

*Issues, Ideology, and the Rise of Republican Identification  
Among Southern Whites, 1982-2000*

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The South's partisan shift from solidly Democratic to leaning Republican is one of the biggest transformations in American political history. This paper explores four explanations for this change: ideological self-identification and issue positions, changes in the ideological makeup of the parties, white southerners becoming more conservative, and conservative racial attitudes. The paper provides strong support for an ideological based realignment and little support for the alternative explanations. Overall, attitudes about the size of government and opinions about defense spending were the issues most highly correlated with partisan identification.

Few subjects have captured the attention of political scientists like the changing political dynamics of the American South.<sup>1</sup> The shift from V.O. Key's solidly Democratic South to a region that is increasingly Republican raises a number of important questions for political scientists. Explanations of partisan identification often emphasize the early formation and lasting connection of individuals to political parties (Abramson 1975; Campbell et al. 1960). In the aftermath of the Civil War and Reconstruction, allegiance to the Democratic Party among white southerners was passed down from generation to generation and reinforced by the experiences of the Great Depression and the New Deal. However, revisionist scholars demonstrate that partisan identification can be influenced by short-term factors including presidential vote choice (Markus and Converse 1979) and retrospective evaluations of party performance (Fiorina 1981; Mackuen, Erickson, and Stimson 1989). In the South, these factors influenced partisanship as the Reagan presidency pulled, and dissatisfaction with the national Democratic Party pushed, many southerners toward the Republican Party (Black and Black 2002).

Some theories of partisan change have also established the importance of ideological self-identification, policy preferences, and issue positions in shaping partisan identification (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Carmines,

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McIver, and Stimson 1987; Franklin 1992; Page and Jones 1979; Shreckhise and Shields 2003). This ideological-realignment theory of partisan change suggests that citizens' political ideologies and issue positions are the most important factors shaping partisan identification. According to this theory, increasing support for the Republican Party's economic and social issue positions prompted white southerners to change partisan allegiances.

Critics of the ideological realignment theory point to a number of alternative explanations to partisan change in the American South. First, changes in the ideological makeup of the political parties need to be considered as explanations of the South's shift in partisanship. For example, as the Republican Party moved to the right and the Democratic Party moved to the left, a readjustment of partisan identification in the region may have taken place. Second, white southerners may have become more conservative in recent years causing an increase in allegiances to the Republican Party. Third, conservative racial attitudes among white southerners, a hypothesis suggested by Carmines and Stimson (1989), may explain recent partisan changes in the South. Given these competing explanations and the magnitude of partisan change in the South, a more thorough analysis is warranted.

### **Data and Methods**

The data in this paper come from two main sources. Most of the analyses reported in this paper utilize cross-sectional survey data collected in the American National Election Studies (NES). These surveys included measures of party identification, ideological self identification, policy preferences, and a wide variety of demographic characteristics.

In examining trends in party identification between 1982 and 2000, we have combined data from individual election studies into two time periods, one including data from the 1982-1990 surveys and the other including data from the 1992-2000 surveys. Because some of the variables were missing from the 1986 and 1998 surveys, these years are excluded from the results for the 1980s and 1990s respectively. We chose this approach, not only because the time period of interest divides into two decades, but also to compare the effects of issues on party identification during the Reagan and post-Reagan eras. Conducting the analyses this way also minimizes the effects of short-term fluctuations in one or more of our variables. For example, in presidential election years, strong positive or negative responses to the presidential candidates can produce temporary shifts in the distribution of party identification. By combining data from several successive surveys, we hope to eliminate these short-term effects in order to focus on longer-term trends in party identification.

Throughout the analyses, we use six issue questions that were included in all of the NES surveys between 1982 and 2000. These questions dealt with a variety of national policy issues: government services and spending, government responsibility for jobs and living standards, government aid to blacks, equality for women, the conditions under which abortion should be permitted, and defense spending. The policy areas covered represent a good mix of economic (government services and spending, government responsibility for jobs and living standards), social (government aid to blacks, equality for women, abortion), and national security issues (defense spending). The NES question regarding liberal-conservative ideology was also available throughout this time period.<sup>2</sup> Except for abortion, opinions on issues were measured with seven-point scales with the most liberal position coded as 1 and the most conservative position coded as 7. Opinions about abortion were measured with a four-point scale with the most liberal (pro-choice) position coded as 1 and the most conservative (pro-life) position coded as 4.

