

# Journal of Political Science

---

Volume 11  
Number 1 (*Fall*)

Article 4

---

November 1983

## Partisan Realignment and Decomposition: The Virginia Case

Kay Monaghan Knickrehm

B. Douglas Skelley

Devin C. Bent

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops>



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Knickrehm, Kay Monaghan; Skelley, B. Douglas; and Bent, Devin C. (1983) "Partisan Realignment and Decomposition: The Virginia Case," *Journal of Political Science*: Vol. 11 : No. 1 , Article 4.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops/vol11/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Politics at CCU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Political Science by an authorized editor of CCU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [commons@coastal.edu](mailto:commons@coastal.edu).

## Partisan Realignment and Decomposition: The Virginia Case\*

KAY M. KNICKREHM

B. DOUGLAS SKELLEY

DEVIN C. BENT

*James Madison University*

*\*An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1982 Citadel Symposium on Southern Politics, The Citadel, Charleston, South Carolina.*

Few observers would deny that electoral behavior in the United States is undergoing significant changes. There is substantial disagreement, however, concerning the nature and meaning of these changes both nationally and in the South. The New Deal coalition appears to be breaking up, and the demise of the solidly Democratic South has been widely recognized in both political and academic circles.<sup>1</sup> For two decades partisanship has declined as a predictor of voting behavior, while the proportion of independents has increased.<sup>2</sup> While some observers see the present changes as evidence of an emerging Republican majority, others portray recent changes as indicative of decomposition, a weakening of the two-party system.<sup>3</sup> Ladd asserts, moreover, that partisan detachment is a continuing and decisive factor in American elections.<sup>4</sup> Yet Campbell concludes that "independents will eventually be absorbed back into the two-party system, in the process bringing about a greater balancing of the strengths of the Democrats and the Republicans in the South."<sup>5</sup>

State-level party behavior reflects national trends as well as the historical, legal, and organizational features of each state. National parties can be characterized as confederations of independent state party organizations which may ignore both national leadership and national conventions to go their own way. State-level electoral behavior is distinguished from that at the national level by lower voter interest, poorer candidate recognition, lower voter turn-out, and in the South, lower levels of party competition. These state-level differences complicate attempts to make generalizations about the phenomena of partisan realignment and decomposition. The South presents an additional complexity because the Democratic party continues to dominate state offices, especially the legislatures, despite two-party competition in national elections. Realignment or dealignment, nevertheless, will ultimately affect state politics, and the study of state-level partisanship is essential if these political behaviors are to be fully understood.

Few studies of changing southern partisanship have focused on state offices and state-level realignment or decomposition per se. This paper examines the extent of decomposition and realignment in Virginia from 1961 through 1981 by examining voting data from its 139 counties and independent cities. During this period the Democratic party lost its solid grip on Virginia politics and an effective, well-organized Republican party emerged.

Since 1952 the Republicans have carried the state for all but one presidential candidate while steadily increasing their claim to seats in Congress and the Virginia General Assembly. In 1969 they elected their first governor in this century. Despite the loss of the governor's office after three successive victories to Democrat Chuck Robb in 1981, the Republicans now claim 30 percent of the membership of the Virginia House of Delegates and 23 percent of the membership of the Virginia Senate.<sup>6</sup>

Thus the processes of change are well advanced in Virginia: the Republicans have successfully competed on the state-wide level and continue to make gains in the legislature. Virginia appears to be an excellent choice, and perhaps the best choice, to examine the breakup of the solidly Democratic South. To this end two alternative sets of hypotheses are advanced and examined by this study.

I. New Alignment Hypotheses:

- a. A realignment has occurred in Virginia politics and a new alignment has emerged.
- b. Decomposition, a phase in the realignment process, has decreased with the emergence of the new alignment.

II. Dealignment Hypotheses:

- a. Old voting patterns have broken down, but no new alignment has emerged.
- b. Decomposition has continued to increase.

