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# DOUGLAS WILDER AND THE CONTINUING SIGNIFICANCE OF RACE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE 1989 GUBERNATORIAL ELECTION

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In 1989 Virginia elected an African-American to serve as its chief executive officer. Until Douglas Wilder, no African-American had ever been elected governor of any state. In 1872, the African-American lieutenant-governor of Louisiana, P.B.S. Pinchback<sup>1</sup>, was elevated to the post of acting governor for 43 days. The operative word here is elevated. Success for African-American candidates running for high profile<sup>2</sup> statewide office has been rare. With the exception of Wilder, only Edward Brooke and Carol Mosely Braun have been able to win high profile statewide office; but even when they succeeded, the results did not reveal extensive white support for these candidates.

Piliawsky notes that black<sup>3</sup> electoral success has been limited, in large part, by the unwillingness of whites to vote for African-Americans when running against whites.<sup>4</sup> This assessment underestimates the amount of white resistance to African-American candidates. Racial prejudice has been the major barrier to high profile African-American statewide success. A study by Linda Williams found the higher the political office, the more likely it is that whites would not vote for an African-American candidate.<sup>5</sup> When whites were asked

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whether they would support a qualified African-American for city council, 2.5% reported they would not; 5.2% reported they would not support an African-American for mayor; 5.6% reported they would not support an African-American for U.S. senator; and 7.5% reported they would not support an African-American for governor. Topping governor was vice president (10.5%) and president (20%).

The notion that voters will support the candidate with whom they share skin color is well known.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, some voters turn to race as a simple, readily available cue if they find the competitor's issue positions equally attractive or equally obnoxious.<sup>7</sup> Such an argument does not, however counter the fact that voting becomes a product of racism if, even before voters become attentive or decide not to become attentive to candidates' policy positions, they have decided a priori to vote for one candidate simply on the basis of race, against another for the same reason.

### **Previous Research**

A small body of literature exists examining the impact of race in statewide elections where African-American candidates face white candidates.<sup>8</sup>

Sonenshein offers a descriptive study in which he compares the statewide candidacies of Edward Brooke, Thomas Bradley and Douglas Wilder.<sup>9</sup> Sonenshein argues that race can be overcome if black candidates: 1) run in states where whites have liberal attitudes toward race; 2) develop a flexible campaign strategy that is amenable to whites; and 3) work within the party structure. Citrin, Green and Sears studied preelection surveys of registered white voters and voting preference in California. The authors found race was not critical in Bradley's gubernatorial defeat. White conservatives tended to oppose all Democratic candidates. These voters were no more likely to vote against Bradley than against Democratic U.S. senate candidate Edmund G. Brown, Jr.

In contrast, other studies found race to be the cause of Bradley's 1982 gubernatorial defeat. Pettigrew and Alston compared the Bradley vote to a 1972 vote on a state proposition that opposed busing public school students to achieve racial desegregation.<sup>10</sup> The counties that

avored the anti-busing referendum 10 years earlier tended to vote against Bradley for governor. Henry, using regression, analyzed the relationship between Democratic registration and the vote for the major Democratic candidates on a county-by-county level.<sup>11</sup> He found major defection on the part of white Democrats.

Luebke's study of the North Carolina lieutenant governor's contest blames the loss that Howard Lee<sup>12</sup> suffered on race. Because of race, Lee was unable to attract a varied segment of the electorate. Luebke argues that African-Americans who aspire to statewide office would do well to pursue an interracial populist electoral strategy where blacks, working-class whites, and white middle-class liberals make up a coalition.<sup>13</sup>

Becker and Heaton deal with race as an aside in their classic study of Edward Brooke.<sup>14</sup> Studying preelection public opinion polls during the campaign for U.S. senate in Massachusetts, they found that as election day grew closer, support for Brooke among whites dropped substantially among voters categorized as most prejudiced; significantly among those labelled less prejudiced and moderately among least prejudiced whites. Without the benefit of election results, one cannot determine the exact amount of support Brooke received from white voters. One could argue that Becker and Heaton's findings were understated.