A second data source consists of Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) scores. Using a defined set of votes for each member, ADA scores have provided a measure of liberalness for members of the U.S. Congress since 1947. Because the votes used to compute ADA scores vary each year, the scores reported for this analysis have been adjusted using the technique outlined by Groseclose, Levitt, and Snyder (1999).

In addition to contingency tables and correlation analysis, we utilize Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression analysis to estimate the effects of opinions about specific policy issues and liberal-conservative identification on the seven-point party identification scale while controlling for a variety of demographic characteristics. We also employ OLS regression analysis to estimate the effects of opinions about specific policy issues on the seven-point liberal-conservative identification scale.<sup>3</sup> In both models we include dummy variables for the year of the survey to capture election specific effects. Our regression models include control variables for factors that have been demonstrated to affect partisanship and ideology including age, gender, education, income, union membership, marital status, and religion (Miller and Shanks 1996).

## **Results**

Republican successes in recent presidential and congressional elections in the South have reflected the increasingly Republican partisan identification of southern white voters. In the 2000 Voter News Service exit poll, 48 percent of white southerners described themselves as Republicans while only 31 percent described themselves as Democrats. These percentages represent a dramatic turnaround in the party loyalties of southern whites—a

turnaround that began during the 1950s and 1960s and accelerated during the 1980s and 1990s.

Table 1 displays trends in party identification among blacks, northern whites, and southern whites in surveys done for the NES from the 1950s through the 1990s. Between the 1950s and the 1970s, the percentage of southern whites identifying with the Democratic Party fell by 17 percentage points. However, the percentage of southern whites identifying with the Republican Party increased by only 9 percentage points during these two decades. Rather than moving directly into the Republican camp, it appears that many southern whites who abandoned the Democratic Party during the 1960s and 1970s temporarily adopted the independent label (Beck 1977; Campbell 1977a, 1977b). During the next two decades, however, the percentage of southern whites identifying with the Republican Party increased dramatically—going from 29 percent during the 1970s to 38 percent during the 1980s (Petrocik 1987; Stanley 1988) and 47 percent during the 1990s. Meanwhile, the percentage of northern whites identifying with the Republican Party, after increasing by 7 percentage points during the 1980s, declined by 2 percentage points during the 1990s. As a result, during the 1990s, for the first time in the history of the NES, and probably the first time since the Civil War, the percentage of southern whites identifying with the Republican Party exceeded the percentage of northern whites identifying with the Republican Party.

What explains this transformation in partisan loyalties during the last two decades of the twentieth century? One possibility is dramatic changes in ideological makeup of the political parties. A more conservative Republican Party would have been an attractive alternative for white southern Democrats. Likewise, an increasingly liberal Democratic Party may have pushed longtime Democrats in a Republican direction. Figure 1 displays the

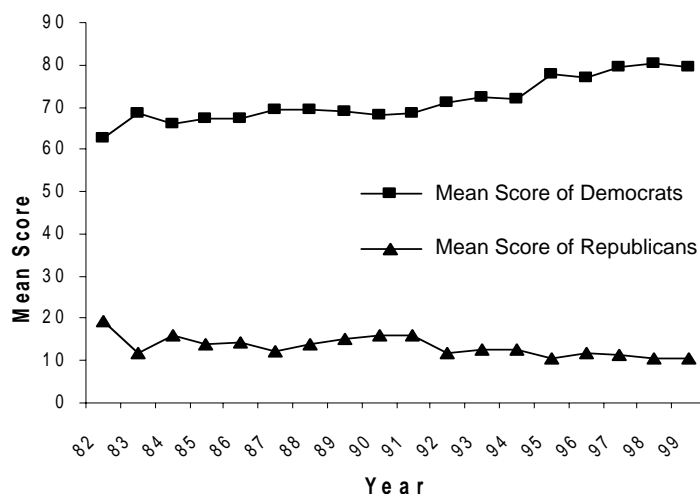
**Table 1. Party Identification by Decade  
for Blacks, Northern Whites, and Southern Whites**

|                 | 1952-1960<br>D – R | 1962-1970<br>D – R | 1972-1980<br>D – R | 1982-1990<br>D – R | 1992-2000<br>D – R |
|-----------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Blacks          | 57 – 20            | 80 – 8             | 81 – 7             | 81 – 9             | 80 – 8             |
| Northern Whites | 48 – 42            | 51 – 38            | 47 – 38            | 43 – 45            | 46 – 43            |
| Southern Whites | 71 – 20            | 60 – 26            | 54 – 29            | 48 – 38            | 41 – 47            |

Note: Entries shown are combined percentages of strong, weak, and independent Democrats and Republicans.