### Methodology and Data

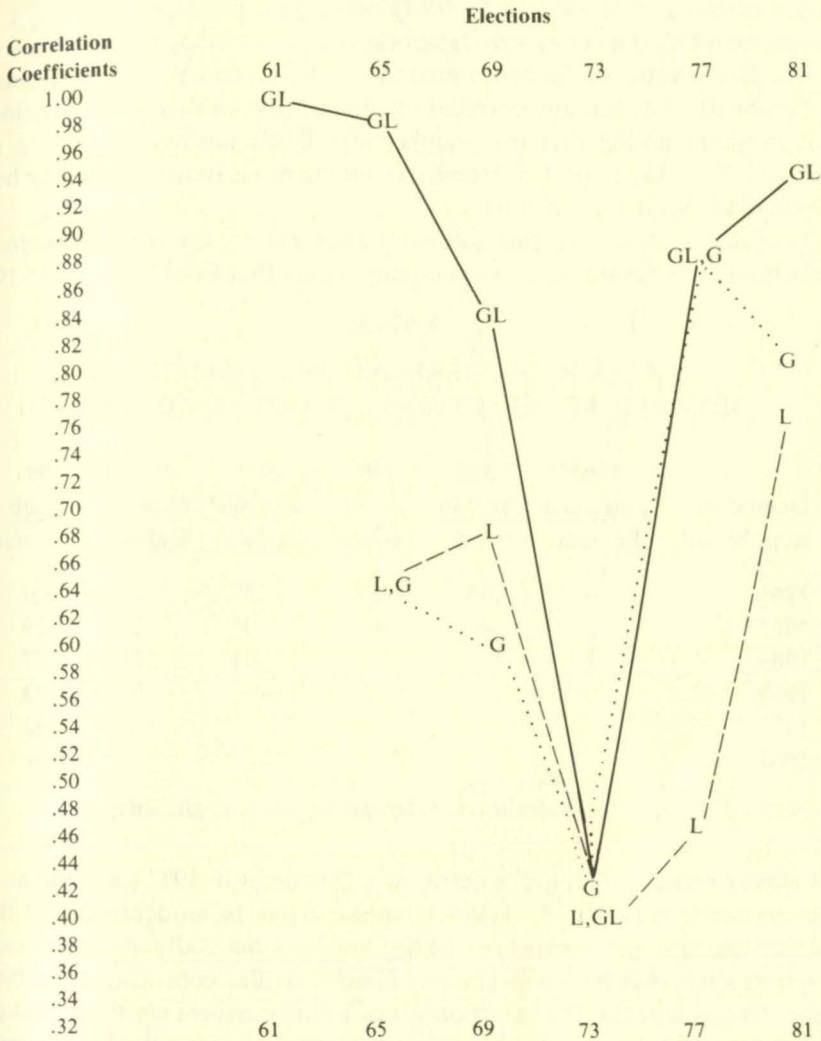
The technique of autocorrelation is used here to examine the extent of realignment.<sup>7</sup> This method has weaknesses in that a major realignment which occurred with some uniformity across Virginia's counties and independent cities would appear as a continuation of existing patterns.<sup>8</sup> Such a realignment is unlikely given the diversity of Virginia's counties and cities, and this possibility could be detected in the inter-election comparison of state-wide totals. An advantage of this method, moreover, is that aggregate data tap changes in partisan behavior, changes that may precede shifts in identification.<sup>9</sup> The correlations between concurrent electoral contests are also used here to examine the extent of decomposition. The correlation coefficient provides a better measure of the similarity of the geographical distribution of the vote in concurrent elections than, for example, a "split results" approach.

Election returns from counties and independent cities were obtained for the elections for governor, lieutenant governor, and the Virginia House of Delegates for 1961 through 1981, and the Democratic percentage of the two-party vote was computed. Henry Howell, a Democrat who ran as an Independent gubernatorial candidate in 1973, was treated as a Democrat. No attempt was made, however, to assign party labels to Independent can-



didates for the House of Delegates. If either party failed to run a candidate in a House district, that district was excluded from the computations. Rules were developed to guide the computation of the Democratic percentage in multi-member districts of the House.<sup>10</sup> The number of cases is appreciably smaller for correlations and autocorrelations involving the House of Delegates because some counties are split between districts and because the number of contested seats are limited. The N's are shown in any table or figure for the House elections.

Figure 1. Autocorrelations and Concurrent Correlations: Governor and Lieutenant Governor, 1961-1981.



..... G: Governor autocorrelations (with election four years earlier).  
 - - - - L: Lieutenant Governor autocorrelations (with election four years earlier).  
 \_\_\_\_\_ GL: Governor-Lieutenant Governor concurrent correlations.