Little scholarly attention has been devoted to the dynamics of the campaign per se. Also very little is known about the impact that race has in a statewide election where the African-American candidate won. No scholarly attention has been devoted solely to this issue. There has been research devoted to mayoral contests.<sup>15</sup> However, high profile statewide office is distinct from the mayoral office with respect to power and constituency. Hence the significance of high profile statewide office should be evident. The election of Lawrence Douglas Wilder as governor of Virginia makes for a good study. Not only did the contest involve an African-American candidate pitted against a white candidate, but the African-American candidate won with 40% of the white vote, causing some political pundits to render the race issue inconsequential.<sup>16</sup> This study looks at the political dynamics of the campaign election as well as survey data and aggregate voting data to estimate the impact of race.



## The Candidates

Wilder, a Democrat, boasted impressive credentials. A decorated veteran and a lawyer by profession, he was elected to the Virginia State Senate in 1969, where he served for 16 years. During his tenure as state senator, Wilder advanced to chairman of the powerful Privileges and Elections Committee which oversees state appointments and voting legislation.<sup>17</sup> He also chaired the Democratic Steering Committee as well as the Senate Transportation Committee.<sup>18</sup> And in 1985 Wilder was elected lieutenant-governor.

Wilder's opponent, Marshall Coleman, also a lawyer, was elected to the Virginia House of Delegates in 1973, where he served for two years. From there he served two years as a state senator. In 1978, he was elected attorney general of Virginia where he served until 1982. Coleman though had a rocky political career. He suffered two harsh defeats; once while running for governor (1981), the other while seeking the nomination for lieutenant governor in 1985. Having alienated Harry Byrd loyalists in the Republican party for seeking black support, Coleman was denied a chance to run on his party ticket as lieutenant governor. In 1989 he did not even have a strong following within his own party. In a sense, he had risen from the political dead.

Race reverberates in southern politics like no other issue, past or present. Almost a half century ago, Key wrote that "in its grand outlines the politics of the South revolves around the position of the Negro."<sup>19</sup> He revealed that southern politics was traditionally structured to maintain white supremacy, and that most of its idiosyncracies were direct or indirect consequences of that fact. Although Key found race a major factor in southern politics, he notes that in Virginia, race is often a covert issue. Rabble rousing and Negro-baiting on the part of political aspirants have not been acceptable etiquette in the Old Dominion. This particular finding seemed to remain true in 1989. Wilder's opponent, Marshall Coleman, upheld the Virginia tradition by not calling attention to Wilder's race.

Since Wilder's triumph, politicians and scholars alike have argued with fervor that race is no longer a factor in electoral politics. State Senator Robert C. Scott, (D-Newport News) argued, that "race turned out not to be a factor in the contest."<sup>20</sup> Wilder's victory provides the

foundation for his argument. "It's not an issue," said Scott when asked how race would affect the election. "It's incredible that anybody is even concerned about it being a factor... I think people are insulted by the discussion."<sup>21</sup> "We have been judging candidates by their qualifications, not by their race, in Virginia for years."<sup>22</sup> Scott's words reek of naivete. The irony is, Scott is African-American.

The majority of Virginia voters agreed. The CBS News/New York Times exit poll asked respondents, "Was Douglas Wilder's being black a major reason why you voted as you did for governor?" Of the respondents 78% said race was not a reason at all, 12% answered a "minor" reason and just 8% admitted it was a "major" reason.<sup>23</sup>

