Partisan Appraisals of Party Defectors:
Looking Back at the Reagan Democrats

Julio Borquez

Using data from the 1980-1992 National Election Studies, this paper compares the policy and partisan views of three sets of voters: (1) "loyal" Democrats who voted for their party's presidential candidates; (2) "defecting" Democrats who voted for Ronald Reagan or George Bush; (3) loyal Republicans. During the 1980s, the defectors were commonly labeled "Reagan Democrats," and the conventional wisdom at the time was that Reagan Democrats were disenchanted with the liberal tilt of the "national" Democratic Party, especially on issues related to race and redistribution. The analysis shows that defecting Democrats were indeed strikingly conservative on racial policy questions, and in some cases were statistically indistinguishable from Republicans. At the same time, Reagan Democrats expressed preferences on "safety net" issues like Social Security that put them squarely within the Democratic Party mainstream. In response to open-ended questions asking what they liked or disliked about the two major parties, Reagan Democrats offered generally favorable appraisals of their party.

Political analysts and historians have recently begun to look back at the 1980s, motivated in part by a belief that events and developments of that time still shape politics today (Ehrman 2005; Troy 2005). In the realm of electoral politics, a "critical 1980s phenomenon" (Troy 2005, 48) was the emergence of "Reagan Democrats." Ronald Reagan's success in the 1980 and 1984 presidential elections was attributed in part to the votes of large numbers of self-identified Democrats, namely white, blue-collar, middle- and working-class Democrats. These defecting Democrats came to be known as "Reagan Democrats," and they became a fixture in electoral analysis during the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, a storyline took hold during this time that treated Reagan Democrats as more than simply Democrats who voted for Ronald Reagan. They were portrayed as a distinct bloc of voters, betrayed by the "national" Democratic Party and its leftward tilt on key policy questions (Brown 1991; Greenberg 1995). In polls and focus groups, Reagan Democrats expressed opposition to affirmative action, welfare, food stamps, redistributive policy more generally, as well as the expansion of rights to ethnic and cultural minorities (Edsall and Edsall 1991; Greenberg 1995). These policy preferences were said to set them apart from other rank- and-file Democrats and put them at odds with Democratic Party leadership.

Reagan Democrats attracted attention because they were thought by many observers to be the vanguard of a new Republican ascendancy. Their

JULIO BORQUEZ is assistant professor of political science in the Department of Social Sciences at University of Michigan-Dearborn.

defection to Ronald Reagan was considered to be the first step toward long-standing Republican allegiance, and a key element in a Republican realignment. Insofar as Reagan Democrats were typecast as working-class voters, they symbolized the reputed collapse of the New Deal coalition, and the emergence of a new electoral order (Lawrence 1997; Shafer 2001, 2003). Leading GOP strategists eagerly courted disgruntled Democrats, though they disagreed about the prospects of transforming them into Republicans. Former Republican National Committee chair Bill Brock expressed surprise that by 1988 his party had not been able to convert more Democratic defectors—that is, Reagan Democrats—into self-described Republicans: "The phrase 'Reagan Democrats' ought to be a contradiction in terms. They ought to be Republicans by now" (quoted in Stanley 1991, 27-28). By contrast, Bush campaign director Lee Atwater foresaw a continuing battle to win the hearts and votes of wavering Democrats: ". . . if they (defectors) didn't see any differences or particular differences between the two candidates, guess what? They would have gone back and been Democrats again. They're always looking for an excuse to be, because they are Democrats" (quoted in Runkel 1989, 112).

Assessing the Reagan Democrat Storyline

Although much has been written about Democratic Party response to the Reagan Democrat phenomenon (Baer 2000; Hale 1994 and 1995), the phenomenon itself has received much less attention. Specifically, the clear political identity of Reagan Democrats, though often assumed, has not been sufficiently investigated. This paper will address this oversight by examining two defining elements of the Reagan Democrat storyline—their distinct policy conservatism, and their more general disaffection from the Democratic Party. The data employed in this paper come from the National Elections Studies (NES) for each presidential election from 1980 through 1992. The distinctiveness of Reagan Democrats can be assessed by comparing policy preferences and party appraisals across four categories of voters: (1) Republican Party identifiers who were loyal to their party and voted Republican; (2) Democratic identifiers who defected to the Republican candidate; (3) Democratic identifiers who were loyal to their party and voted Democratic; and (4) Democrats who defected to Ross Perot in 1992.[1] By looking systematically at differences between defecting and loyal Democrats, we can better assess key elements of the Reagan Democrat storyline. That storyline predicts that Democratic defectors should express preferences quite different from loyal Democrats, and perhaps similar to Republicans.

Two points regarding case selection should be noted at the outset. First, Reagan Democrats were defined by party strategists as white voters (Green-

berg 1995) so the analyses shown here are based on white voters only.[2] Second, the analyses include only respondents who expressly declared themselves partisans; that is, independent leaners are excluded. Replication of the findings shown here using independent leaners yielded few differences, and I have chosen to employ a stringent definition of party allegiance for purposes of identifying Democratic defectors.

Impact of the Reagan Democrat Phenomenon

The portrait of Reagan Democrats as a bloc of disgruntled conservatives ready to sever their ties to the Democratic Party is important because it has influenced the thinking of political strategists, journalists, and probably more than a few political scientists, well beyond the Reagan presidency. In a variety of ways, Reagan Democrats have left a mark on the electoral landscape that is visible even today.

