

*Party Activists in Virginia, 1991-2001:
Finishing the Realignment Cycle*

John J. McGlennon

Virginia has become a mature two-party system in recent decades, with Democrats and Republicans actively competing for statewide offices and control of the state legislature. This competition has been accompanied by an acceleration of the partisan divide among party activists over issues and ideology, giving voters a clear choice between parties which are much more representative of their national counterparts. The erosion of Democratic dominance has been long accepted, and both GOP and Democratic activists see their party structures strengthening as they prepare for continued electoral competition.

Introduction

Virginia's party politics offers an opportunity to evaluate the maturing of partisan competition in a Southern state. For fifty years, there have been seriously contested races for the highest offices in the state, though the progression of the Republican Party at other levels has come more slowly. Though the Old Dominion has recently elected Republican majorities at every level of government, few doubt that the Democratic Party is capable of offering strong competition. The current status of the parties reflects the shifting ground on which Virginia's politics rests (Lamis 1990; Black and Black 2002; Sabato 2002).

After a decade of Democratic resurgence, Virginia politics reached the culmination of conversion to two-party competition in the decade between 1991 and 2001. Democratic division, the resurgence of Republican organizational strength, and redistricting combined to produce historic change in the Virginia General Assembly and in statewide offices (Edds and Morris 1999). As the parties' fortunes fluctuated, the state's declining rural areas emerged as the balance of power in statewide elections after decades of assumption that the ever expanding suburbs represented the keys to election success.

Party organizations continued the movement toward more ideological polarization, but they also reflected the changing nature of the party in election campaigns and the understanding of activists of the role they would be playing in campaigns and the day to day operation of the state's political system (McGlennon 1997).

JOHN J. MCGLENNON is Professor of Government at the College of William & Mary. Research assistance was provided by former William & Mary students Rocco Columbo and Christy Boardman as well as by Michelle Trovato, Valerie Trovato, and Barbara Finocchio.

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Development of Political Parties in Virginia

Electoral Patterns

Because of its characteristics of growth and affluence and its odd-year state elections, Virginia has often found itself attracting attention as the precursor of electoral change. In the late 1960s and 1970s, Virginia showed how Republicans would profit from the disintegration of a once-dominant Democratic Party split apart by race and ideology. Three successive Republican governors (one a converted former Democratic governor) won election as Democrats struggled to hold together after bitter nominating contests. Leading Democrats of both the right (U.S. Senator Harry F. Byrd, Jr.) and the left (Lt. Governor Henry Howell) declined to seek Democratic nominations during the 1970s but ran as independents instead (Lamis 1990, 161-162; Eisenberg 1972, 85-91).

Election results for a variety of offices in Virginia for 1980-2001 are in Table 1. During the 1980s, Virginia demonstrated its preference for moderation and basic competitiveness by electing three Democratic governors, each of whom appealed to the electorate as a pragmatic centrist prepared to address the state's basic needs while maintaining a cautious approach to finances. Republicans preferred to assert themselves simply as the more conservative candidates, a strategy of limited appeal even to an electorate which nominally considered itself conservative.

This decade produced a "rising star" in Governor Charles Robb, son-in-law of the late President Lyndon B. Johnson, whose potential as a national candidate faded shortly after his election to the United States Senate. Though demonstrating the ability of a southern Democrat to blend social liberalism (pro-civil rights, pro-women's rights, pro-choice) with fiscal conservatism and support for military strength, Robb faltered as his clean-cut image was undermined by allegations of personal improprieties.

The 1980s also put Virginia in the national spotlight for electing an African-American to the Governorship, when L. Douglas Wilder narrowly succeeded in his historic campaign at the end of the decade (McGlennon 1995, 92; Yancey 1988). Generally, Democrats were restored to predominance over the course of the decade, winning their first U.S. Senate election in more than 20 years, regaining a majority of U.S. House seats, and retaining wide majorities in both houses of the General Assembly.

