative now than it was in 1972. In 1972, moderate-to-liberal whites made up 43 percent of southern Republican voters. By 2008, they made up only 22 percent. At the same time, conservative whites who made up just 50 percent of southern white voters in 1972 grew to 71 percent in 2008.

Diminishing Regional Differences

Another important consequence of the ideological realignment of the parties in the South has been a substantial decline in the differences between the ideological and policy preferences of supporters of the Democratic Party in the South and the rest of the country. During the 1970s, the first decade in which the seven-point ideology scale was included in the ANES survey, Democratic voters in the South were considerably more conservative than Democratic voters in the rest of the country: the mean location of southern Democratic voters on the scale was 4.1 while the mean location of non-southern Democratic voters was 3.6. By the 2000s, both groups were much more liberal and the difference between them was considerably smaller—the mean location of southern Democratic voters was 3.4 while the mean

Table 3. The Diminished Regional Divide in American Politics: Policy Preferences and Voting Decisions of Democratic and Republican Voters by Region in 2008 (% Conservative)

	Democrats		Republicans	
	North	South	North	South
Economic Issues				
Jobs/Living Standards	29	33	73	77
Health Insurance	16	18	57	68
Spending/Services	9	15	54	57
Universal Health Care	15	19	67	69
Average	17	21	63	68
Cultural Issues				
Abortion	24	34	50	55
Gay Marriage	46	54	80	83
Gay Adoption	32	47	58	69
Average	34	45	63	69
National Security Issues				
Defense Spending	32	32	56	57
Iraq Withdrawal	16	16	57	61
Average	24	24	56	59
Presidential Vote				
McCain	7	11	89	90
Obama	93	89	11	10

Source: 2008 ANES.

location of non-southern Democratic voters was 3.2. Meanwhile, Republican voters in the South, and the rest of the country, were moving further to the right. Between the 1970s and the 2000s, the mean location of southern Republican voters went from 5.0 to 5.4 while the mean location of non-southern Republican voters went from 4.8 to 5.3.

Today, the political attitudes and voting behavior of supporters of the two major parties in the South and the rest of the country are very similar. This can be seen in Table 3 which compares the policy preferences and presidential voting decisions of southern and non-southern Democrats and Republicans in 2008. The data displayed in this table show that in the South, as in the rest of the country, the differences between Democrats and Republicans are somewhat greater on economic issues than on cultural or national security issues. Southern Democrats are slightly more conservative than

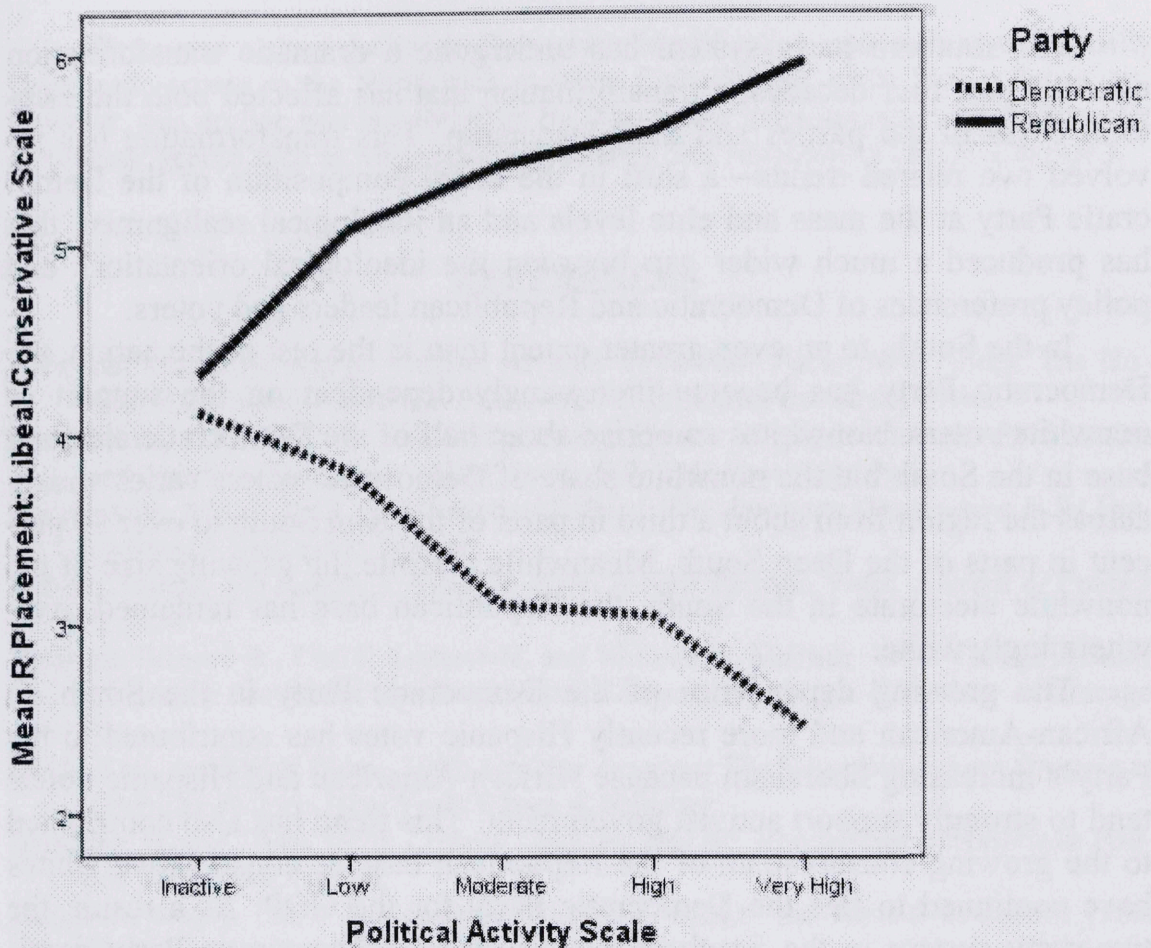
non-southern Democrats, especially on some cultural issues. And southern Republicans are slightly more conservative than non-southern Republicans. However, the differences between Democratic and Republican voters in both regions are much larger than the differences between southern and non-southern supporters of each party.

