

*Race and the Ideological Transformation of the Democratic Party:
Evidence from the Bayou State*

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There is little doubt that the Democratic Party in the South has become decidedly more liberal over the last several decades. Not as much is known, however, about the extent of this ideological shift (measured in some quantifiable metric), nor the exact causes of this phenomenon. Many have credited the noted ideological sea change with the en masse re-enfranchisement of blacks in the region. In order to test the validity of this claim, aggregate-level data from Louisiana were combined with individual-level survey data to create an ideological profile for the Democratic Party in the Bayou State. Decomposing the transformation by racial groups leads to a counterintuitive finding: over time, blacks have actually served as a moderating force within the party structure. In addition, the white contingent of the Democratic Party has become increasingly more liberal as the proportion of blacks within the party structure has increased.

Introduction and Purpose

Students and observers of Southern politics have long ago noted the Democratic Party in the region has become increasingly liberal over the last several decades. Many have credited this ideological sea change with the en masse re-enfranchisement of blacks in the region, beginning in the mid-1960s. Most of these black voters joined the Democratic Party, and in doing so added a significant number of more liberal party adherents to Southern Democratic Party organizations. Many have postulated that this action explains much of the liberalization of the Democratic Party in the region in the second half of the 20th Century.

Political mobilization of the black population is only part of the equation however. Others have also noted an exodus on the part of white conservatives from the Democratic Party. Black and Black document this trend noting, "It is among southern conservatives that repudiation of the Democratic Party has been most pronounced and that a secular realignment toward Republicanism is occurring" (1987, 251). Black and Black go on to note that as early as 1980 a majority of white conservatives in the region were Republican identifiers.

While these two events are obviously linked, they are nevertheless still unique. Writing in an era of one-party factional politics described in detail by Key (1949), Heard precisely catalogues the dynamic that will ultimately

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lead to two-party competition and, concomitantly, the liberalization of the Democratic Party in the South.

While retaining group consciousness for some time to come, ultimate assimilation in the Democratic Party most probably lies ahead for southern Negroes. The strengthening of the liberal elements in the party would in the long run encourage the shift of conservative Democrats to the Republican Party and encourage the growth of competitive party politics (1952, 235).

Numerous scholarly studies have documented the aftereffects of this shift on the political system, including the leftward movement of Democratic legislators (see, for example, Bullock 1981; Hood et al. 1999; or Whitby and Gilliam 1991). There is much, however, that remains to be uncovered about even the basics of this phenomenon. Such concerns extend not only to the specific causes of Democratic Party liberalization in the South, but also the exact extent of this shift, measured in some quantifiable terms. The goal of this research endeavor is to determine the extent of ideological movement of the Democratic Party in the South using a common empirical referent and, further, to provide some possible insights into this shift.

Empirical Testing

The Nature and Extent of Ideological Change

The State of Louisiana has consistently recorded annual registration data on partisanship for well over fifty years. In addition, partisan identifiers can also be delineated along racial lines for the same period of time. Since we know the numbers of white and black Democratic adherents in the Bayou State, Louisiana would seem to serve as an excellent test case to examine the ideological shift of the Democratic Party in more detail. Located in the Deep South, Louisiana also contains sizable numbers of black citizens when compared to other states, even states located in the same region. In addition, the primary racial/ethnic divide in the state has been defined by the black-white dichotomy, unlike Texas and Florida that also contain sizable Hispanic populations.

Louisiana, of course, does not record a voter's ideological self-identification. For this information we are forced to rely on individual-level survey data. The National Election Study series provides an excellent biennial time series for this factor beginning in 1972. As previously noted, much of the political change occurring in the region begins before this date in the mid-1960s. Fortunately, the Comparative State Elections Project conducted in 1968 contains not only this identifier, but a sizable sample of Southern residents as well. Combining these data sources allows us to extend the scope of this inquiry back in time to the late 1960s.

Using a combination of aggregate-level registration data along with individual-level survey data we will create an ideological profile of the Louisiana Democratic Party from 1968 through 2002. Using the traditional 7-point ideological self-placement scale (throughout this manuscript higher scores indicate increasing levels of conservatism) we can derive an ideological distribution for Southern Democrats. In addition, we can also produce separate distributions for black and white Southerners.

Since the National Election Study surveys are designed to produce national-level inferences, the representativeness of any sample year for Southern Democrats is called into question—much less the confidence we could place in data for a single state or for a particular racial subgroup.¹ In order to retain some degree of confidence in these figures, we chose to tabulate ideological distributions for respondents living in the South over six-year time periods. In so doing we are assuming that Democratic Party ideology is fairly homogenous, both across states in the region and among racial groups, for these time periods.