## The Findings

*The state-wide elections.* Figure 1 presents the autocorrelations for the elections of governor and lieutenant governor (showing the correlations with the election four years earlier) and the correlations for these two elections occurring concurrently. The pattern that emerges in Figure 1 seems in broad outlines to be consistent with hypothesis I, the new alignment. Results for both governor and lieutenant governor show signs of a new alignment, moving by 1981 to autocorrelations higher than those of the 1960s. It might be argued, however, that no realignment occurred. The low autocorrelations of 1973 (with 1969) could be a product of Howell's independent bid: the voters were temporarily disoriented by the lack of an official Democratic candidate for governor. This argument, however, cannot account for the high autocorrelations that appear in succeeding elections. (It is worth noting that in Virginia party labels are not printed on the ballots. Thus the impact of Howell's running as an Independent may have been diminished for the voter.)

Table 1 shows the full autocorrelation matrix for the gubernatorial elections. If we examine the last column, we see that Robb's victory in 1981

TABLE 1  
MATRIX OF CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS  
BETWEEN ALL ELECTIONS FOR GOVERNOR, 1961-1981

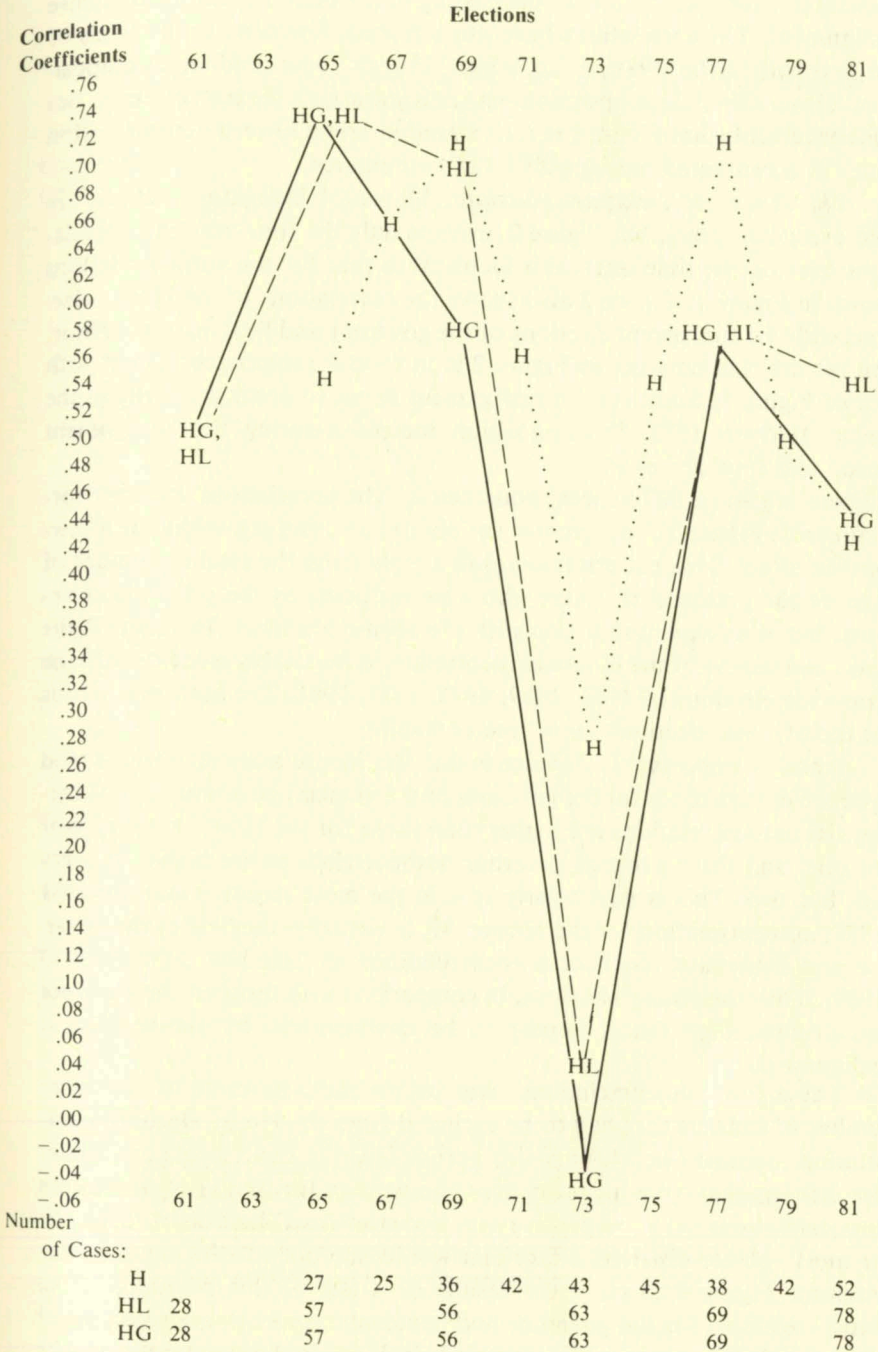
	1961	1965	1969	1973	1977	1981
Democrat:	<u>Harrison</u>	<u>Godwin</u>	Battle	Howell*	Howell	<u>Robb</u>
Republican:	Pearson	Holton	<u>Holton</u>	<u>Godwin</u>	<u>Dalton</u>	Coleman
1961	—	.65	.38	-.30	-.06	.00
1965		—	.60	.05	.25	.29
1969			—	.41	.56	.57
1973				—	.87	.73
1977					—	.81
1981						—