Democratic Party professionals tried to develop a policy agenda that could stem voter defection and solidify support among disaffected party identifiers. By the late 1980s, the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) had assumed a leading role in that effort, and had gained an influential voice within the Democratic Party. Founded by moderate and conservative Democratic office-holders, the DLC argued that the national party leadership was simply too liberal, leaving many middle-and working-class Democrats feeling abandoned, dissatisfied, and receptive to Republican overtures. The DLC promoted a "New Democrat" policy agenda that emphasized themes of personal responsibility, economic opportunity, and reinventing government, and focused on policy proposals in areas like education, law enforcement, and welfare reform (Baer 2000; Hale 1994 and 1995; Witcover 2003). A principle aim of the DLC has been to fashion a more centrist image for the Democratic Party. The DLC agenda has been a point of contention within the Democratic Party over the years. Bill Clinton cites the New Democrat agenda as a key to his success in 1992 and 1996 (Clinton 2004). At the same time, critics contend that the New Democrat package of themes has gone too far in blurring the differences between the Democratic and Republican parties, giving wavering Democrats fewer reasons to support their party (Crotty 1992; Dionne 1996; Faux 1996; Judis and Teixeira 2002; Klinkner 2001).

Reagan Democrats became standard fare in press coverage of presidential campaigns in the 1980s and 1990s. Even in 2004, journalists continued to draw upon the Reagan Democrat storyline, identifying Reagan Democrats as a critical voting bloc in battleground states like Michigan (Milbank 2004), Ohio (Roff 2004), and Pennsylvania (Dine 2004).

In the wake of George W. Bush's 2004 reelection, a dialogue has ensued within the Democratic Party that harkens back to earlier debates over

how to cope with the Reagan Democrats. The DLC is still urging a centrist platform aimed at the "vital center" of moderate middle-class voters (Davis 2005; From and Reed 2004 and 2005; Marshall 2004), while others argue for a more aggressively liberal agenda that they claim will energize the party rank and file (Hazen and Chaudry 2005; Johnson and Merians 2004; Judis and Teixeira 2005; Sirota 2005a, 2005b).

Distinct Policy Preferences?

The Democratic Party is widely recognized as a broad coalition encompassing divergent preferences on a range of policy questions, and during the Reagan era, Democratic Party identifiers displayed more diversity than their Republican counterparts (Mayer 1996). Policy and ideological diversity has complicated coalition strategies within the Democratic Party, and has been linked to party defection in Presidential elections (Mayer 1996). Since the policy preferences of Democratic defectors were a prominent part of the Reagan Democrat storyline, and were a prime focus of media coverage and party strategy, they merit close attention. We will target issue areas where Democratic loyalists and defectors were clearly different. The GOP was credited with an effective use of such wedge issues during the 1980s (Edsall and Edsall 1991; Pitney 1993). In addition, because Reagan Democrats were often thought to be ripe for partisan conversion, we will identify cases where defectors espoused issue positions similar to those held by Republicans.[3] But it will also be useful to highlight issues where Democrats, loyal or defecting, were largely in agreement. Such consensus could counteract the divisive effects of wedge issues, so long as campaigns revolved around areas of agreement rather than areas of contention. Overall, it will be instructive to see how the similarities and differences between Democratic defectors and loyalists conform to the Reagan Democrat storyline.

Race and Redistribution

The Reagan Democrat storyline suggests that Democratic defectors embraced the distinct issue of conservatism, especially on racial and redistributive policy. The divisive effects of issues like federal assistance to blacks and minorities and means-tested programs like welfare and food stamps were foretold in such works as Kevin Phillips' *The Emerging Republican Majority* (1969) and Scammon and Wattenberg's *The Real Majority* (1970). These authors recognized the potential of such issues to drive a wedge between conservative white Democrats and their party's more liberal activist and leadership wings. These issues served as the basis for Richard Nixon's "southern strategy" to win the votes of white Democrats in 1968,

and remained important to Republican electoral strategies in the South (Black and Black 2002), as well as efforts to attract conservative Democrats across the country. The issues were strategically important to the GOP not simply because they were redistributive in nature, but because they shifted resources (or more specifically, could be *framed* as shifting resources) from one core Democratic constituency—white, working-class voters—to another core Democratic constituency—black voters. By triggering feelings of economic threat as well as racial antagonisms, they had a potentially explosive effect on Democratic Party unity (Carmines and Layman 1998; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Weissberg 1991).

A fixture in the NES surveys is a series of seven-point scales in which respondents are provided competing issue positions, and are asked to place themselves somewhere in between the alternatives in a way that represents their own stance. One such survey item invites respondents to express their opinions regarding government aid to blacks and minorities:

> Some people feel that the government in Washington should make every effort to improve the social and economic position of blacks and minorities. Others feel that the government should not make any special efforts to help minorities because they should help themselves. Where would you place themselves on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?[4]

Empirical Results

Table 1 shows the mean placement of Democratic defectors, Democratic loyalists, as well as Republicans, on the seven-point scale for government aid to blacks and other minorities. Higher scale scores indicate greater support for the position that blacks and minorities should "help themselves." In presidential elections between 1980 and 1992, Democratic defectors consistently expressed more conservative views than loyal Democratic voters. That is, they were more apt to endorse the position that blacks and minorities should help themselves.