Source: American National Election Studies.

**Figure 1. Adjusted ADA Scores by Party in House**



Source: Groseclose, Levitt, and Snyder (1999)

adjusted ADA scores by political party in the U.S. House between 1982 and 1999. Higher values reported in Figure 1 represent a more liberal delegation.

For Republicans, ADA scores dropped between 1982 and 1983, and then hovered around 15 during the 1980s and 10 during the 1990s. ADA scores for the House Democrats were in the 60s during the 1980s shifting to the 70s during the 1990s. The findings displayed in Figure 1 present some, though not dramatic, evidence that the parties became more ideologically polarized during the last two decades of the twentieth century. House Republicans became slightly more conservative and House Democrats became slightly more liberal.

A key question for students of American politics is how voters responded to this changing political environment. In other words, what factors explain the increase in Republican identification among white southerners? Changes in the ideological makeup of the parties may be part of the explanation, but partisan identification needs to be explored at the individual level as well.

One possibility is that white southerners have become more conservative in recent years. However, the empirical evidence indicates that ideology has remained relatively consistent in the South. Based on responses to the NES question on ideological self-identification, 47 percent of southern whites identified as conservative in the 1970s, 48 percent identified as conservative in the 1980s, and 49 percent identified as conservative in the 1990s. Table 2 shows the change in partisan identification among southern

whites over the past three decades, controlling for ideology. Among liberals, there is a slight decrease in Republican identification between the 1970s and 1990s. However, among moderates and conservatives, Republican identification increased dramatically between the 1970s and 1990s. During this time period, Republican identification increased by 15 percent among moderates and by 30 percent among conservatives. This evidence demonstrates that the link between ideology and partisanship is a recent development.

Without dramatic changes in the ideological makeup of the parties or evidence that southern whites have become more conservative, other explanations of partisan change in the South need to be considered. The remainder of this paper evaluates two explanations for partisan realignment: ideological realignment and racial attitudes based realignment.

Table 3 displays correlations between our issue scales and party identification among northern and southern whites during the 1980s and 1990s. During both decades, party identification was most highly correlated with liberal-conservative ideological identification. Moreover, the strength of the relationship between party identification and ideology increased between the 1980s and the 1990s.

After ideology, attitudes toward government services and spending, government responsibility for jobs, and defense spending were most highly correlated with party identification during the 1980s and 1990s. Attitudes toward women's equality, abortion, and government aid to blacks were less strongly correlated with party identification. This evidence provides little support for an alignment based on racial attitudes.

Except for the issue of defense spending, the correlations between issue positions and party identification increased between the 1980s and the 1990s, and this increase was greater among southern whites than among northern whites. It appears that clearer differences between the parties' issue positions were reflected by stronger relationships between these issue positions and party identification among the white electorate and especially among the southern white electorate.

The results of OLS regression analyses of party identification among northern and southern whites are shown in Table 4, with the results broken down by decade. The results are reported using unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. We included a set of demographic variables to compare the impact of social background characteristics to the effect of issues and ideology on partisan identification. These variables were age, gender, education, family income, union membership, marital status, and religious affiliation. Coefficients for the control variables were generally in the expected direction. Education and income were positively correlated with Republican partisanship, while age and union membership were negatively correlated with Republican partisanship. Individuals identifying as Catholic, Jewish, or "other religion" identified more

**Table 2. Party Identification by Decade for Southern Whites, Controlling for Ideology**

| Ideology     |           | Democrat | Independent | Republican |
|--------------|-----------|----------|-------------|------------|
| Liberal      | 1972-1980 | 71       | 12          | 17         |
|              | 1982-1990 | 71       | 7           | 22         |
|              | 1992-2000 | 75       | 10          | 15         |
| Moderate     | 1972-1980 | 58       | 18          | 24         |
|              | 1982-1990 | 52       | 17          | 31         |
|              | 1992-2000 | 45       | 16          | 39         |
| Conservative | 1972-1980 | 40       | 13          | 47         |
|              | 1982-1990 | 30       | 9           | 61         |
|              | 1992-2000 | 18       | 5           | 77         |

Note: Entries shown are percentages.  
Source: American National Election Studies.