As much as Democrats dominated the 1980s, the 1990s became the decade of Republican resurgence. Over the course of the decade, two GOP governors won election, once leading a sweep of all three statewide constitutional offices, won control of the U.S. House delegation, and finally gained control of both houses of the state legislature. The Republicans won by

Table 1. Republican Strength in Virginia, 1960-2002

Year	Percent of Presidential Vote	Percent of Gubernatorial Vote	Percent of U.S. Senate Vote	Percent of U.S. House Delegation	Percent of State House Delegation	Percent of State Senate Delegation
1960	52.4		0.0	20.0	7.5	5.0
1962		36.1		20.0	11.0	
1964	46.2		19.0	20.0	11.0	7.5
1966		37.7	33.5/37.4*	40.0	11.0	
1968	43.4			50.0	15.0	15.0
1970		52.5	15.3	60.0	24.0	
1972	67.8		51.5	70.0	20.0	15.0
1974		50.7		50.0	17.0	
1976	49.3		0.9	60.0	21.0	12.5
1978		55.9	50.2	60.0	25.3	
1980	53.0			90.0	33.3	22.5
1982		46.4	51.2	60.0	34.3	
1984	62.3		70.0	60.0	33.3	20.0
1986		44.8		50.0	35.0	
1988	59.7		28.7	50.0	39.0	25.0
1990		49.8	80.9	40.0	39.0	
1992	45.0			36.4	41.0	45.0
1994		58.0	42.9	45.5	47.0	
1996	47.1		52.5	45.5	47.0	50.0
1998		55.8		45.5	50.0	
2000	52.5		52.3	54.5	52.0	52.5
2002		47.0	82.6	63.6	64.0	

Notes: The vote is calculated as a percentage of the total vote. The last three columns give the percent Republican following the specified election (e.g., after the 2000 election, Republicans held 54.5 percent of the U.S. House seats). State elections are held in odd numbered years. To save space, the results are reported for the following year (e.g., the results for the 2001 state elections are reported in the row for 2002. *The second figure is for a special election held in 1966.

stressing solutions to issues which mattered to voters, crime in 1993 and annual taxes on automobiles in 1997. Democrats were largely reduced to offering weaker versions of the bold policy initiatives of the GOP (“End parole” and “No car tax”).

Although Democrats had some notable successes (electing the first African-American Representative from Virginia since 1891 and the first woman from Virginia since the 1940s), the highest profile victory came in the 1994 plurality re-election of Senator Robb over Republicans Oliver North and J. Marshall Coleman, the 1981 and 1989 party candidate for governor running as an independent with the support of Republican Senator John Warner. North’s conviction on charges of lying to Congress during the Iran-Contra scandal divided the GOP in the Senate race.

Despite the varying degrees of electoral success experienced by the two parties, their internal politics were surprisingly similar during the 1990s. Governor Wilder, despite a wide Democratic majority in the House of Delegates and a smaller but clear majority in the Senate, often found himself embroiled in controversy with leaders of his own party. Facing a national recession, and diminished by an unsuccessful presidential nomination campaign, Wilder found that his former colleagues in the General Assembly were little inclined to offer support for his agenda. Party activists fragmented into those disappointed that Wilder budgets offered no money for favorite causes, those enthusiastic about and loyal to the governor, and those who were unhappy with his public criticism of other Democratic leaders and candidates.

After Wilder's election, Republicans won both contests for governor in the 1990s. Former congressman George Allen, redistricted out of his newly won House seat in 1992, won a surprisingly easy upset victory in 1993, basing his campaign largely on a promise to end parole in the Commonwealth and to dramatically increase the number of prison cells. Allen was succeeded by Attorney General James Gilmore, whose campaign slogan became "No Car Tax," a promise to reimburse taxpayers for the local personal property tax on cars.