In 1980, Democratic defectors were, on average, slightly more conservative than loyal Democrats, and while statistically significant, the difference of .57 on a seven-point scale packs little substantive punch.[5] In 1984, the difference between defecting Democrats and loyal Democrats was again statistically significant, and became a bit more pronounced, owing largely to the fact that loyal Democrats were notably more liberal on this question in 1984 than they were in 1980. The most striking distinctions between the two groups of Democratic voters occurred in 1988 and 1992. Democrats voting for George Bush placed themselves, on average, 1.35 points to the right of loyal Democrats in 1988, and were nearly one full scale point to the right of loyal Democrats in 1992. The growing chasm among Democratic Party

Table 1. Support for Government Aid to Blacks and Minorities among Voter Subgroups

	1980	1984	1988	1992
Democrats: Loyal	4.31 (177)	3.69 (285)	4.11 (225)	4.37 (333)
Democrats: Defectors to Republican	4.88 (68)	4.48 (87)	5.46 (57)	5.25 (40)
Democrats: Defectors to Perot ('92)				4.62 (52)
Republicans: Loyal	5.15 (213)	4.57 (366)	4.92 (331)	5.18 (302)
Group Differences				
Defecting Democrats* vs. Loyal Democrats	t = 2.57 sig = .011	t = 4.23 sig = .000	t = 5.02 sig = .000	t = 3.01 sig = .033
Defecting Democrats* vs. Republicans	t = 1.50 sig = .136	t = 0.50 sig = .614	t = 2.54 sig = .012	t = 0.30 sig = .767

Note: Entries are mean responses on a seven-point scale running from 1 = Washington should make every effort through 7 = Minorities should help themselves. The number of cases for each subgroup is shown in parentheses.
*Only defectors to the Republican candidate are included here.

identifiers reflected at least two decades of GOP "coded" appeals to existing racial antagonisms (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Mendelberg 2001). Government assistance to blacks and minorities was clearly a wedge issue that divided Democrats, a division quite in keeping with the Reagan Democrat storyline.

In addition to the propensity of defecting Democrats to position themselves to the right of loyal Democrats on the aid to minorities scale, a second striking feature in Table 1 is the similarity of Democratic defectors to Republican voters. In every election, the average scale scores of defectors were closer to Republicans than to other Democrats. In three of the four elections, the average scores of Democratic defectors and Republicans were statistically indistinguishable. Only in 1988, when defecting Democrats were slightly to the *right* of Republicans on aid to minorities, were the differences between the two groups statistically significant.

One of the most visible and controversial redistributive policies to emerge from the Great Society era was the Federal food stamp program. Although the program was not designed specifically to assist blacks and minorities, surveys found that white Americans erroneously believed that programs like food stamps and AFDC benefited predominantly African-Americans (Gilens 1999). Beginning in 1984, NES respondents were asked to share their views about levels of Federal government spending in a variety

of policy areas. In the case of food stamps, they were asked: "Should Federal spending on food stamps be increased, decreased, or kept about the same?"

Federal spending on food stamps is another issue that divided Democratic defectors from loyal Democrats (Table 2). In all three elections, around 50 percent of both loyal and defecting Democrats supported current levels of spending. But loyal Democrats were much more likely—by margins of 20-25 percent—to favor increases in spending. By similar margins,

Table 2. Support for Federal Spending on Food Stamps among Voter Subgroups

	Increase	The Same	Decrease	(n)
1984				
Democrats: Loyal	30.7	49.5	19.8	(283)
Democrats: Defectors				
to Republican	4.0	56.6	39.4	(99)
Republicans: Loyal	6.7	41.0	52.3	(373)

*Group Differences**
Defecting Democrats** $t = 5.93$ sig = .000   Defecting Democrats** $t = 1.49$ sig = .137
  vs. Loyal Democrats   vs. Republicans

	Increase	The Same	Decrease	(n)
1988				
Democrats: Loyal	28.4	50.6	21.0	(243)
Democrats: Defectors				
to Republican	6.7	46.7	46.7	(60)
Republicans: Loyal	8.5	45.2	46.3	(354)

*Group Differences**
Defecting Democrats** $t = 4.80$ sig = .000   Defecting Democrats** $t = 0.24$ sig = .809
  vs. Loyal Democrats   vs. Republicans

	Increase	The Same	Decrease	(n)
1992				
Democrats: Loyal	24.0	53.1	22.9	(350)
Democrats: Defectors				
to Republican	2.2	54.3	43.5	(46)
Democrats: Defectors				
to Perot	7.7	55.8	36.5	(52)
Republicans: Loyal	5.7	51.9	42.4	(314)

*Group Differences**
Defecting Democrats** $t = 3.98$ sig = .000   Defecting Democrats** $t = 0.45$ sig = .653
  vs. Loyal Democrats   vs. Republicans

Note: Entries are row percentages. The number of cases for each subgroup is shown in parentheses.
*For purposes of calculating t, responses were coded 1 = increase, 0 = same, -1 = decrease.
**Only defectors to Republican candidate are included here.

defecting Democrats were more likely to call for reductions in Federal spending on food stamps. Once again, Democratic defectors were not only distinct from Democratic loyalists, they were quite similar to Republicans. While the differences between loyal Democrats and defectors to Bush were substantively clear and statistically significant, the differences between defectors and Republican identifiers were substantively minor and statistically indiscernible.

Overall, the divisions between loyal and defecting Democrats on racial policy confirm a central part of Reagan Democrat lore. Moreover, these policy preferences carried weight in voting booths, exerting potent effects on candidate evaluations and vote choice, especially in 1988 (Borquez forthcoming). That Reagan Democrats were similar to Republicans on racial policy made these matters all the more challenging to Democratic Party leaders.