Note: The victor is underlined. \*Howell running as an Independent.

is closely related to Howell's defeat as a Democrat in 1977 (.81) and as an Independent in 1973 (.73). It would appear from the autocorrelations that Robb has not yet created a voting coalition markedly different from Howell's but that he has better mobilized a similar constituency. Table 1 also reveals that the 1973 election is not a single critical election. Realignment seems to have occurred over several elections. Thus the Robb victory of 1981 and Howell's defeat in 1977 are both moderately related to Holton's Republican victory of 1969 (.57 and .56 respectively).

The correlations of the concurrent election of governor and lieutenant

Figure 2. House of Delegates Autocorrelations at Four Year Intervals and Concurrent Correlations with Governor and Lieutenant Governor, 1961-1981.



..... H: House autocorrelations at four year intervals.  
 - - - - HL: House-Lieutenant Governor concurrent correlations.  
 \_\_\_\_\_ HG: House-Governor concurrent correlations.



governor in Figure 1 also appear supportive of hypothesis I; decomposition appears to have decreased after the passing of the period of the most intense realignment. The correlations have *not* returned, however, to the levels of the first half of the 1960s, a fact which suggests some residual decomposition. This residual decomposition may disappear with the next election, but it is conceivable that Figure 1 reveals a gradual trend toward decomposition which is accentuated during periods of realignment.

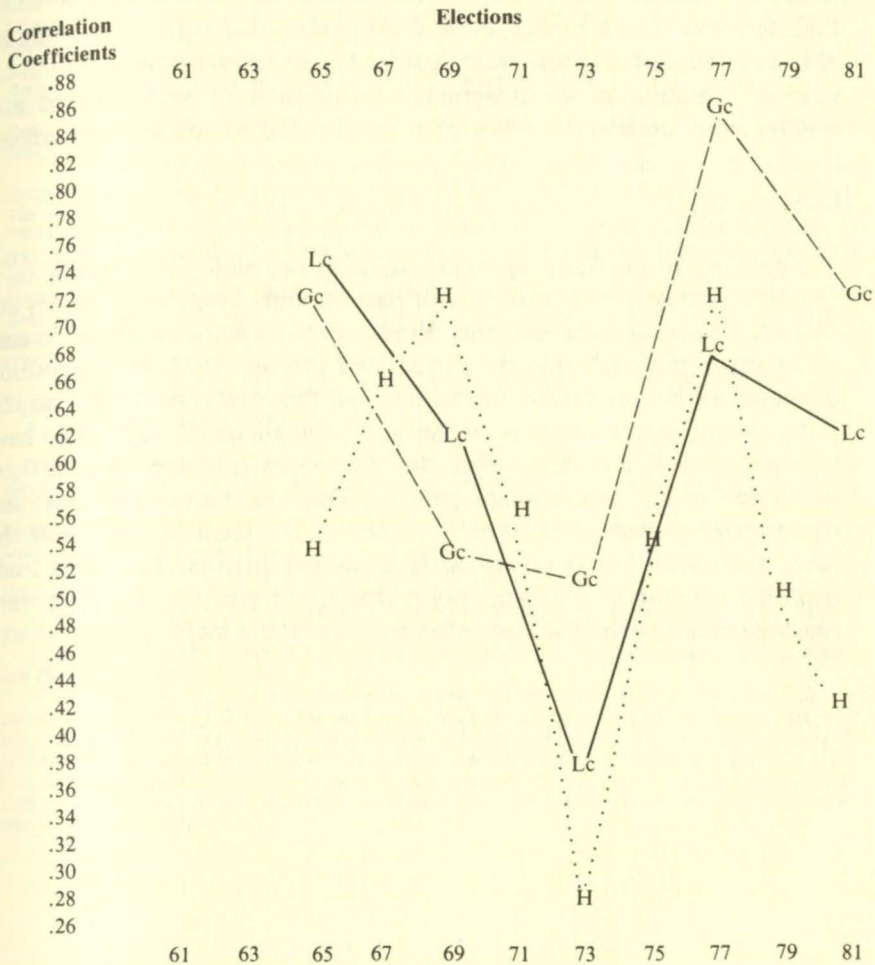
*The House of Delegates elections.* House of Delegates elections are held every two years, but Figure 2 presents only the four-year autocorrelations because the time interval is identical to that for the autocorrelations shown in Figure 1. Figure 2 also shows the correlations of the House elections with the concurrent elections of the governor and lieutenant governor. The picture that emerges in Figure 2 is in several respects consistent with that of Figure 1. Some sort of realignment seems to occur primarily in the period 1969 to 1973. Decomposition increases during the realignment period and then decreases.