There are at least two reasons to expect that race would be a factor in the election. First, Wilder's bid marked the first time a black had ever run for governor in Virginia. The very idea that Wilder could become the first African-American governor in Virginia, the cradle of the Confederacy, which promoted "massive resistance" to court-ordered school desegregation, was certain to attract enormous media attention, making a racial component unequivocal.<sup>24</sup> Pettigrew notes that the first candidacy of an African-American increases concern among whites regarding the balance of power between the races.<sup>25</sup> This finding is exemplified in a comment made by Donald Shinault, a Virginia voter, who said "he was worried that Lieutenant Governor Douglas Wilder would fill some 4,000 gubernatorial appointments with blacks, especially at the top."<sup>26</sup> Second, the political climate in Virginia at the time was largely uncondusive to the political demands of African-Americans. During Labor Day weekend, African-American college students clashed with national guardsmen at Virginia Beach where they converged for a weekend retreat known as Greekfest.<sup>27</sup> The nation was bombarded with television images of black youth vandalizing and pillaging businesses along the resort strip. The disturbance lasted two days and left an estimated \$1.4 million worth of damage in its wake.<sup>28</sup> One could make the argument that, as racial polarization increases, racial voting increases as well.

In this article I argue that in spite of Wilder's victory, his race proved to be a factor in two ways: One, race played a role in the way Wilder (cognizant of his skin color) conducted his campaign. And two, race influenced the way white votes were cast.

## **Research Design**

In an attempt to assess the impact of race in this election, several methods have been employed. First, an examination of Wilder's campaign strategy has been conducted. Since African-Americans do not constitute a majority of the population in any state, they lack the numerical strength to vote an African-American candidate into a statewide office. Hence, African-American candidates who run for statewide office have to employ a strategy that allows them to sustain support from the African-American community while at the same time not alienating white voters. Second, preelection polls and exit poll data are examined to see if: 1) support for Wilder diminished as election day approached and 2) there is any discrepancy regarding projected outcome and final outcome. Third, the author looks at a breakdown of age, education and income levels of the white electorate to see who voted for and against Wilder. Conventional wisdom says older white voters are less receptive to African-American office seekers than are young white voters. Fourth, the level of white support received by Wilder in 1989 is compared to the level of white support garnered by Wilder in 1985 when he was elected lieutenant governor. Fifth, Wilder's election returns are compared to those of his white Democratic running mate, Donald Beyer, a political neophyte. Given Wilder's incumbency, one would expect him to fare as well, if not better than, his running mate. Finally, a regression analysis using precinct level data is employed to determine polarized voting on the part of white voters.

The following analysis identifies the salient features that lend support to the aforementioned hypotheses.

## **Analysis of Campaign**

Wilder never called for a black take-over. Instead he tried to lessen the impact of race by employing a deracialized political strategy. This strategy attempts to defuse the divisive effects of race by avoiding references to ethnic or racially construed issues, while at the same time emphasizing those issues that appeal to a wide community, thus



mobilizing a large portion of the electorate.<sup>29</sup> This strategy also enhances the prospects for a bi-racial coalition. As was said earlier, since African-Americans do not constitute a majority in any state, they lack the numerical strength to vote a black candidate into office. Black, et al. note that in statewide elections, black potential influence usually ranges from sharing in a victory to no influence at all.<sup>30</sup> A successful Democratic bi-racial coalition requires that blacks be united and whites sufficiently divided in their candidate preferences.<sup>31</sup> In the past, African-American office seekers have sought to identify with the poor, mostly with the African-American poor espousing black empowerment as a campaign theme.<sup>32</sup> This strategy mobilized the African-American community but alienated the white electorate. Whites are uncomfortable with the "black power" confrontational style of African-American office seekers. The deracialized political strategy as defined by McCormick and Jones entails three features; style, issues, and mobilization tactics. The author might add to this list the candidate's negotiation of the race issue per se.

Wilder's first order of business was to disavow himself from his early days as a state senator when he was an advocate of black causes and his appearance personified black militancy. In those days, Wilder frequented the senate chambers in an Afro and black leather jacket.<sup>33</sup> In his maiden speech, an occasion usually marked by humility and deference to senior members, Wilder denounced the legislature for its racist policies. In his first legislative proposal, he demanded that the state's anthem ("Carry me back to Old Virginny") be repealed because it celebrates slavery as an institution supposedly beloved by master and slave alike.<sup>34</sup> And he introduced resolutions calling for voting rights and statehood for the District of Columbia.