Government Activism and the Social Safety Net

Although the distinctive conservatism of Democratic defectors on racial policy is much in keeping with the Reagan Democrat storyline, there were boundaries to that conservatism. During the Reagan-Bush years, other aspects of the modern welfare state, such as social security, enjoyed substantial public support (Bennett and Bennett 1990; Cook and Barrett 1992; Page and Shapiro 1992), and were less likely to create fissures within the Democratic Party. Such issues were strategically useful to the Democratic Party as means of preserving party unity and counteracting GOP exploitation of wedge issues like affirmative action and aid to blacks and minorities.

An enduring and defining difference between the Democratic and Republican parties—as organizations and in the minds of voters—has been their views about the proper size and scope of the Federal government, with Democrats generally most supportive of an activist government response to policy questions (Aldrich 1995; Baumer and Gold 1995; Josefson 2000; Pomper 1998). One of the traditional NES seven-point scales captures this fundamental difference between Democrats and Republicans:

> Some people think the government should provide fewer services, even in areas such as health and education in order to reduce spending. Suppose these people are at one end of the scale at point 1. Other people feel it is important for the government to provide many more services even if it means an increase in spending. Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7. And of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between at points 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?"

It is perhaps not surprising to see defecting Democrats adopting "Republican" preferences on racial issues where there is visible elite conflict within the Democratic Party. But it would be more ominous for Democratic candidates to see defectors expressing dissenting views on a matter where Democratic consensus was thought to be long-standing and deeply rooted.

The mean scale scores for the partisan subgroups, where higher scores indicate more support for government services, are shown in Table 3. Not surprisingly, in each election loyal Democratic voters offered the most support for government services, while loyal Republican voters were least enthusiastic. The Democratic defectors struck an interesting pose not seen on the racial issues. Although the defectors aligned closely with Republicans on racial issues, on the more general question of government services they tended to stake out a middle position between the two groups of loyal partisans.

This was clearly the case in 1980, when defecting Democrats were a full scale point more favorable toward government services than Republicans, yet two-thirds of a point less favorable than loyal Democrats. While the mean scores for defecting Democrats inched closer to the Republican means in 1984 and 1988, the differences between these groups remained visible and statistically significant (see t-tests in Table 3). By 1992, the gap between Democratic defectors and Republicans reopened, from .50 in 1988

Table 3. Support for Government Services and Spending among Voter Subgroups

	1980	1984	1988	1992
Democrats: Loyal	4.96 (166)	4.62 (274)	4.55 (221)	4.51 (316)
Democrats: Defectors to Republican	4.28 (72)	3.86 (92)	3.81 (52)	4.10 (33)
Democrats: Defectors to Perot ('92)				4.18 (52)
Republicans: Loyal	3.27 (198)	3.17 (367)	3.31 (319)	3.20 (295)
Group Differences				
Defecting Democrats* vs. Loyal Democrats	t = 2.84 sig = .005	t = 4.79 sig = .000	t = 3.52 sig = .000	t = 1.71 sig = .089
Defecting Democrats* vs. Republicans	t = 4.19 sig = .000	t = 4.25 sig = .000	t = 2.45 sig = .015	t = 3.42 sig = .001

Note: Entries are mean responses on a seven-point scale running from 1 = Reduce services and spending through 7 = Increase services and spending. The number of cases for each subgroup is shown in parentheses.
*Only defectors to the Republican candidate are included here.

to .90 four years later (note that defectors to Bush were nearly indistinguishable from defectors to Perot); at the same time, the difference in scale scores between loyal Democrats and defectors to the GOP (.41) was the smallest of the four elections.

The positions embraced by Democratic defectors may reflect the cross-pressures of Ronald Reagan's persistent attacks on government activism on one hand, and Democratic Party allegiance on the other. The middle-ground position may show the extent to which the Reagan message resonated among defectors, but was held in check by party identification and partisan cues reflecting a long Democratic tradition of support for activist government. The departure of Reagan and his message may have contributed to the renewed distance between defectors and Republicans in 1992.

In many ways, Social Security is the cornerstone of the modern welfare state. Most everyone stands to receive Social Security benefits sometime in their lives, making it more difficult for politicians to exploit voter stereotypes of identifiable clientele groups, such as the poor or urban minorities. Indeed, because Social Security has such an encompassing clientele, it is often called the "third rail" of American politics, a program enjoying such broad public support that elected officials dare not change it. During the Reagan-Bush era, Social Security received generally high marks from the public for program effectiveness and the deservingness of program recipients (Cook and Barrett 1992).

Moreover, Social Security united loyal and defecting Democrats. The data displayed in Table 4 are based on an NES item inquiring whether Federal spending for Social Security should be increased, decreased, or kept the same. Not surprisingly, all voter subgroups were inclined to at least maintain current levels of Federal spending for Social Security, though loyal Republicans voiced more tepid support than the Democratic subgroups. Most interesting, however, are the lines of partisan cleavage that appear in Table 4. In contrast to the issues examined above, where defecting Democrats tended to look quite Republican in their issue preferences, they aligned with other Democratic Party identifiers. For the three elections covered by the survey question, the differences in support for Federal spending among loyal and defecting Democrats were negligible. On the other hand, the differences between defecting Democrats and Republicans were both substantively clear and statistically significant, a pattern that obtained for all three elections.

While racially charged issues highlighted politically damaging cracks in Democratic unity, Democratic identifiers remained in accord on the general premises of the modern welfare state: that it is appropriate and desirable for the government to ensure and enhance citizens' economic and social well-being.