**Table 3. Correlations Between Issue Scales and Party Identification for Northern and Southern Whites, 1982-1990 and 1992-2000**

| Issue             | 1982-1990 |       | 1992-2000 |       |
|-------------------|-----------|-------|-----------|-------|
|                   | North     | South | North     | South |
| Lib-Con Id        | .38       | .30   | .46       | .44   |
| Services/Spending | .27       | .21   | .31       | .26   |
| Gov Resp Jobs     | .23       | .15   | .27       | .25   |
| Gov Aid Blacks    | .16       | .07   | .19       | .18   |
| Women's Equality  | .09       | -.01* | .14       | .11   |
| Abortion          | .06       | -.01* | .16       | .12   |
| Defense Spending  | .23       | .16   | .20       | .21   |

Note: Coefficients shown are Kendall's tau-c.  
\*Not statistically significant. All other coefficients are significant ( $p < .001$ ) based on one-tailed t-test.  
Source: American National Election Studies.

**Table 4. Results of Regression Analyses of Party Identification for Northern and Southern Whites, 1982-1990 and 1992-2000**

| Independent Variable       | Northern Whites    |                     | Southern Whites   |                    |
|----------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
|                            | 1982-1990          | 1992-2000           | 1982-1990         | 1992-2000          |
| <i>Ideology and Issues</i> |                    |                     |                   |                    |
| Lib-Con Id                 | .517***<br>(.032)  | .619***<br>(.032)   | .418***<br>(.065) | .672***<br>(.055)  |
| Gov Resp Jobs              | .112***<br>(.027)  | .085**<br>(.027)    | .069<br>(.057)    | .125**<br>(.045)   |
| Services/Spending          | .187***<br>(.029)  | .208***<br>(.028)   | .195***<br>(.058) | .078<br>(.047)     |
| Gov Aid Blacks             | .058*<br>(.028)    | .072**<br>(.027)    | -.058<br>(.058)   | .119*<br>(.047)    |
| Women's Equality           | .047<br>(.025)     | .011<br>(.025)      | .007<br>(.046)    | -.036<br>(.041)    |
| Abortion                   | -.032<br>(.040)    | .074<br>(.039)      | .096<br>(.086)    | .150*<br>(.068)    |
| Defense Spending           | .252***<br>(.027)  | .165***<br>(.029)   | .261***<br>(.059) | .144**<br>(.048)   |
| <i>Controls</i>            |                    |                     |                   |                    |
| Age                        | -.006*<br>(.002)   | -.007**<br>(.002)   | -.015**<br>(.005) | -.021***<br>(.004) |
| Gender                     | .129<br>(.075)     | -.008<br>(.072)     | -.041<br>(.160)   | .171<br>(.122)     |
| Education                  | .149**<br>(.050)   | .220***<br>(.046)   | .236*<br>(.103)   | .272***<br>(.083)  |
| Income                     | .164***<br>(.041)  | .169***<br>(.041)   | .012<br>(.087)    | .222***<br>(.066)  |
| Union                      | -.580***<br>(.088) | -.402***<br>(.091)  | -.336<br>(.271)   | -.642**<br>(.216)  |
| Married                    | -.097<br>(.084)    | -.067<br>(.080)     | -.203<br>(.181)   | -.480***<br>(.140) |
| Catholic                   | -.618***<br>(.086) | -.540***<br>(.082)  | -.063<br>(.285)   | -.452**<br>(.174)  |
| Jewish                     | -.935***<br>(.228) | -1.297***<br>(.218) | .017<br>(.484)    | -.359<br>(.393)    |
| Other Religion             | -.355**<br>(.123)  | -.290**<br>(.103)   | .642*<br>(.283)   | -.030<br>(.188)    |
| Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>    | .377               | .429                | .208              | .412               |
| N                          | 2028               | 2117                | 580               | 755                |

Note: Entries shown are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Models include year dummy variables not reported in this table.