As late as 1984, Wilder pushed for a holiday honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Wilder was, for many of his white colleagues, the epitome of the angry young black.<sup>35</sup> Yet during the gubernatorial campaign Wilder said, with almost perverse pride, "I have never been an activist of any sort."<sup>36</sup> Throughout the campaign, Wilder projected an affable and ingratiating image. Where Jesse Jackson might have bristled, Wilder postured himself as a "son of Virginia" cozying up to Confederate flags, content to embrace, not ridicule, the symbols of his home state.



## *Judson L. Jeffries*

Wilder avoided racially inflammatory issues and refused to be associated with programs that call for preferential treatment as compensation for past discrimination. A study by Robert Holsworth found that in the Richmond area, almost 70% of whites felt that minorities and women should not be granted special preferences in hiring and promotion in order to compensate for past discrimination.<sup>37</sup> The one time that affirmative action was raised, Wilder sidestepped the issue and instead averred that he believed economic growth was the best method for lifting those who had yet to be reached by the prosperity of the 1980s. In addition, when police in Virginia Beach beat African-American college students who had converged there for the holiday, Wilder issued a strong "law and order" statement so not to seem sympathetic or lenient. He did not speak about the rising rate of infant mortality and he said virtually nothing about the increasing dropout rates among high school students in urban areas. Wilder also avoided any mention of the Supreme Court decision in Richmond v. Croson (1989).<sup>38</sup>

Wilder focused on issues that transcend race. He took a pro-choice stance on abortion, adroitly managing to identify himself with a Virginia tradition, featuring Thomas Jefferson in his abortion television spots. Wilder vowed not to raise taxes. He advocated expansion of an existing state program to subsidize day care for low and moderate income parents. He made a commitment to tough environmental laws. And he took a firm stance on crime, promising to support capital punishment. African-American statewide candidates cannot afford to be vulnerable on crime, an issue deeply intertwined with racial feelings.

On the question of race, African-American candidates who seek statewide office have to maneuver gingerly. If an African-American candidate refuses to address the race question, he runs the risk of turning off his primary support base, the African-American community. If the African-American community perceives the African-American candidate as someone who has disowned his race, the African-American community might withhold support. However, if the African-American candidate injects the race question into the campaign, he risks driving away white voters.

Wilder downplayed the race issue throughout the campaign. He

did not say over and over again, "Elect me to make history." Wilder insisted time and again that race was not a campaign issue, that voters should be concerned only with his government experience and his platform. There were times during the campaign when Wilder confronted the race question with humor and wit. "Can it really be taking place here in Virginia?" he slyly asked in mock wonder in an address in Petersburg, as reported in The Washington Post. "Are they really going to do that there?" "What poison have they poured in the water down there?"<sup>39</sup> This pawky humor defused the potential explosiveness of the situation and assuaged old-time fears that a lot of southern whites have about African-American politicians. Wilder made his blackness and ground-breaking achievements seem almost boring. But at no time during the campaign did Wilder disown his racial identity.

Finally, African-American candidates cannot afford to run highly publicized minority mobilization campaigns for fear of creating a white backlash. Hence, Wilder did not pound the pavement soliciting the African-American vote for all of Virginia to see. Instead, he made (often closed to the press) more than 65 visits to black churches during the final two months of the campaign.<sup>40</sup> The black church provided an arena to address the African-American community while affording Wilder low visibility. Although Wilder did not court the African-American community aggressively, African-American turnout exceeded white turnout by a margin of 76.6% to 65%. This was a far greater African-American participation rate than those of the last three gubernatorial contests. This finding is not surprising for three reasons. First, the presence of an African-American candidate has usually stimulated African-American voter participation.<sup>41</sup> Support for this is illustrated when one compares the African-American turnout rate of the 1989 gubernatorial election with the African-American turnout rate of the 1988 presidential election year. African-American turnout was relatively low in 1988 with just 64% of those registered casting a ballot.<sup>42</sup> Clearly, African-American voters were not stimulated by the candidacies of Micháel Dukakis and Senator Charles Robb. Second, African-American progress as measured by the campaign rhetoric of previous Virginia governors' administrations has been more symbolic than substantive. Hence, African-American voters have realized that the

only real hope for African-Americans ever receiving the prosperity that has long been denied them is to elect African-American candidates for statewide and national office. And third, given the historical significance of this election, it is hardly surprising that African-American voters answered the call in droves.