Table 4. Support for Federal Spending on Social Security among Voter Subgroups

	Increase	The Same	Decrease	(n)
1984				
Democrats: Loyal	56.4	43.0	0.7	(305)
Democrats: Defectors				
to Republican	49.5	48.5	2.1	(97)
Republicans: Loyal	29.9	63.6	6.5	(385)

Group Differences*
Defecting Democrats** t = 1.38 sig = .169   Defecting Democrats** t = 3.82 sig = .000
  vs. Loyal Democrats   vs. Republicans

	Increase	The Same	Decrease	(n)
1988				
Democrats: Loyal	60.5	37.5	2.0	(256)
Democrats: Defectors				
to Republican	60.7	34.4	4.9	(61)
Republicans: Loyal	38.7	57.9	3.3	(359)

Group Differences*
Defecting Democrats** t = 0.37 sig = .713   Defecting Democrats** t = 2.67 sig = .008
  vs. Loyal Democrats   vs. Republicans

	Increase	The Same	Decrease	(n)
1992				
Democrats: Loyal	51.8	45.9	2.3	(355)
Democrats: Defectors				
to Republican	54.3	41.3	4.3	(46)
Democrats: Defectors				
to Perot	47.3	50.9	1.8	(55)
Republicans: Loyal	31.7	61.5	6.8	(322)

Group Differences*
Defecting Democrats** t = 0.06 sig = .950   Defecting Democrats** t = 2.80 sig = .005
  vs. Loyal Democrats   vs. Republicans

Note: Entries are row percentages. The number of cases for each subgroup is shown in parentheses.
*For purposes of calculating t, responses were coded 1 = increase, 0 = same, -1 = decrease.
**Only defectors to Republican candidate are included here.

A "New Democrat" Issue: Financial Aid for College Students

The Democratic Leadership Council sought to develop a policy agenda that would appeal to middle- and working-class Democrats and preempt Republican wedge issues. Financial assistance to college students was an early centerpiece of the DLC's "New Democrat" platform, and was at the heart of one of President Clinton's first policy initiatives, the national

service bill that created Americorp, along with student loan reform (Waldman 1995). NES respondents in 1988 and 1992 were asked, "Should Federal spending on financial aid for college students be increased, decreased, or kept about the same?" The potential of this "New Democrat" theme to build consensus between Reagan Democrats and their party brethren is suggested by the findings in Table 5.

As with Social Security, there was an overall consensus for at least maintaining current levels of Federal spending on college financial aid. Support for financial aid increased among all partisan groups between 1988 and 1992. Republicans expressed the least enthusiasm for increased spending in 1988, but even they warmed somewhat to the idea if increased spending by 1992.

Of particular interest in Table 5 is the comparison of partisan group support in 1992, when the DLC had found a stronger voice within the Democratic Party. While all three voter groups had moved in the direction of

Table 5. Support for Federal Spending on Financial Aid for College Students among Voter Subgroups

	Increase	The Same	Decrease	(n)
1988				
Democrats: Loyal	51.9	40.4	7.7	(260)
Democrats: Defectors				
to Republican	38.7	53.2	8.1	(62)
Republicans: Loyal	29.5	54.8	5.7	(356)

Group Differences*
Defecting Democrats** $t = 1.52$ sig = .129   Defecting Democrats** $t = 1.88$ sig = .061
   vs. Loyal Democrats   vs. Republicans

	Increase	The Same	Decrease	(n)
1992				
Democrats: Loyal	67.0	27.6	5.4	(351)
Democrats: Defectors				
to Republican	66.7	22.2	11.1	(45)
Democrats: Defectors				
to Perot	64.2	28.3	7.5	(53)
Republicans: Loyal	44.0	44.7	11.3	(318)

Group Differences*
Defecting Democrats** $t = 0.64$ sig = .524   Defecting Democrats** $t = 1.88$ sig = .061
   vs. Loyal Democrats   vs. Republicans

Note: Entries are row percentages. The number of cases for each subgroup is shown in parentheses.
*For purposes of calculating t, responses were coded 1 = increase, 0 = same, -1 = decrease.
**Only defectors to Republican candidate are included here.

favoring increased Federal spending, the clear distinction was between Democrats (of all types) and Republicans. Among Democratic Party identifiers—loyal and defecting—there was a clear preference for increased Federal spending. The marginal distributions of opinion among loyal Democrats and Democratic defectors were very similar in both 1988 and 1992. It is the Republican voters who stood out in their weaker support for Federal spending on college financial aid.

Party Disaffection among Party Defectors?

The previous analyses identified some policy areas in which Democratic defectors expressed views that were quite different from loyal Democrats, and remarkably similar to Republicans. Such findings, along with popular speculation about the policy "disaffection" and "abandonment" of Reagan Democrats, were of course a source of great delight to GOP leaders, and considerable anxiety to Democratic Party leaders. But were the conservative policy preferences of Democratic defectors accompanied by a more general disenchantment with the Democratic Party, and a more favorable embrace of the Republican Party?

Although many Republican strategists were optimistic that presidential vote defection during the 1980s might translate into long-standing Republican Party allegiance, others, such as Lee Atwater, were mindful of the fact that Reagan Democrats were, by definition, Democrats. The cross-pressures of Democratic Party allegiance versus support for Republican candidates should set defecting Democrats apart from loyal Democrats when it comes to overall evaluations of the two major parties. Although loyal Democrats and loyal Republicans are expected to express clear preferences for their own party, we might also reasonably expect to see cross-pressured defectors expressing more equivocal appraisals of the parties. Then again, if defectors really were the vanguard of a Republican realignment, we should see defectors offering partisan appraisals similar to those of Republican voters.

Comparative Party Evaluations

An initial test of these expectations was based on NES respondents' "feeling thermometer" ratings of the Democratic and Republican parties. Respondents were asked to give ratings that reflected their favorable, "warm" feelings or unfavorable, "cool" feelings toward the Democratic and Republican parties. The feeling thermometer does not refer to any specific attributes of the parties, but is intended to capture respondents' more global evaluations of the parties.