What can we determine about the transformation of the Democratic Party in the South, and more specifically in Louisiana, over time? To begin, Table 1 displays a set of mean ideology scores for Southern Democrats over six successive time periods (see Figure 1 for a graphical representation of these trends). These scores are also calculated separately for black and white respondents. Again, we are using the 7-point ideological self-placement scale with a value of one representing those respondents classifying themselves as *extremely liberal* and those who consider themselves *extremely conservative* being coded as seven. In general, Southern Democrats have become increasingly liberal over time, from a high of 4.57 in the 1968 time period to a low of 3.85 in the 1996-2002 period. This represents a net decrease of approximately three-quarters (.72) of a point.

Once we decompose these changes by race some surprising effects arise. One, white identifiers have actually become more liberal over time, while black Democrats have actually grown more conservative over the last 35 years. Whites, who begin the time series with a mean ideology score of 4.77, saw this figure erode by 1.04 points to only 3.73 by the 1996-2002 time period. On the other hand, black Democrats in the region had increased their mean ideology score by well over a quarter of a point (.31) during the course of the time series, from 3.76 to 4.07.

Shifting to the aggregate-level picture of the Louisiana Democratic Party, we can examine the racial divisions within the party from 1960 through 2002 in Figure 2. With the exception of the few years included prior to the Voting Rights Act, the pattern is one of a monotonic increase in the percentage of blacks in the party, from 14 percent in 1965 to 42 percent in 2002. Conversely, the percentage of white Democratic identifiers in the state

**Table 1. Southern Democrats—
Mean Ideology Scores and Skewness**

Time Period	Total	White	Black
1968	4.57 <i>-.417</i> (895)	4.77 <i>-.526</i> (717)	3.76 <i>.101</i> (178)
1972-1977	4.07 <i>-.075</i> (665)	4.31 <i>-.109</i> (517)	3.26 <i>.472</i> (148)
1978-1983	3.99 <i>.061</i> (498)	4.03 <i>.048</i> (403)	3.81 <i>.189</i> (95)
1984-1989	4.05 <i>-.006</i> (553)	4.07 <i>-.012</i> (369)	4.01 <i>.015</i> (184)
1990-1995	3.90 <i>.068</i> (509)	3.89 <i>.053</i> (327)	3.91 <i>.082</i> (182)
1996-2002	3.85 <i>.189</i> (498)	3.73 <i>.279</i> (334)	4.07 <i>-.043</i> (164)
Net Increase/Decrease	<i>-.72</i>	<i>-1.04</i>	<i>.31</i>

Notes: Scores calculated based on the standard 7-point ideological self-placement scale (1 = extremely liberal; 7 = extremely conservative). Mean scores in bold; skewness in italics; number of respondents in parentheses.

has steadily declined over the same period of time, from 86 percent to only 58 percent. In summary, the number of black identifiers in the Louisiana Democratic Party has steadily increased over the last forty years, while the percentage of whites comprising the party faithful has steadily slipped over the same four decades.

Knowing something about the ideological distribution of Southern Democrats as well as the racial divisions within the Louisiana Democratic Party, we can combine this data to create a series of illustrations designed to depict the ideological transformation of the Democratic Party in the state during the preceding 35 years. The first step in the process is to norm the ideological distributions derived from the individual-level survey data to conform to the parameters of the Democratic Party in Louisiana. This stage entailed multiplying the actual number of white (black) Democrats in the state by the percentages derived from the ideology frequency distribution for