Wilder also asked the Rev. Jesse Jackson, the most prominent African-American in national politics, to stay out of his campaign for governor. Wilder clearly did not want to risk being drawn into the morass of national black politics despite arguments by political pundits that Jackson's performance in the Virginia Democratic primary on Super Tuesday paved the way for Wilder's election. "I think Jesse is an activist", Wilder told the Associated Press.<sup>43</sup> Jackson still frightens many white voters who envision him as a civil rights demagogue. Hence, Wilder did not solicit Jackson's expertise for fear that Jackson would damage his chances for election. Wilder, however, was not averse to the campaign assistance of conservative white leaders. He did not reject the assistance of former Representative Watkins M. Abbitt. "I simply think Mr. Wilder will make a better governor than Mr. Coleman," said Abbitt, who is a conservative Democrat. "He'll carry on the tradition of the last two governors."<sup>44</sup> Wilder also did not reject the support provided him by House Speaker A.L. Philpott, the don of segregationist politics. These conservative Democrats had kept African-Americans disenfranchised, using the state's poll tax to discourage them from voting, and concocting a defiant state "massive resistance" scheme that forced the closing of public schools under federal court desegregation orders. When asked about his association with Philpott, an exasperated Wilder smiled: "A.L. and I are good friends from way back."<sup>45</sup>

In spite of Wilder's efforts to eliminate race from the campaign, there is ample evidence that suggests race still influenced the election.

### **Analysis of Election Returns**

Election broadcasters and political analysts have in recent years become quite adept at pinpointing election outcomes. Preelection, public opinion and exit polls all pointed to a strong Wilder victory. A Washington Post survey of 1,107 likely voters found Wilder leading



Coleman 52% to 37% a week before the election.<sup>46</sup> On election night, the Mason-Dixon exit poll anointed Wilder with a 10%-point triumph, 55% to 45%.<sup>47</sup> However, the actual vote was a virtual "photo-finish." The final election count revealed that Wilder had won by the slimmest margin in the history of Virginia gubernatorial elections, 50.1% to 49.8%.<sup>48</sup> Why were the polls wrong? This narrow margin of victory, compared to the poll results, raises questions about hidden racism among voters. The author suggests several possibilities. One, a segment of the white electorate was reluctant to tell poll-takers that they were not voting for an African-American candidate, particularly if the interview was conducted face-to-face rather than through a self-administered questionnaire. In the case of the Mason-Dixon Opinion Research exit poll, the interviews were conducted face-to-face. This raises the notion of "social desirability."<sup>49</sup> Some whites who voted against Wilder because of his race may have felt some social pressure to say that they indeed voted for him. Two, when whites encountered an African-American poll-taker, they again lied and said they voted for Wilder when they voted for Coleman. White respondents are more likely to give liberal or pro-black responses when the interviewer is African-American.<sup>50</sup> Hatchett and Schuman note, in instances like this, the white respondent "accommodates," in order to get through the racial interaction with minimal tension. Few whites are secure enough in themselves to voice their prejudice out loud to someone of the opposite race.<sup>51</sup> Three, antiblack voters anxious to conceal racist feelings might have said they were undecided rather than make the hypocritical statement that they would vote for the African-American candidate. Fourth, a segment of the white electorate were genuinely undecided going into the voting booth. However, notes, political scientist Larry Sabato, white voters who are still undecided going into the booth are likely to vote for the white candidate.<sup>52</sup> Finally, some white voters honestly intended or believed they were going to vote for Wilder, but once inside the booth could not bring themselves to cast their ballot for an African-American candidate.