Though Gilmore's campaign succeeded, and his proposal won overwhelming support in the General Assembly, the escalating cost of the rebate (well over twice the \$575 million Gilmore had estimated during the campaign) and declining state revenue growth caused conflict between the governor and his party's new legislative majority. In the last year of Gilmore's administration, relations between the governor and Republicans in the state Senate had deteriorated so badly that they could not agree on a bill to amend the state's biennial budget. In failing to pass a bill amending the state budget, as was traditional during a legislative session just before the second year of the state's biennial budget cycle, the state made unhappy history. It could still function with the budget adopted the previous year, but was powerless to address the early stages of what would become a major budget crisis. Republicans, now in control of both the governorship and the legislature, demonstrated an inability to govern which voters apparently took into account in turning the governorship over to a Democrat in the next election.

Gilmore's relations with his own party's legislators deteriorated badly, but his early and critical support for George W. Bush's presidential campaign earned him the chairmanship of the Republican National Committee in 2001. Gilmore didn't have much time to settle into his job before being forced to resign shortly after Republicans lost the governors races of New Jersey and Virginia before his first year was finished. The Virginia defeat was particularly embarrassing for Gilmore, as he had steered Republican

National Committee money and staff to the GOP candidate in Virginia to a far greater extent than he offered aid in other off-year races.

As Virginia politics moved from the 20th to the 21st century, Republican George Allen ousted Senator Robb, and the GOP gained significant majorities in both the U.S. House delegation and the Virginia House of Delegates. Though Democratic businessman Mark Warner won the governorship in 2001, it was unclear whether his victory was a partisan or personal one.

Today, Virginia remains the only state in the nation which prohibits its governor from seeking consecutive re-election, thus guaranteeing an open-seat race for the state's highest position every four years. It continues to support Republican presidential candidates, as it has with only one exception since 1952, and appears to have cemented Republican congressional and General Assembly majorities through redistricting plans written by Gilmore and the Republican legislators in 2001.

Party Organizations

Organizationally, both parties expanded their presence in state and national politics in the decade between 1991 and 2001. Each state party maintains full-time offices in Richmond with several paid staff members. Party offices also host separate operations for legislative caucuses, and annual budgets have soared. In recent federal elections, millions of dollars have flowed through both party headquarters as “soft” or “party-building” money is funneled through state parties during competitive campaigns for the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives.

Turnover was frequent among state party officers during the decade as both parties made changes due to election outcomes, factional divisions, political ambitions and other factors. Party chairs were sometimes caught in the crossfire between governors who hand-picked them and legislators and/or activists with different priorities. Perhaps the best known of the party chairs during the decade was Democrat Mark Warner, who served from 1993 to 1995, a year prior to running an aggressive challenge to U.S. Senator John Warner (no relation). Warner had a highly productive term as party chair, dramatically improving the organization and technology of the state Democrats, and subsidizing party operations out of his own personal fortune. He benefited from his service by building a loyal network of party activists who helped him to outperform expectations in holding Senator Warner to a narrow re-election win. Warner's strong showing (fueled in part by nearly \$12 million of personal contributions to his campaign) allowed him to emerge as the consensus future Democratic choice for governor after the Democrats were shut out of state office in 1997.

Over the years, Democrats have often turned to their state party chairs as potential statewide candidates (Richard Davis became lieutenant governor, Owen Pickett sought a U.S. Senate nomination before becoming a congressman), and prominent elected officials have frequently taken the job. In 1999, Democrats picked State Senator Emily Couric as state chair, fully expecting that she would wind up running for lieutenant governor on the ticket headed by Mark Warner. Unfortunately, Couric (the sister of television's *Today* show host Katie Couric) died of pancreatic cancer in the middle of her campaign for nomination.

Republican state chairs have maintained a lower profile, and though they may have had ambitions, these plans do not as frequently include running for statewide office. In part, the control of the governorship by the GOP for most of the 1990s helps to explain the lack of visibility of state party chairs, as they have been overshadowed by the titular head of the party. Still, some GOP chairs have used the position as a launching point to elective office. Congressman Randy Forbes won a special election upon the death of Democratic congressman Norman Sisisky in 2001. Forbes jumped into the congressional special election abandoning his campaign to win the GOP nomination for lieutenant governor that year, a race in which he was encountering stiff opposition from a more conservative candidate.