Thermometer ratings of the Democratic and Republican parties were used to calculate a comparative party evaluation score for each respondent.

Thermometer ratings of the Democratic Party were subtracted from ratings of the Republican Party, so that a positive score indicates a Republican advantage in comparative party assessment, while a negative score indicates a Democratic Party advantage. An expressly comparative measure is useful here to investigate the possibility that cross-pressured defectors evaluated the two parties more similarly than did loyal partisans.

This possibility is, in fact, borne out by the data. Table 6 displays the mean thermometer difference scores among the voter sub-groups. In the four presidential elections between 1980 and 1992, loyal Democrats and loyal Republicans expressed clear preferences for their own parties. On average, loyal Democrats rated their own party more favorably than the GOP by about 35-40 points. Loyal Republicans preferred their party over the Democratic Party by similar margins. By contrast, defecting Democrats rated the two parties much more similarly. Although defecting Democrats, on average, expressed slightly warmer feelings toward their own party in 1980 and 1984, that Democratic advantage disappeared in 1988 and 1992. In fact, among defectors the mean thermometer ratings for the two parties were identical, or nearly so.

Defectors lacked the obvious pro-Democratic orientation of their loyal brethren. So too did they lack the obvious pro-GOP orientation of the loyal Republicans. Indeed, Democratic defectors were statistically distinct from

Table 6. Comparative Party Evaluations among Voter Subgroups

	1980	1984	1988	1992
Democrats: Loyal	-36.7 (196)	-42.3 (308)	-41.8 (255)	-39.1 (355)
Democrats: Defectors to Republican	-11.1 (77)	-4.2 (97)	1.5 (61)	0.0 (45)
Democrats: Defectors to Perot ('92)				-21.4 (54)
Republicans: Loyal	34.6 (227)	35.6 (399)	38.3 (360)	37.9 (319)
Group Differences				
Defecting Democrats* vs. Loyal Democrats	t = 7.04 sig = .000	t = 11.7 sig = .000	t = 10.7 sig = .000	t = 9.05 sig = .000
Defecting Democrats* vs. Republicans	t = 13.24 sig = .000	t = 13.53 sig = .000	t = 9.80 sig = .000	t = 9.05 sig = .000

Note: Entries are mean thermometer difference scores for each subgroup. Difference scores were calculated by subtracting respondents' Democratic thermometer rating from their Republican rating. Positive difference scores represent a Republican advantage, while negative scores indicate a Democratic advantage. The number of cases for each subgroup is shown in parentheses.
*Only defectors to the Republican candidate are included here.

both groups of loyal partisans. At no time did defecting Democrats as a group clearly reject the Democratic Party and embrace the Republican Party. Rather, they showed evidence of being genuinely cross-pressured.

Open-ended Assessments of Party Attributes

A drawback of the feeling thermometer is that we do not know exactly what respondents had in mind when they offered evaluations. Were they thinking about party policy positions? More general party philosophy? Particular party politicians? Feeling thermometer ratings cannot capture such nuanced party assessments, but there are other NES questions that can. A regular feature of the NES is a series of open-ended questions that invite respondents to explain what they like and dislike about the two major parties:

Is there anything in particular that you like about the Democratic Party?
Is there anything in particular that you don't like about the Democratic Party?
Is there anything in particular that you like about the Republican Party?
Is there anything in particular that you don't like about the Republican Party?

We can examine the tone and content of voters' comments about the parties to see if they conform to the Reagan Democrat storyline. If they do, we should find a substantial number of defecting Democrats offering negative comments about the Democratic Party. At the very least, defectors should be noticeably more negative than loyal Democrats in their observations about the Democratic Party, and generally more charitable in their comments about the Republican Party. Moreover, the content of comments offered by defectors should follow the Reagan Democrat script, featuring criticisms of Democratic Party policy positions.

The comments offered in response to the open-ended likes/dislikes questions typically cover a wide range of topics, from party philosophy to individual politicians, from quite general concerns to very specific traits. The NES staff codes the verbatim responses, based on an extensive master code list. To make the analysis manageable, voters' observations have been grouped into three categories, based on the NES party-candidate master codes.[6] Comments about *party* attributes include references to general party philosophy (e.g., size of government), ideological stance, and coalitional makeup of the parties. Comments about *policy* attributes cover more specific issue positions or proposals, while comments about *candidate* attributes include such considerations as candidates' experience, leadership qualities, and personal characteristics.[7] Tables 7 and 8 show the percentage of voters

**Table 7. Assessments of Democratic Party Attributes
among Voter Subgroups**

	Party		Policy		Candidates	
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
1980						
Democrats: Loyal (202)	65.3	15.3	25.7	8.4	18.3	14.4
Democrats: Defectors						
to Republican (81)	49.4	30.9	16.0	14.8	9.9	17.3
Republicans: Loyal (233)	23.6	38.6	9.4	33.0	6.0	27.0
1984						
Democrats: Loyal (313)	75.7	22.0	29.7	9.9	16.9	11.8
Democrats: Defectors						
to Republican (100)	43.0	14.0	16.0	14.0	7.0	20.0
Republicans: Loyal (404)	24.0	39.1	7.4	36.9	11.9	24.0
1988						
Democrats: Loyal (261)	77.0	21.8	36.0	11.1	10.3	13.4
Democrats: Defectors						
to Republican (62)	40.3	25.8	11.3	12.9	6.5	14.5
Republicans: Loyal (364)	23.9	45.6	16.2	38.5	7.1	22.0
1992						
Democrats: Loyal (359)	73.8	20.9	35.1	10.0	12.8	16.7
Democrats: Defectors						
to Republican (47)	34.0	19.1	10.6	6.4	6.4	19.1
Democrats: Defectors						
to Perot (54)	51.9	16.4	29.6	13.0	10.9	27.3
Republicans: Loyal (324)	21.3	42.0	11.7	41.4	5.2	35.2

Note: Entries are percentages of respondents offering at least one positive or negative observation in response to open-ended likes/dislikes questions. The number of cases for each subgroup is shown in parentheses.

in each partisan sub-group who offered positive or negative comments about the Democratic and Republican parties in the three coding categories.