Wilder suffered substantial white defection. According to the CBS News/New York Times exit poll, one-quarter (23%) of Coleman voters supported the Democratic candidate for lieutenant governor, and 29% supported the Democratic candidate for attorney general. In all,

Wilder failed to carry 27<sup>53</sup> cities and counties that he won in 1985 when he was elected lieutenant governor. Nearly all of these cities and counties are in southwest Virginia, a region where Democratic loyalties have traditionally been strong. The views of working class defectors from the Democratic Party in the 1988 presidential election were studied by Stanley Greenberg who found that these white defectors expressed a profound distaste for African-Americans. "African-Americans constitute the explanation for their [white defector's] vulnerability and for almost everything that has gone wrong in their lives; not being African-American is what constitutes being middle class; not living with African-Americans is what makes a neighborhood a decent place to live..."<sup>54</sup> The defection suffered by Wilder also strengthens Williams' finding that the higher the political office, the less whites are willing to vote for an African-American candidate.

Race is also reflected in the age, education and income breakdown of the percentage of white votes cast against Wilder. Wilder captured 57% of the voters aged 18 to 29 compared to only 37% of the voters 60 years and older. Terry won 57% of those 60 years and older. Beyer won 48% of those 60 years and older.<sup>55</sup> It is reasonable to assume that the majority of these 60 year old and older voters were white, being that the life span of blacks is shorter than that of whites. A disproportionate number of 60 year olds and older are white. And 60 year old and older southern whites (the generation of segregation) are less hospitable to African-Americans than are younger southern whites.<sup>56</sup> A Washington Post survey lends support to the aforementioned finding. A total of 1,249 randomly selected whites were interviewed from September 28 to October 3, 1989 regarding their perceptions about blacks. A few of the questions that were asked were:

Do you think that blacks lag behind whites economically because most blacks don't have the motivation or will power to pull themselves out of poverty?

Do you think blacks are generally worse off economically than whites because most blacks have less inborn ability to learn?

Of the 60 year old and older white respondents, 52% of them indicated negative views of African-Americans compared to 21% of those 18 to 30 year old whites.<sup>57</sup>

Wilder also received the lowest support among those whites with the least amount of education. Only 5% of the white voters who did not graduate from high school voted for Wilder.<sup>58</sup> This data coincides with the Washington Post survey that found that 55% of those whites who didn't graduate from high school expressed negative views of African-Americans, compared to 34% of those who graduated from high school and 23% of those who graduated from college. Wilder also received the lowest support among those who earned under \$12,000 annually. Of these voters, only 7% voted for him. The poll revealed that 47% of whites earning less than \$12,000 annually expressed negative views about African-Americans.<sup>59</sup> Whites with less than a high school education and low income have been known to be more hostile to African-American office seekers than whites with higher levels of education and income.<sup>60</sup>

A fifth indication that suggests race was a factor is reflected when comparing Wilder's vote against Donald Beyer's (lieutenant governor) vote total. Beyer topped Wilder by more than 40,000 votes.<sup>61</sup> That Wilder ran so far behind Don Beyer suggests that the Virginia electorate is by no means color blind.

Beyer's significantly stronger showing relative to Wilder's is surprising. Both Wilder and Beyer emphasized a pro-choice stance on abortion. Both were for capital punishment. And both were well financed. The similarities end here, however. Beyer's political fitness pales in comparison to Wilder's. Beyer, a car dealer, and a "Johnny-come-lately," began the race virtually unknown outside his home area of northern Virginia.<sup>62</sup> He had never run for any political office before. His name recognition was so low that both Democratic Governor Baliles and Senator Chuck Robb forgot his name at one point during a television interview a week before the election. The most apparent difference between the two candidates was that Wilder is African-American and Beyer is white.