The political parties in Virginia begin the twenty-first century in a paradoxical position. They have experienced dramatic improvement in their staffing, funding and technical competence. At the same time, their ability to control the campaigns of party candidates appears more limited than ever. Overall, although their relative positions have fluctuated in the past two decades, both parties have emerged with a stronger, more permanent organization even if they continue to be overshadowed by the particular candidates seeking office representing the parties (McGlennon 1997).

Grassroots Party Activists, 2001 and 1991

If the party organizations have undergone these changes, what about the volunteers who devote considerable time and effort to maintaining the party and advancing its candidates and policies? To examine the changes which have occurred among the party activists, we will compare results of the Southern Grassroots Party Activists projects conducted in 1991 and 2001. In each year, activists from Virginia and the ten other Southern states were surveyed and were asked several identical questions in both surveys. The results of the surveys provide opportunities to examine the characteristics, opinions and experiences of members of the party organizations at two distinct points in their development (McGlennon 1995).

Demographic Characteristics

The demographic profile of Virginia party activists surveyed in 2001 suggests that both the Democratic and Republican organizations have failed to broaden participation among the electorate. Both parties are top heavy with activists past the age of 50, and their ranks appear to be graying year by year. Their membership is wealthier and better educated than their counterparts from ten years ago, but they do show divergence on race and religion.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Virginia Party Activists, 1991 and 2001

Demographic Characteristic	Democrats		Republicans	
	1991	2001	1991	2001
Age				
18-34	7	2	12	13
35-54	43	15	42	30
≥50	50	83	46	57
Gender				
Male	57	52	66	70
Female	43	48	34	30
Race				
White	83	80	96	98
Black	15	18	2	1
Other	2	2	2	1
Education				
≤High school	16	10	10	3
Some college	24	25	24	25
≥College graduate	60	65	66	72
Family Income				
<\$20,000	13	5	4	1
\$20-49,000	40	31	34	20
≥\$50,000	47	64	62	79
Religion				
Protestant	79	67	88	80
Catholic	11	10	6	16
Other	5	16	2	4
None	5	8	4	0

Note: Entries are percentages, totaled by column (e.g., 83 percent of Democratic activists surveyed in 2001 were over 50 years old).

Democrats are less Protestant and Catholic than they were, while more adherents to other religions and non-believers have become active, even taking into account the eight percent of Democrats who are “non-believers.” Democrats report less impact of religion on their daily and political lives than do Republicans. Republicans were more likely to report frequent church attendance, and significantly more of them reported that religion plays a significant role in guiding their daily lives, although a solid majority of Democrats reported this same impact. Given that nearly one-quarter of Democrats did not identify themselves as Protestants or Catholics (versus only 4 percent of Republicans), it is not surprising that “Born Again Christians” are much more plentiful in the GOP, constituting more than half of the total number of activists (versus just under a third of Democrats). However, it is in the nexus of politics and religion that the two parties see the sharpest split. While half of Republicans report feeling “close” to the Christian Right, four-fifths of Democrats report that they are “far” from this political force.

Democrats have a slightly larger number of African-American activists than they did ten years earlier, and have seen a significant infusion of Hispanics. Black representation among Democrats was approaching equivalence with the state’s overall population breakdown, if not with the level of African-American support for Democratic candidates (which may constitute as much as 40 percent of the statewide Democratic vote). Republicans on the other hand are even less diverse, including even fewer non-Whites than they did ten years earlier.