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001

Source: American National Election Studies.



strongly with the Democratic Party. We also included dummy variables for each of the years in our analyses as controls.<sup>4</sup>

The results in Table 4 demonstrate that ideological self-identification was a strong predictor of party identification in both the 1980s and the 1990s. Moreover among northern whites, and especially among southern whites, the impact of ideology relative to other issues increased between the 1980s and the 1990s. These findings provide additional evidence that an ideological realignment was occurring among white voters during the 1980s and 1990s and that this realignment was most dramatic among white southerners (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Schreckhise and Shields 2003).

For both southern whites and northern whites, attitudes about the size and role of the federal government appear to be driving partisan identification. In addition, among southern and northern whites the impact of defense spending on party identification declined during the 1990s. The end of the Cold War and the Soviet threat apparently led to a decline in the salience of defense spending as an issue.

For other issues, the story for southern whites is slightly different from that of northern whites. Among southern whites, attitudes toward government services and spending had less influence on partisanship during the 1990s than during the 1980s while attitudes toward abortion had significantly more influence. In addition, the impact of attitudes toward government aid to blacks increased in importance in the 1990s, but only to a level similar to that of several other issues included in the regression analysis. For southern whites in the 1990s, the impact of attitudes on government aid to blacks was smaller than the effect of ideology, attitudes about government responsibility for jobs, abortion, and defense spending.

The results presented in Table 4 indicate that ideological identification was a strong predictor of party identification among northern and southern whites during the 1980s and, especially, during the 1990s. Given the importance of ideology, we decided to examine the relationship between issue positions and ideological self-identification. Table 5 presents the results of regression analyses of ideological identification among northern and southern whites during the 1980s and 1990s. Once again, the entries in Table 5 are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Coefficients for the year dummy variables are not included in the table. The control variables reported in Table 5 were less important in explaining ideology than partisan identification. Individuals identifying as Catholics, Jewish, and "other religion," particularly in the North, were much more likely to label themselves as liberal.

As for the issues, two findings stand out in the regression analyses of ideological identification presented in Table 5. The most notable changes were the increases in the coefficients for the services/spending and abortion

**Table 5. Results of Regression Analyses of Ideological Identification for Northern and Southern Whites, 1982-1990 and 1992-2000**

| Independent Variable    | Northern Whites    |                    | Southern Whites   |                    |
|-------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
|                         | 1982-1990          | 1992-2000          | 1982-1990         | 1992-2000          |
| <i>Issues</i>           |                    |                    |                   |                    |
| Gov Resp Jobs           | .089***<br>(.018)  | .095***<br>(.018)  | .090*<br>(.036)   | .081**<br>(.030)   |
| Services/Spending       | .148***<br>(.019)  | .224***<br>(.019)  | .125***<br>(.037) | .218***<br>(.030)  |
| Gov Aid Blacks          | .079***<br>(.019)  | .084***<br>(.018)  | .107**<br>(.037)  | .101***<br>(.031)  |
| Women's Equality        | .096***<br>(.017)  | .111***<br>(.017)  | .085**<br>(.029)  | .127***<br>(.027)  |
| Abortion                | .223***<br>(.027)  | .290***<br>(.026)  | .227***<br>(.055) | .310***<br>(.044)  |
| Defense Spending        | .180***<br>(.019)  | .172***<br>(.019)  | .161***<br>(.037) | .132***<br>(.031)  |
| <i>Controls</i>         |                    |                    |                   |                    |
| Age                     | .001<br>(.002)     | .003*<br>(.001)    | .005<br>(.003)    | .006*<br>(.002)    |
| Gender                  | -.010<br>(.052)    | -.112*<br>(.049)   | -.112<br>(.103)   | -.186*<br>(.081)   |
| Education               | .050<br>(.034)     | .004<br>(.032)     | .132*<br>(.066)   | .008<br>(.055)     |
| Income                  | .063*<br>(.029)    | .002<br>(.028)     | .027<br>(.056)    | .096*<br>(.044)    |
| Union                   | -.018<br>(.061)    | -.108<br>(.062)    | .024<br>(.174)    | .050<br>(.145)     |
| Married                 | .063<br>(.058)     | .167**<br>(.055)   | .106<br>(.117)    | .019<br>(.094)     |
| Catholic                | -.217***<br>(.059) | -.105<br>(.056)    | -.010<br>(.185)   | -.200<br>(.116)    |
| Jewish                  | -.583***<br>(.158) | -.512***<br>(.149) | -.244<br>(.313)   | -.907***<br>(.261) |
| Other Religion          | -.392***<br>(.084) | -.218**<br>(.070)  | -.167<br>(.183)   | -.540***<br>(.124) |
| Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> | .275               | .388               | .234              | .415               |
| N                       | 2041               | 2119               | 583               | 758                |