Figure 1. Democratic Party-Mean Ideology Scores

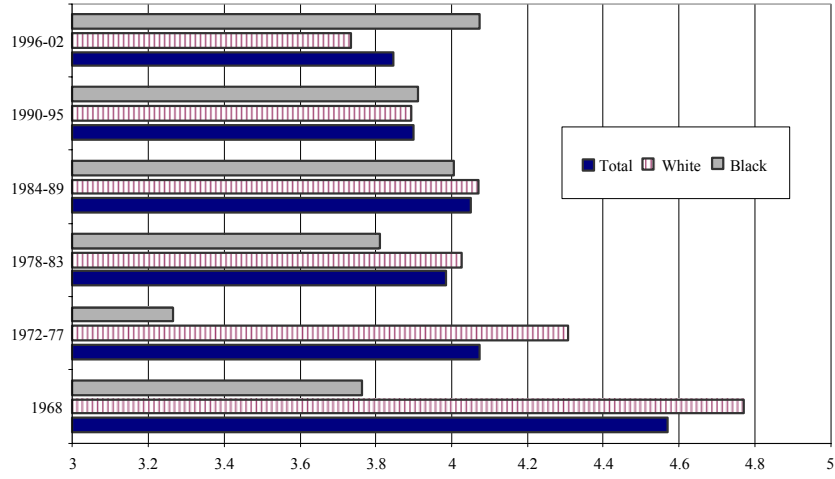
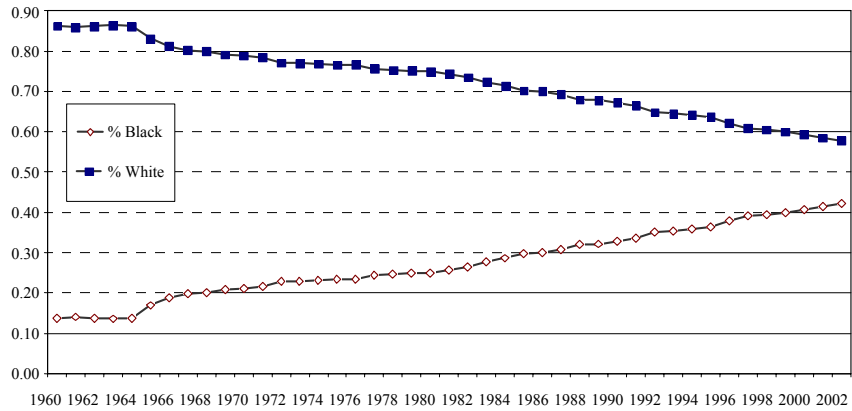


Figure 2. Louisiana Democratic Party-Racial Divisions



white (black) Southerners. For example, if there are 1000 whites in the Louisiana Democratic Party in 2000 and the frequency distribution for the same period of time indicates that 5 percent fell into the *extremely conservative* category, then the number of white Democrats in 2000 who were *extremely conservative* would be 50.

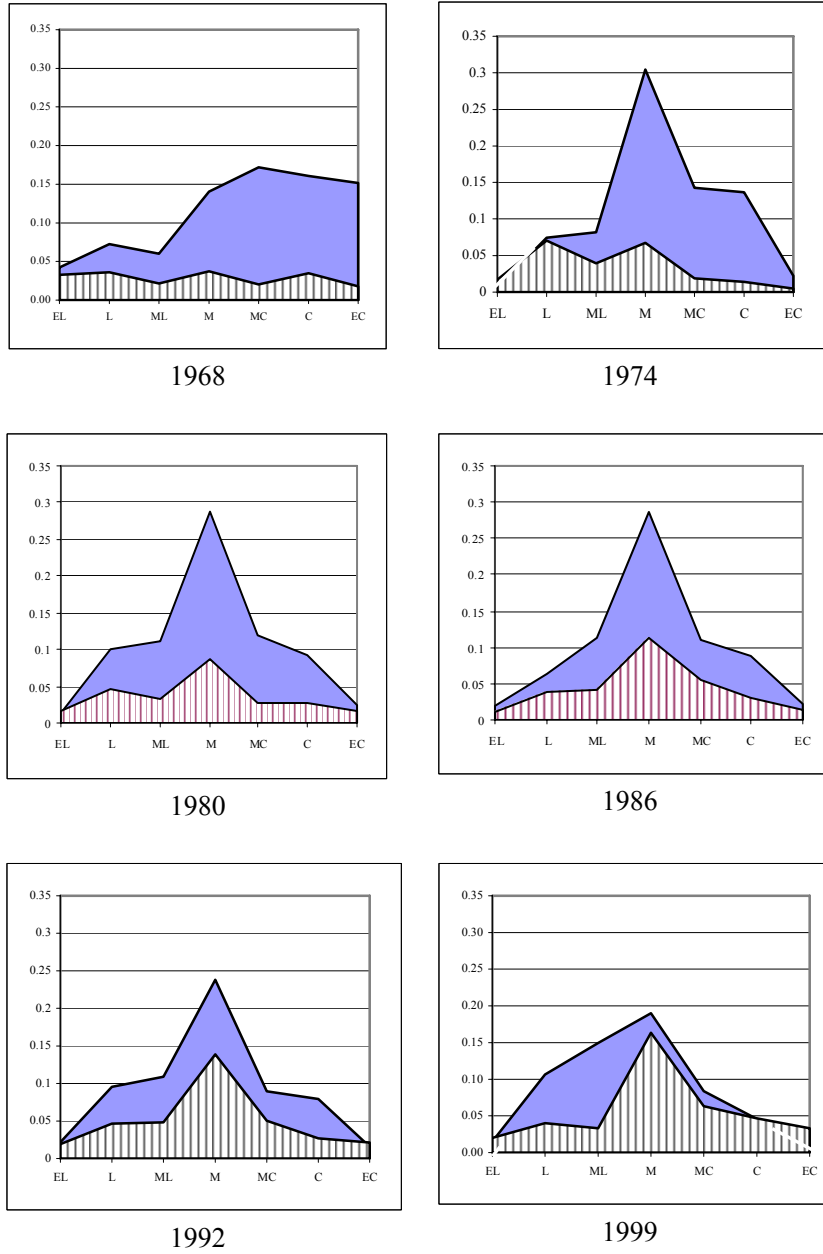
Once the party registration totals for black and white Democrats in Louisiana have been weighted to fit the accompanying ideological patterns, it is then possible to alter these two distributions to account for the percentage of identifiers that each group contributed to the overall Democratic Party totals. This is accomplished by simply dividing the weighted distributions for blacks and whites by the total number of Democratic registrants in Louisiana for a given year. To continue the example from above, if these 50 *extremely conservative* whites were contained within a Democratic Party with 1,500 total registrants, then this group would account for 3.3 percent of total Democratic identifiers in the state.