Partisanship, Ideology, and Issues

Compared to their counterparts a decade earlier, the activists of 2001 had even stronger attachment to their own party and were less likely to distinguish between the state and national levels of the parties. Ideological diversity has been largely eliminated from the Republican Party and continues to narrow among Democrats. All but a handful of GOP activists called themselves conservative, with the majority (58 percent) identifying as “very conservative.” This marks an enormous shift to the right over the decade, since in 1991 only a quarter of the Republicans selected the most extreme ideological category and one in five declined to identify as conservatives. Democrats as a group continued to move to the left (31 percent claiming to be very liberal and 35 percent somewhat liberal), but one-third of their activists were moderate (26 percent) or conservative (8 percent), down from one-half of the party ten years earlier.

Though one would assume that party activists would uniformly identify with the party in which they are active, in southern parties there has been some tendency to distinguish between state and national components of the

party organization. In 1991, about 15 percent of Republicans and nearly a quarter of Democrats professed to have less than strong affiliation with their own party at either the state or national level. In 2001, these numbers had declined by half in each party, and in neither party did any significant difference appear in attachment to state versus national organization.

Further evidence of the internal consistency of party organizations is found in the self-reported votes of activists in the 1996 and 2000 Presidential election. Fully 96 percent of each party's activists supported their standard-bearer in 1996, and in 2000, Democrat Al Gore won 95 percent of Democrats, while George Bush took a nearly unanimous 99 percent of GOPers.

The increasing ideological and partisan consistency of the activists is also evident in their attitudes on various political issues. Activists in both the 1991 and 2001 surveys were asked a number of questions about public policy issues, and their responses show continuing polarization between the parties. In fact, on nine of ten questions posed at both times, the gap between Democrats and Republicans increased over the ten year period, with dramatic swings in many. The one exception was on an item where there was near universal agreement in both parties in both periods.

Republican opinion shifted dramatically on abortion and environmental spending, while Democratic positions changed more marginally. Table 3 shows the party activists' positions in each year and provides a calculation of the increased polarization over time.¹ In a number of cases, where majorities of both parties had been on the same side of an issue ten years ago, they were in opposition to each other in 2001. On a total of 14 policy statements considered by activists in 2001, majorities of Democrats and Republicans agreed on only three: (a) women should have an equal role with men in running business, industry and government; (b) blacks should not be given preferences in hiring and promotion; and (c) the government in Washington should not guarantee a job and good standard of living to every citizen.

Democrats and Republicans did show a bit more consensus when asked to evaluate the level of federal spending on several programs, indicating whether they favored increased, decreased or the current level of federal spending. Of the seven areas mentioned, majorities of partisans were never in direct opposition to each other, with one favoring increased spending and the other decreased spending. Rather, majorities of both parties favored maintaining current levels of spending on crime control, while on the other six programs, the parties split between the status quo and change. Republicans favored more spending on defense, and Democrats preferred the current level of spending. Democrats favored increases in environmental, education, Social Security and health care, while Republicans felt current funding was adequate. The GOP activists wanted welfare spending reduces, while Democrats felt the present level of spending was right.

Table 3. Increase in Issue Polarization among Virginia Party Activists, 1991 and 2001

Issue Agreement	1991		2001		Change in party difference 1991-2001
	Dem	Rep	Dem	Rep	
Abortion is a personal choice	85	55	92	23	39
Increase defense spending	16	42	26	85	23
Permit public school prayer	55	83	41	93	24
Increase environmental spending	90	58	74	10	32
Blacks preference hiring/promotion	31	3	42	0	14
Improve position of women	89	47	88	28	18
Fewer services/reduce spending	22	72	7	80	23
Improve position blacks/minorities	83	31	88	31	5
Insure job/good living standard	50	13	47	6	4

Note: Entries are percentages. The entries in the final column are calculated by subtracting the difference between party activists in 1991 from the difference between party activists in 2001. Positive scores indicate an increase in the difference between parties.

A couple of issues were asked only on the more recent survey, and party divisions were evident on the death penalty, protection of homosexuals from employment discrimination, private school vouchers, a flat tax on income, and gun control. Differences in agreement between the party activists on these issues ranged from a low of 48 percent to a high of 77 percent, suggesting that these more contemporary issues are important to the involvement of these activists.