A regression analysis was employed to see if whites were voting along racial lines. The analyses use aggregated voting data. Thus one must be careful in drawing inferences from these data, since one



cannot directly measure the motivations of individual voters.<sup>63</sup> The units of analysis here are all the precincts<sup>64</sup> (N=55) in the city of Norfolk, Virginia. Precinct figures on the proportion of the vote for Wilder and Beyer, and the racial breakdown of registered voters, were obtained from the State Board of Elections. The city of Norfolk was chosen for two reasons: 1) it is the largest city in the state of Virginia and 2) it consists of both homogeneous and heterogeneous precincts. The racial composition of Norfolk is 39.1% African-American and 55% white. Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression was performed using the percentage of the voting age population (VAP) which is white as the independent variable and the percentage of voters who voted for Wilder and Beyer as the dependent variable. The intercept is the percentage of the vote received by Wilder and Beyer in precincts where there are no whites. Every precinct in the city (depicted by a black dot) is located within the figures.

The data shown in Table 1 and Figure 1 reveals that Beyer was heavily dependent on support from African-Americans. In precincts where there are no whites, Beyer received nearly 90% of the vote. Wilder, on the other hand, received only moderate support from whites. Historically, African-Americans have been more willing to vote for white candidates than whites are willing to vote for African-American candidates. Interestingly, the whiter the precincts get, support for Beyer descends. As the white voting age population goes up by 10%, the percentage of the vote for Beyer decreases by 4.3%.

A look at the vote for Wilder as shown in Table 1 and Figure 2 resembles that of Beyer's. For every 10% increase in the white voting age population, support for Wilder decreases by 5.7%.

One might argue that the precincts in Norfolk are dominated by Republican voters, and that Republicans are voting along party lines. One might also contend that Democratic voters are exercising their right to cross over and choose another candidate on the basis of a particular issue or policy position. Neither of these alternative explanations are sufficient. If this were the case, Republican and Democratic voters would have voted against Wilder and Beyer at the same rate. This was not the case, though. Wilder's percentage of the vote decreased at a steeper rate than Beyer's. This suggests that something other than party affiliation and issue preference caused

Table 1

Regression of White Voting Age Population on Vote for Wilder and Beyer

|                    | Wilder | Beyer |
|--------------------|--------|-------|
| Coefficient        | -5.7   | -4.3  |
| Standard Error     | 4.24   | 3.1   |
| Intercept          | 97.3   | 89.1  |
| Adjusted R-Squared | .78    | .78   |

Significant at .001

Figure 1

Beyer Vote in Norfolk Precincts

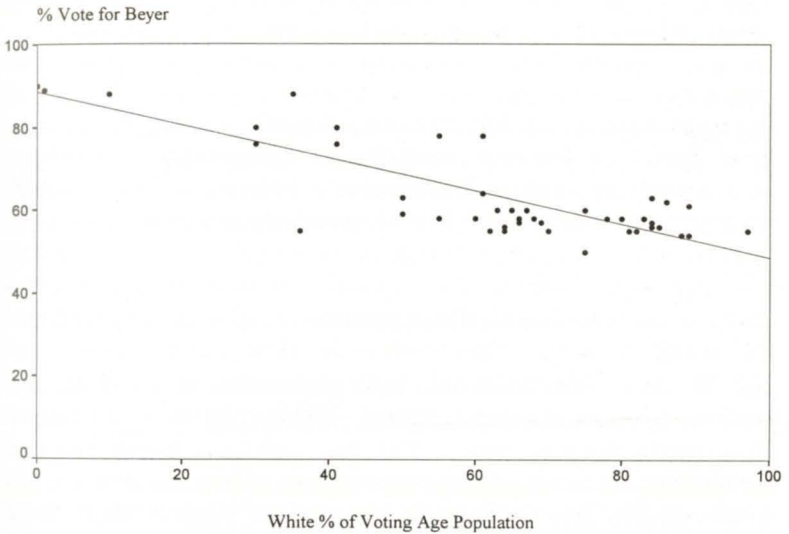
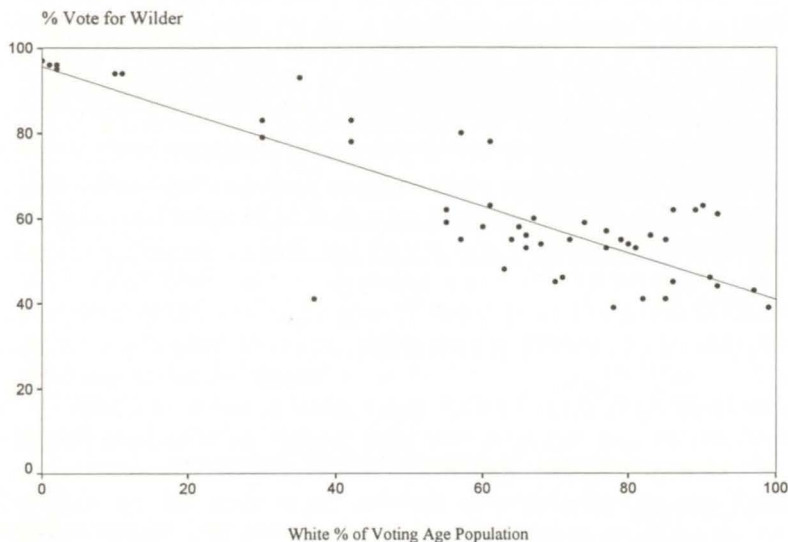