Figure 3 presents six panels representing the years 1968, 1974, 1980, 1986, 1992, and 1999, respectively. The vertically striped distribution in the foreground represents the ideological distribution of blacks in the Louisiana Democratic Party while the solid distribution in the background represents whites (Note: all six panels depict the same scale for easy comparison across time periods). The horizontal axes represent the same 7-point ideology scale with the far left of the scale representing the percentage of extreme liberals (EL) and the far right-side displaying the percentage of extreme conservatives (EC) in the party. The vertical axis on the reader's left indicates the percentage that each point on the distribution contributes to the overall makeup of the Democratic Party in Louisiana. For example, in the 1974 panel, white moderates (high peak on white distribution) constituted 30.5 percent of total Democratic Party identifiers in Louisiana.

In addition, the skewness statistic for these distributions is recorded in italics just under the mean values in Table 1. Skewness is a measure of the symmetry, with normal distributions registering a skewness value of 0. Positive skewness values indicate a longer left tail on a distribution, or in our case a liberal skew, while negative values represent a larger right tail or more conservative tilt.

The size of each distribution relative to one another again depicts over time that blacks comprise an increasingly greater number of party identifiers than do whites. In terms of ideological transformation, blacks begin with a pattern of equal distribution across categories in the 1968 panel with a slight skew to the left, becoming even more positively skewed in the next time period. This trend is interrupted in the 1980 and 1986 panels that are characterized by a pattern of moderation and finally a skew slightly to the right during the final time period.

Figure 3. Ideological Distribution of the Louisiana Democratic Party, 1968-1999



The distribution for white identifiers, on the other hand, is characterized by an extreme right skew in the 1968 panel. A period of moderation then follows over the next three time periods with a decided shift to the left beginning in 1992. By 1999 an even heavier tilt to the liberal end of the spectrum is observed with a skewness statistic of .279. It is interesting to note that in terms of the shape of the distributions presented, the 1980s represented a period in which both the black and white distributions were representative of the classic normal or bell-shaped distribution with the skewness statistics for each distribution being very close to 0 (White = -.012; Black = .015).

Testing Heard's Ideological Crowding-Out Effect

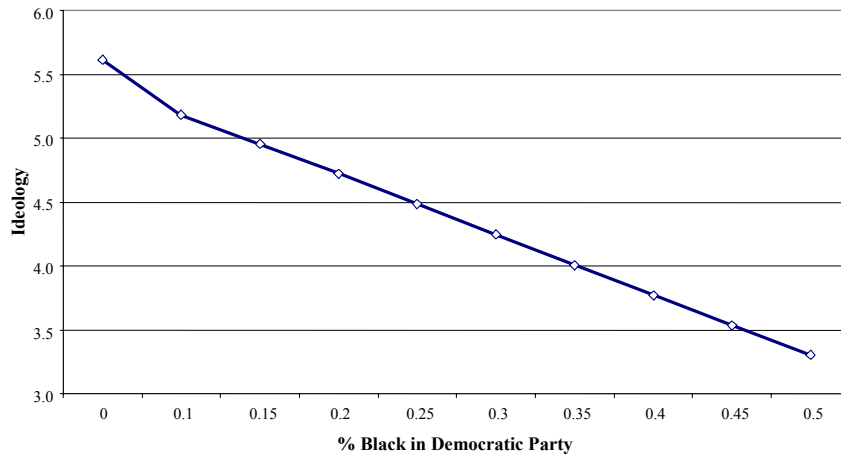
So far this inquiry has determined that the number of black identifiers within the Louisiana Democratic Party has greatly increased over the last several decades. In addition, an ideological sea-change among Southern Democrats has occurred during this same period of time, producing a much more liberal party electorate. Decomposing this effect, it has also become evident that white party adherents have grown steadily more liberal over this time frame, while blacks have actually become more conservative. It would appear then that this noted ideological transformation is primarily the result of change among whites identifiers, despite the fact that as a percentage of party make-up their numbers have steadily declined over time.