There was also little difference between southern and non-southern voters in 2008 when it came to loyalty to their party's presidential candidate. About 90 percent of southern and non-southern Democrats voted for Barack Obama and about 90 percent of southern and non-southern Republicans voted for John McCain. That represents a dramatic change in the behavior of southern Democratic voters. In 1972, according to ANES data, only 45 percent of southern Democrats voted for the Democratic presidential candidate, George McGovern and as recently as 1984, only 75 percent of southern Democrats voted for the Democratic presidential candidate, Walter Mondale. However, support by southern Democratic voters for Democratic presidential candidates has increased dramatically over time as conservative voters have fled the party. Today, Democratic voters in the South are about as loyal to their party's presidential candidates as Democratic voters in the rest of the country.

Political Engagement and Ideological Polarization

The southern party system today is characterized by a much sharper ideological divide between the two major parties than in the past. We have seen that over the past four decades, the average Republican voter in the South has become more conservative while the average Democratic voter has become considerably more liberal. Moreover, the evidence displayed in Figure 7 from the 2008 ANES shows that the ideological divide separating the parties is greatest among the most politically active members of the electorate. This figure displays the average location of Democratic and Republican identifiers, including leaning independents, on the seven-point liberal-conservative scale depending on the number of campaign activities that they engaged in during 2008. These activities included voting, trying to influence someone else's vote, displaying a yard sign or bumper sticker, giving money to a candidate or party, attending a campaign rally, and working on a campaign.

According to these data, there was little difference between the ideological views of inactive Democrats and Republicans and only a modest difference between those who were minimally active, basically those who did nothing beyond voting. These two groups made up about half of the eligible electorate in 2008. However, the ideological divide was much greater among the half of eligible voters who engaged in at least one

Figure 7. Partisan Polarization of Southern Voters by Political Activity

Source: 2008 ANES.

political activity beyond voting. And there was a very deep divide between the most active Democrats and Republicans—the 20 percent of eligible voters who engaged in at least two activities beyond voting.

The data in Figure 7 show that in the South today, as in the rest of the nation, the more politically active a group of citizens, the more ideologically polarized that group tends to be. Active Democrats are considerably more liberal than inactive Democrats and active Republicans are considerably more conservative than inactive Republicans. Politically active citizens exercise disproportionate influence on candidates and elected officials. These are the citizens who vote in primaries, attend campaign rallies, contact public officials to express opinions on issues, and give money to political candidates. So the polarization that we see among Democratic and Republican political elites today does not indicate that there is a “disconnect” between those elites and their constituents, as some scholars have argued (Fiorina 2009). Rather, it reflects the responsiveness of political elites to the views of their politically engaged constituents (Abramowitz 2010).

Discussion and Conclusions

The southern party system has undergone a dramatic transformation over the past four decades, a transformation that has affected both the electoral bases of the parties and their leadership. This transformation has involved two related trends—a shift in the racial composition of the Democratic Party at the mass and elite levels and an ideological realignment that has produced a much wider gap between the ideological orientations and policy preferences of Democratic and Republican leaders and voters.

In the South, to an even greater extent than in the rest of the nation, the Democratic Party has become increasingly dependent on the support of nonwhite voters. Nonwhites comprise about half of the Democratic electoral base in the South but the nonwhite share of Democratic voters varies widely across the region from about a third in parts of the Rim South to over 80 percent in parts of the Deep South. Meanwhile, despite the growing size of the nonwhite electorate in the South, the Republican base has remained overwhelmingly white.

The growing dependence of the Democratic Party in the South on African-American and more recently Hispanic votes has contributed to the Party's increasing liberalism because African-American and Hispanic voters tend to strongly support activist government. This trend has also contributed to the growing conservatism of the Republican base as conservative whites have continued to flee the Democratic Party for the GOP. As a result, the two-party system in the South now consists of a Democratic Party dominated by nonwhites and white liberals and a Republican Party dominated by white conservatives.

Nonwhites have accounted for most of the population growth in the South, as in much of the rest of the country, in recent years, and this trend is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. While the increase in the nonwhite share of the electorate is likely to lag behind the increase in the nonwhite share of the population, there is little doubt that nonwhites will make up a growing share of the electorate in the South as a whole and in most states in the region over the next several decades. There is also little doubt, given the conservatism of Republican voters and elected officials in the South on issues such as immigration and the size and role of government that the vast majority of the nonwhite voters will continue to support the Democratic Party. As a result both racial and ideological polarization will almost certainly continue to grow for the foreseeable future.

NOTE

¹There was a sharp decline in Democratic identification among some traditionally Democratic groups in the North such as white Catholics and white blue collar voters. However, this decline was largely offset by Democratic gains among some traditionally Republican groups such as white college graduates. See Abramowitz (2013), Chapter 3.

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