Figure 2

Wilder Vote in Norfolk Precincts



voters to behave as they did. The correlation between race and the vote for Wilder ( $r^2 = .78$ ) is very strong. Wilder was the popular incumbent lieutenant governor, Beyer was relatively unknown. So, why would Wilder's percentage of the vote decrease at a steeper rate?

### Conclusion

The wrong inferences have been drawn from Wilder's victory. Wilder's opponent, Marshall Coleman, supported the unpopular side of the critical abortion issue. And he made a serious political miscalculation when he decided to run a negative campaign against Wilder. Simply put, Coleman did not give the Virginia electorate a rationale for supporting him over a Democrat with 20 years in state government.



Wilder, on the other hand, had superior credentials as a long time public official. Wilder ran a highly credible campaign as a qualified, major-party candidate. He had proven his ability to win a statewide election when he was elected lieutenant-governor in 1985. He was positioned on the politically advantageous side of the key issues (i.e., pro-choice and pro-capital punishment). Wilder was also seeking to succeed two other popular Democratic governors. The Democrats had won the two previous gubernatorial elections in the state (Charles Robb in 1981 and Gerald Baliles in 1985), and Wilder received the support of both men, making Wilder the candidate to beat from the outset. Interestingly, Virginia governors traditionally pass the same agenda along, largely unchanged, to their successor.<sup>65</sup> Thus, white voters who had supported earlier Democratic candidates had few convenient "excuses" for withholding support from Wilder. In sum, Wilder was a highly qualified upper-middle class candidate with a quiet and conciliating style, the kind of qualifications and style most acceptable to white voters. So why did Wilder barely escape defeat? The clearest explanation is that there was a hard core of white voters who would not vote for an African-American candidate.

Since Wilder's victory there has been considerable activity at the statewide level in the South by black candidates. Most notably, both Harvey Gantt and Andrew Young lost their bids for U.S. senator and governor, respectively. Thus, the path to statewide success remains, for the most part, uncharted. If whites are unwilling to fully support qualified black candidates for statewide office, then what chance does a black presidential candidate have? The South's influence in presidential elections is well documented.<sup>66</sup> It would be nice to believe that American politics has reached a point where race is no longer such a compelling factor. To be sure, much has changed in the area of race relations since Key's study of southern politics, but to dismiss the significance of race in contemporary American politics, particularly southern politics, is to camouflage reality.

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Endnotes

1. P.B.S. Pinchback, a Republican, held the office while the elected governor, Henry Clay Warmoth, underwent an impeachment trial.
2. High profile office is defined by the author as the offices of governor and U.S. senator.
3. The words Black and African-American are used interchangeably depending upon context and sound.
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The city of Norfolk consists of both homogeneous and heterogeneous jurisdictions. Precinct data is also more desirable than city and county level data because it is the smaller unit. The results from the city and county level analysis followed virtually the same pattern as the precinct analysis.

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