Overall, Democratic defectors' observations about the Democratic Party were less generous than those of loyal Democrats, but more positive than those of Republican voters (Table 7). Looking first at comments about party attributes, defectors were consistently more likely to say something positive about the Democratic Party than they were to criticize the party. Even in 1984, the peak of recent Democratic defection, over 40 percent of those defectors remarked approvingly of some party attribute; by contrast,

Table 8. Assessments of Republican Party Attributes among Voter Subgroups

	——Party——		——Policy——		——Candidates——	
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
1980						
Democrats: Loyal (202)	7.9	48.5	5.9	19.8	9.9	10.9
Democrats: Defectors						
to Republican (81)	16.0	30.9	12.3	9.9	14.8	4.9
Republicans: Loyal (233)	51.9	20.6	34.8	6.0	24.5	6.9
1984						
Democrats: Loyal (313)	15.0	58.8	8.9	34.5	9.9	12.8
Democrats: Defectors						
to Republican (100)	12.0	26.0	18.0	21.0	18.0	8.0
Republicans: Loyal (404)	48.8	20.0	41.1	14.6	26.7	6.4
1988						
Democrats: Loyal (261)	12.6	52.9	15.7	41.8	8.0	16.1
Democrats: Defectors						
to Republican (62)	19.4	21.0	38.7	21.0	24.2	9.7
Republicans: Loyal (364)	46.7	19.0	56.3	16.5	27.2	13.2
1992						
Democrats: Loyal (359)	8.9	60.2	11.4	37.3	5.6	17.9
Democrats: Defectors						
to Republican (47)	12.8	21.3	10.6	12.8	14.9	8.5
Democrats: Defectors						
to Perot (54)	12.7	47.3	14.5	27.3	5.5	12.7
Republicans: Loyal (324)	50.3	22.5	39.5	19.1	29.9	10.5

Note: Entries are percentages of respondents offering at least one positive or negative observation in response to open-ended likes/dislikes questions. The number of cases for each subgroup is shown in parentheses.

only 14 percent of 1984 defectors criticized party attributes. Although the tone of defectors' comments across the four elections was not as favorable as those of loyal Democrats, those remarks did not portray defectors as a group that was fundamentally disenchanted with Democratic Party principles.

Given their conservative policy preferences on racial policy, we might expect to find sizeable numbers of Democratic defectors offering negative comments about their party's issue positions, and to be more critical of the party than loyal Democrats. Indeed, defectors as a group were

less enthusiastic than loyalists about Democratic Party policy. But the open-ended comments did not suggest a groundswell of policy discontent among defectors, nor did they suggest the similarity with Republicans that was apparent in some of the closed-ended policy questions. The proportion of Democratic defectors critical of party policy never exceeded 15 percent (compared to roughly 30-40 percent among Republican voters), and that was generally balanced by a similar percentage that commented favorably about party policy. It was only in the assessments of Democratic candidates and party figures that defectors were more apt to be negative than positive. But even here, only ten to fifteen percent of defecting Democrats spontaneously gave negative appraisals of their party's candidates. And in 1988, loyal Democrats were nearly as apt as defectors to offer criticisms of party candidates.

If defecting Democrats during the Reagan-Bush years were taking a first step toward embracing the Republican Party, it was not evident from the open-ended comments concerning what they liked and disliked about the GOP. The results shown in Table 8 are something of a mirror image of Table 7. On balance, defecting Democrats were less negative than loyal Democrats in their assessments of the Republican Party. But they were also less approving than loyal Republicans.

Democratic defectors were generally more likely to criticize than to praise overall Republican philosophy, ideology and other party attributes. Only in 1988 did equal proportions of defectors offer positive (19.4%) and negative (21.0%) comments. While Democratic defectors did express conservative policy preferences in response to closed questions, they did not usually go out of their way to mention policy as a reason to like the Republican Party. Again, 1988 was the exception, where nearly 40 percent of defecting Democrats mentioned policy as a praiseworthy attribute of the GOP. In the other three elections, that percentage was substantially lower, and was closely matched by the percentage of defectors finding fault with Republican Party policy. It was only with regard to party candidates that defecting Democrats were more likely to offer favorable rather than unfavorable observations. This underscores the *Reagan* in the Reagan Democrat phenomenon.[8] Indeed, even in 1988, an important objective of the Bush campaign was to take advantage of the "Reagan legacy" (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 1991; Burnham 1989; Shanks and Miller 1991).

Taken together, Democratic defectors' likes and dislikes about the two parties provide little support for the view that defection reflected either a fundamental disaffection with the Democratic Party or a nascent enthusiasm for the Republican Party. Like the comparative thermometer ratings, the open-ended comments portray Democratic defectors as a group of genuinely cross-pressured voters, not as Republicans-in-waiting.

