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# Realignment, Region and Race: Presidential Leadership and Social Identity

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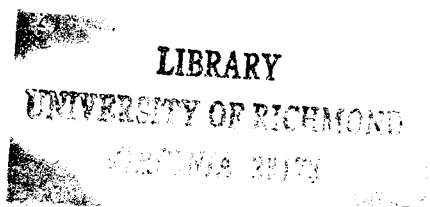
# REALIGNMENT, REGION, AND RACE

Presidential Leadership and  
Social Identity

BY

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# CHAPTER 1

## THE REALIGNMENT OF AMERICAN POLITICS

In 1860, the six-year-old Republican Party won its first presidential election. Abraham Lincoln of Illinois, in many ways a compromise candidate, easily prevailed over a divided opposition — a split Democratic Party and a third “Constitutional Union” party. Lincoln, the Republican, decisively won all of the 18 “free states” but equally dramatically lost all of the 15 slave states. One hundred and forty years later, in 2000, the pattern was very different. In a close election, Republican George W. Bush lost all but three of the 1860 free states to Democrat Al Gore, yet won all but two of the 15 former slave states. Many Northern states that had been Republican since the party’s founding had switched to the Democrats. The region that had been the Democrat’s Solid South for a century after the Civil War had become overwhelmingly red, or Republican. In a similar pattern eight years later, Barack Obama, the Democratic candidate, won all of the 1860 free states, but lost 10 of the former slave states to the Republican candidate, John McCain. What happened? Had the political proclivities of North and South

reversed themselves, or had the parties changed positions on issues that divided the regions?<sup>1</sup>

This book tells the story of how and why the North and South switched political parties. It also outlines how the alignments of the Farm, Mountain, and Southwest states that came into the Union after the start of the Civil War have evolved. Initially, however, our focus is on the 33 states that cast ballots in 1860, the election that precipitated secession and civil war. How do we understand the remarkable transformation of party alignment in these two large sections of the American political landscape? The short answer, I contend, is racial dynamics. Furthermore, these racial dynamics are perpetuated largely by social identity concerns; that is, people's need to have their political leaders validate themselves and the groups by which they define themselves. For many years, white social identity in the South, but not the North, was based on beliefs in white privilege, superiority, and supremacy. Challenges or alternatives to a Southern social identity based on white superiority were fiercely resisted.

Regional differences on race and other issues are tied to enduring human motives, which rise and fall in importance according to a range of economic, international, and social conditions. Chief among these motives are needs for safety, prosperity, and self-validation. As suggested above, the need for a positive sense of self-esteem based in large part on a positive social or group identity has had an overriding influence in many presidential elections since our nation's founding. Parties and politicians that have offered people a positive sense of identity by defining them as a distinct group among others in the population and endorsing the validity of their customs, needs, anxieties, and aspirations have won their votes. In many instances, parties or politicians have offered either white supremacy or white privilege tied to white

aspirations as an element of a positive social identity. We will discuss several traditions within social psychology that have explored the importance of social identity and the way leaders shape and validate it in order to influence followers and potential followers. For the moment, highly relevant is Howard Gardner's proposition that leaders best influence their fellow human beings by the stories they relate, and that the most powerful such stories are about a group's identity: where it has come from, where it is going, what "is to be feared, struggled against, and dreamed about" (Gardner, 1995).