Is there any evidence to indicate that Heard's *Crowding-Out Effect* noted previously is present among white Democrats? Did the influx of relatively more liberal black adherents force conservative whites to pack their bags for the GOP? Combining white Democratic respondents from the 1968 CSEP and NES datasets we undertake a relatively simple test of this proposition. Using party registration data from Louisiana, a measure denoting the percentage of blacks in the Democratic Party from 1968 to 2002 was created (see again Figure 2 for a graphical representation of this variable).

An ordered logit model was then specified to explain the ideological position of white Democrats in the South in relation their overall numbers in the Democratic Party. In addition, a control for residence in the Deep South was also included in the model.² From the model parameters we then estimated ideological distributions for white Democrats at various levels of black strength within the party ranks ranging from 0 percent to 50 percent.^{3,4} Finally, a mean ideology score for white Democrats was derived from these estimates and plotted in Figure 4.

Looking at Figure 4 one can easily see that white Democrats became more liberal (denoted by decreasing scores) as blacks comprised a greater proportion of the party makeup. The model estimates the mean ideology score for whites at an 80%-20% split to be 4.72. At a 58%-42% division

Figure 4. Estimated Ideology of White Democrats



white ideology is estimated to have fallen to 3.67—a decline of 1.05 points. These estimates derived from a simple two-variable model produce a fairly realistic picture of the overall decline in conservatism among white Democrats observed over the last 35 years (the actual drop being 1.04 points over the same period of time [see Table 1, Column 2]). Some empirical evidence does appear to exist then to confirm Heard’s thesis, a prediction made more than a decade before re-enfranchisement of blacks into the southern political scene.

Conclusion

This study has measured the ideological change in the Louisiana Democratic Party over the last several decades by developing a metric that can provide a common frame of reference, both across time and among groups. In doing so we have come a step closer to visualizing what actually happened, in ideological terms, following the enfranchisement of black Southerners in the mid-1960s. Yet, much of the explanation concerning this noted shift is still yet to be undertaken. Decomposing the transformation by racial groups leads to an interesting and counterintuitive finding concerning black and white contributions to liberalization of the Democratic Party in the South: over time black numbers have actually served as a moderating force within the party structure.

This fact would seem to indicate that **most** of the ideological transformation of Southern Democracy rests with the changing behavior of white party adherents, as opposed to simply the ever increasing number of blacks

constituting the organization. It is difficult (perhaps impossible) to determine without panel data whether the Democratic Party in the South became increasingly liberal in the aggregate out of individual transformation/defection, cohort replacement, or even the in-migration of Democratic Party adherents from outside the region. In the least, more sophisticated multivariate modeling should be undertaken in an attempt to uncover mechanisms behind this pivotal alteration in the South's party structure. Likewise, we do not want to discount the role that blacks played, at least as an initial catalyst, in producing ideological change among whites. A steady flow of blacks into the Democratic Party apparatus did lead to a concomitant shift in white ideology over time. Again, however, more complex models will have to be devised in order to differentiate this noted effect from other agents of change.

NOTES

¹Many Southern states, including Louisiana, are not included in the NES sample for any given study year.

²We would hypothesize that white Democrats living in the Deep South, which includes Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina, will be more conservative than whites residing in the peripheral South. Unfortunately, due to collinearity issues a variable denoting time could not be included in the model.

³The results of the ordered logit model are as follows:

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error
% Black	-5.8986**	.7046
Deep South	.2321*	.1049
Intercept 1	-5.1393	.2733
Intercept 2	-3.3879	.2351
Intercept 3	-2.5392	.2201
Intercept 4	-1.1081	.2155
Intercept 5	-.2586	.2107
Intercept 6	-1.1111	.2301

⁴Estimated probabilities created using *Clarify 2.1* (Tomz et al. 2003).

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