Discussion

In the years following the Reagan Democrat phenomenon, other political sub-species have been spotted on the electoral landscape, among them Soccer Moms, Security Moms, and NASCAR Dads. Journalists and party professionals treat these groups as distinct voting blocs requiring targeted campaign strategies and carefully tailored appeals. The very distinctiveness of these groups is often taken for granted and left unexamined. To a large extent, Reagan Democrats escaped empirical scrutiny, even though a great deal of news coverage and campaign strategy was devoted to them. This study examined Democratic vote defectors in the 1980-1992 presidential elections in order to assess two themes that defined the Reagan Democrats—their conservative policy preferences, and their more general disaffection from the Democratic Party. These themes deserve reconsideration because they have influenced party strategies and widely held interpretations of contemporary electoral politics. As with a lot of conventional wisdom in American politics, the Reagan Democrat storyline was partially correct, but also a bit off-target.

On matters of race and redistribution, Democratic defectors—Reagan Democrats—occupied political space clearly to the right of other Democrats, confirming an essential part of the Reagan Democrat lore. Indeed, the preferences expressed by defecting Democrats were often statistically indistinguishable from those of Republicans. The DLC's mission of extinguishing "liberal orthodoxy," which they defined largely in terms of race and redistribution, can be understood as a response to Reagan Democrats' policy positions on these questions. Indeed, it is on these questions that Reagan Democrats displayed their sharpest political identity. At the same time, it is important to note that Democratic defectors still expressed support for key elements of the social safety net, such as Social Security, and in that respect were still well within their party's mainstream. At least in the case of financial aid for college students, there is evidence that the DLC was on the right track in finding issues on which loyal and defecting Democrats could agree.

The common observation that Reagan Democrats felt betrayed and abandoned by their party was overstated. When asked what they liked or disliked about the Democratic Party, defecting Democrats generally expressed less enthusiasm for the party than did loyal Democrats. But for the most part, the preponderance of appraisals offered by defectors was positive, most notably on Democratic Party principles. As Lee Atwater recognized, Reagan Democrats were still Democrats. Moreover, they were Democrats who could articulate a rationale for their Democratic allegiance. The open-ended appraisals lend some support to liberal Democrats' complaints that the DLC "New Democrat" agenda went too far in blurring distinctions between the two major parties.

It is interesting to note that the Reagan Democrat phenomenon took place at a time when many political scientists were questioning the role of party identification as a foundation for electoral choice. Several important studies uncovered weakening party allegiances in the electorate (Ladd and Hadley 1981; Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1976; Wattenberg 1998), and suggested that party identification itself was becoming more fluid and responsive to political and economic conditions (Brody and Rothenberg 1988; Fiorina 1981; Franklin and Jackson 1983; MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1989). It is not surprising that many observers expected that Reagan Democrats, having already voted for Republican candidates, were ripe for conversion.

More recently, political scientists have emphasized the resilience of party identification, and still see it as a linchpin for electoral choice (Bartels 2000 and 2002; Fiorina 2002; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002). The findings reported here underscore the resilience of party identification. Reagan Democrats were clearly cross-pressured voters. They espoused policy preferences different from many other Democrats. And they cast votes for Republican presidential candidates. Still, they retained their Democratic Party affinities, and could offer reasons for them.

As Democrats now try to formulate a blueprint to win back the White House, they must be careful to avoid themes or policy positions that undercut voters' rationales for Democratic Party allegiance. When debating how to appeal to voting blocs like NASCAR Dads, Democrats should be sure that those groups actually have a distinct political identity, and have a firm grasp of what defines that identity. In short, any party strategy should rest on a complete, accurate, empirically based portrait of those voters. Party professionals would do well to look back at the Reagan Democrat phenomenon, where strategies were based on assumptions and a storyline that was not entirely accurate.

NOTES

[1]Because of the small number of cases, 1980 Democratic defectors to John Anderson were excluded.

[2]A check of other demographic attributes found minimal differences between defecting and loyal Democrats. The two partisan groups were similar with regard to age, income, and education. Defecting and loyal Democrats were equally likely to have attended college, though loyal Democrats were a bit more likely to have graduated with a four-year degree. Even though Reagan Democrats were typecast as working-class, defectors were no more likely to identify themselves that way. There was no discernable gender gap between loyal and defecting Democrats. Finally, defecting Democrats in the 1980-1992 elections were not disproportionately southern. On this last point, it is worth

remembering that the mythical home of Reagan Democrats was Macomb County, Michigan (Greenberg 1995).

[3]This analysis parallels Mayer's (1996) study of Democratic Party diversity, but differs in two important ways. First, the partisan subgroups are defined here by voting behavior (loyal or defecting vote). Second, the focus here is as much on cross-party similarities as on intra-party differences. This approach is taken in order to more directly address the Reagan Democrat storyline.

[4]In 1992 this item referred to "blacks" instead of "blacks and minorities."

[5]Throughout this paper, the standard for statistically significant differences between voter sub-groups is .05 or less.

[6]The party-candidate master codes are consistent from year to year. New codes are often added, but existing codes are unchanged.

[7]"Party" attributes include master codes 101-197, 801-897, 1201-1303. "Policy" attributes include codes 900-1199. "Candidate" attributes are covered by codes 1-97, 201-797.

[8]In a similar vein, Abramson et al. (2000) found that support for the independent/ third-party candidacies of George Wallace, John Anderson and Ross Perot stemmed largely from appraisals of candidates and election-specific considerations, and did not signal support for new parties. It is useful to underscore this point in the case of Democratic vote defection during the Reagan-Bush years, because of the common observation that Reagan Democrats were candidates for conversion to the GOP.

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