Recruitment of Activists

Replenishment of the ranks of activists is a constant need of party organizations. Party workers leave the organization for a multitude of reasons, both personal and political. The intense interest in causes and candidates fades, other obligations take over the time of the activist, individuals move, divorce, marry or die. Each year parties must hope to recruit new committee members and hope that some of them will retain a long-term commitment to the party. As was true ten years earlier, the party activists of 2001 reported that they were largely self-recruited. Although some were encouraged to seek election to their local committees by public or party officials, most said that it was their own decision to become active in the party. Still, Republicans were more likely than Democrats to cite encouragement by others as a major consideration in their involvement.

Involvement in Campaigns

It is not surprising to find that in a decade of Republican successes, the activists of this party also reported much higher level of participation in election campaigns than did Democrats. At every level of election, more GOP committee members reported being very active than did Democrats. The gap at the local level was the smallest, and it was at this level that Democrats reported their highest activity level. Republicans were most active in state elections, but also performed strongly at the national level. Democratic activity declined from local to state to national contests.

This pattern is not surprising, given the Republican successes in races for governor throughout the decade. Democratic campaigns for governor in both 1993 and 1997 largely demoralized activists, as they saw their once-favored candidates run ineffective campaigns and lose decisively. In contrast, Democratic activists had equaled GOP performance in the previous survey, after winning three straight governor's races and holding the General Assembly. Democrats reported consistently low levels of activism in national contests, no doubt reflecting Virginia's reliability as a source of Republican electoral votes since 1968. Both parties have tended to ignore the Old Dominion in national elections, leaving activists with few materials

Table 4. Campaign Activity and Orientations of Virginia Party Activists, 1991 and 2001

Activity/Orientation	Democrats		Republicans	
	1991	2001	1991	2001
Very active in				
Local elections	66	58	66	63
State elections	60	52	61	81
National elections	39	43	55	72
Agree that				
Good party workers support candidates even when they disagree	68	51	58	63
Party unity is more important than divisive issues	43	42	38	45
Should not compromise values to win elections	75	NA	86	NA
Avoid controversial positions for the sake of party unity	53	44	49	42
Stay neutral in primary elections	37	29	34	33

Note: Entries are percentages. NA indicates that the question was not asked in that year.

to distribute or rallies to organize. Though Republicans report much higher level of national involvement than Democrats, their level is markedly lower than in state contests.

Organizational Strength of the Parties

Republican activists recognized that with their electoral success, their party had become much stronger between 1991 and 2001. In the previous decade, in which Democrats had rejuvenated their party, both sides had cause to view their organizations as stronger and more effective. In the most recent decade, Republicans overwhelmingly acknowledged their party's

**Table 5. Evaluation of Party Strength
by Virginia Party Activists, 1991 and 2001**

Perception/Activity	Democrats		Republicans	
	1991	2001	1991	2001
Perceived change in party organization over past five years				
Significantly stronger	19	11	21	46
Somewhat stronger	28	32	33	32
Little change	26	24	26	13
Somewhat weaker	18	19	11	8
Significantly weaker	8	14	10	2
Perceive party as stronger in				
Campaign effectiveness	48	44	49	76
Fund raising ability	43	38	46	68
Recruiting candidates	36	29	43	68
Organizational skills	39	41	41	56
Use of the media	38	49	34	47
Use of opinion polls	26	27	25	21
Computer technology	57	78	58	84
Report frequent communication with following party leaders				
Other committee members	82	63	84	90
County chair	69	54	70	93
State party chair	8	6	6	23
State committee members	28	18	18	37
National committee members	9	6	5	12
Local government officials	81	67	70	81
State government officials	47	37	33	70
National government officials	15	13	24	34

Note: Entries are percentages.

increased strength. What may have been more surprising was that in the face of defeats at every level, a plurality of Democrats felt their own party had improved as an organization. It's possible that Democrats saw the failures of their party in the 1990s as being the fault of candidates rather than organization, or perhaps because they were feeling the first flush of energy from what would become a successful gubernatorial campaign later that year, but whatever the cause, it is a bit surprising to see a net positive evaluation by the Democrats.