Note: Entries shown are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Models include year dummy variables not reported in this table.

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001

Source: American National Election Studies.

issues in both regions. In addition, the regression coefficients for the issue of government aid to blacks are smaller than the coefficients for the other issue variables among both northern and southern whites. Moreover, there was very little change in the importance of this issue between the 1980s and the 1990s.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Republican successes in recent presidential and congressional elections in the South have reflected the increasingly Republican partisan identification of southern white voters. According to NES data, the percentage of southern whites identifying with the Republican Party grew from 29 percent during the 1970s to 47 percent during the 1990s. This dramatic shift in partisan allegiances represents a fundamental change in American politics and deserves the attention of political scholars.

This paper has evaluated this change from a number of perspectives focusing particularly on the ideological realignment theory of partisan transformation. After considering several alternative explanations to the ideological realignment theory, this paper provides strong evidence that voters are increasingly choosing partisan identification based on ideology and issue positions.

Except for the issue of defense spending, the correlations between issue positions and party identification generally increased between the 1980s and 1990s. Among members of both groups, ideological identification was more strongly correlated with party identification than any specific policy issue, and for both groups this correlation was stronger during the 1990s than during the 1980s.

Regression analyses of party identification among northern and southern whites during the 1980s and 1990s showed that ideological identification was a strong predictor of party identification among both groups in both decades and that the impact of ideological identification increased between the 1980s and 1990s. Among southern whites, the effects of attitudes toward other specific policy issues were much weaker than the effect of ideological identification. Aside from ideology, attitudes about government responsibility for jobs, government's role in providing services, and defense spending were the most important issues in determining partisan identification. Racial attitudes did not have a strong influence on either party identification or ideological identification of southern whites.

To some, these findings might suggest a sharpening of ideological and policy attitudes and provide little evidence that ideology is driving partisan change. However, the distribution of liberal-conservative attitudes in the South has changed very little over the last few decades, while the distribution of partisan identification has shifted fairly dramatically. Our findings

suggest that ideology is driving partisanship rather than the reverse, and that ideology and issue positions are increasingly important factors in explaining partisan identification, particularly in the South.

In conclusion, the growth of Republican identification among southern whites during the 1980s and especially during the 1990s was based on a preference for the conservative approach of the Republican Party on a wide range of economic, social, and national-security issues. The result of this realignment is that despite the continued loyalty of African-American voters to the Democrats, the Republicans have become the dominant party in much of the region. The question that remains to be answered is whether this process of realignment is now largely complete or whether support for the Democratic Party among southern whites will continue to erode.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Southerners refer to residents of the 11 states of the old Confederacy. Northerners refer to residents of the 39 remaining states and the District of Columbia.

<sup>2</sup>Unfortunately, we were not able to include a question about parental partisan identification because the question is not available after 1992 (or 1994 if you use the 1992-1994 panel data).

<sup>3</sup>Because our dependent variables were measured on seven-point scales, we estimated the models using standard OLS and ordered probit. We found the results of both models to be substantively similar and report the OLS results for ease of interpretation.

<sup>4</sup>The coefficients for the election year dummy variables were not reported in Table 4. The year dummy variables were significant in the equations for the 1980s, meaning that partisan identification was significantly more Republican in 1984, 1988, and 1990 than in 1982 (the excluded year), controlling for the other variables in the model. The size and direction of the year coefficients were a function of which year was omitted for each decade.

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