Activists of both parties were able to distinguish functions in which they were becoming stronger from areas where they still seemed to be less effective. Republicans reported significant improvement in party strength in campaign effectiveness, fund-raising, candidate recruitment, organizational skills and use of computer technology. They were less sanguine about their use of the media and public opinion polls. Though Democratic evaluations of improvement were not nearly as positive, they were more positive than they had been in 1991 in several areas, especially computer technology and use of the media.

Finally, party members differed significantly in their reports of communication with party leaders. Republicans reported higher levels of communication with party leaders at all levels compared to their counterparts in 1991. Democrats, on the other hand were less likely to report frequent communication with any level of party leadership than the early survey had shown. This is particularly surprising given their earlier positive evaluation of the party's use of computer technology, an ideal way to encourage additional communication.

Factionalism and its Sources

Given the increasing ideological cohesiveness of the parties and their stronger identification with state and national party organizations, we would expect to see lower levels of division within the state parties. It would certainly seem that some of the leading sources for division within party ranks would have been eliminated as the parties had reached more internal consistency and polarization between the parties increased. In fact, far fewer partisans recognized factionalism as a problem within their party. Identical percentages (61 percent) in each party said there was little or no factionalism within their organization, reversing the concerns of the earlier survey. In 1991, the parties were still in transition, and factions organized around ideology and personalities, regions and even newcomers versus old-timers. Though partisans could still identify stronger or weaker sources of factionalism, the fact that so few of them felt factionalism was a problem suggests that these divisions don't carry much threat to the parties at present.

**Table 6. Perceptions of Factionalism
by Virginia Party Activists, 1991 and 2001**

Perception	Democrats		Republicans	
	1991	2001	1991	2001
Amount of factionalism in political party				
Fairly high	11	5	19	6
Moderate	55	34	44	32
Low	26	59	30	52
None	7	2	8	9
If factionalism, the types				
Ideological	58	56	49	50
Personal followings	78	50	77	51
Geographical divisions	48	72	42	55
Over one or two issues	53	NA	59	NA
Old v. new residents	48	46	48	30

Note: Entries are percentages. NA indicates that the question was not asked in that year.

Summary and Conclusions

The opportunity to compare party activists in Virginia from one decade to the next provides an intriguing snapshot of a maturing political system. Far earlier than other southern states, Virginia made the transition to two-party competition. As the parties went through contrasting periods of electoral politics, they confronted the need to adapt to their changing environment. A once dominant party which spanned the ideological spectrum found itself divided over candidates and policies, and facing an increasingly aggressive challenge from a party reshaping itself as the conservative voice in state politics. As elected officials and candidates reoriented themselves to their new party bases or migrated to the former opposition, the emergence of more ideologically consistent parties commenced.

Over the years, the parties saw their fates rise and fall as they attempted to capture the moderate to conservative Virginia electorate. Each side recognized that they would have to build or rebuild organizations which had not competed on a statewide basis before, and each party could claim periods of success. Ultimately, however, they seem to have recognized the need to engage in ongoing party building in an era when it is difficult to find young adherents willing to devote time, energy and money to enterprises which they often feel they can effectively influence from outside the party structure.

The two surveys reported here show that parties may not have figured out how to attract and retain a group of activists to fuel their ongoing needs, but they have been able to remain a force in state politics which increasingly is offering voters a clear choice between philosophies of government and political ideologies. And in seeing the relationship between active and effective organization and electoral success, the parties have been given a powerful incentive to attempt to reinvigorate their grass roots in order to remain competitive.

NOTES

¹Only items that were asked in both 1991 and 2001 are included in Table 3.

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