There are some differences, nonetheless. The correlations and autocorrelations in Figure 2 show greater variability, creating something of a saw-toothed effect. This pattern may result simply from the smaller number of cases or the presence of voters who were attracted by the state-wide elections, but who were unfamiliar with the House elections. In Figure 2 the peaks and valleys of the House autocorrelations invariably coincide with the state-wide elections of 1965, 1969, 1973, 1977, 1981. The autocorrelations for the off-year elections show greater stability.

Another important difference is that the House autocorrelations tend to be lower than those for the governor and lieutenant governor. The gubernatorial autocorrelations are higher than those for the House in every year but one, and the lieutenant governor autocorrelations are higher in every year but two. This is particularly true in the most recent years: the 1981 (1977) autocorrelation for the House, 41, is virtually identical to the governor and lieutenant governor autocorrelations at their low point in 1973 (1969). Thus the House elections, in comparison with those of the governor and lieutenant governor, appear to be characterized by almost chronic realignment.

These low autocorrelations may be, in part, a result of the large number of districts that had to be excluded from the House elections computations because one of the major parties failed to run a single candidate. The districts that were included were competitive for that year, and in the autocorrelations were competitive over two elections. These districts may be the most volatile districts, a fact that would account for the low autocorrelations. Figure 3 displays the results of a test of this possibility. The autocorrelations for the governor and lieutenant governor are recomputed using exactly the same counties and cities included in the comparable House autocorrelations. Figure 3 repeats the House autocorrelations from Figure 2 for comparison.

Figure 3. Autocorrelations of Identical Cases at Four Year Intervals:  
House of Delegates, Governor and Lieutenant Governor, 1961-1981.



Note: See Figure 2 for number of cases for House autocorrelations.

..... H: House autocorrelations at four year intervals.

----- Gc: Governor autocorrelations for only cities and counties included in House autocorrelations.

———— Lc: Lieutenant Governor autocorrelations for only cities and counties included in House autocorrelations.



In most years the House of Delegates autocorrelations are still appreciably lower than those for the state-wide races even when the analysis is confined to competitive House districts. Thus the low autocorrelations do not result from the nature of the districts but presumably from the characteristics of the House or its elections and the voters' responses to them. For instance, the House is a low-paying, part-time body marked by high turnover. Local parties, even in the competitive districts, may not be able to offer and support qualified candidates consistently. Election-to-election variation in the geographic distribution of well-qualified and well-financed candidates of either party could produce lower autocorrelations.

## Conclusions

This study has used aggregate data to tap political behavior in a southern state where the processes of partisanship change are relatively advanced. The analysis reveals that Virginia underwent a period of intense realignment that peaked in the period 1969 through 1973. Decomposition increased as the realignment intensified, and then decreased. There may be some residual decomposition, however. A new alignment appears to have emerged in the state-wide elections, but the contested House elections show less evidence of this new alignment. The low autocorrelations that characterize the contested House elections do not seem to result from the more politically volatile nature of the contested districts. This study lends qualified support to the proposition that decomposition is a temporary phenomenon that will pass as voters reattach to the major parties.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See P. A. Beck, "Partisan Dealignment in the Post-War South," *American Political Science Review* 71 (1977):477-496; B. Campbell, "Change in the Southern Electorate," *American Journal of Political Science* 21 (1977):37-64, "Patterns of Change in the Partisan Loyalties of Native Southerners: 1952-1972," *Journal of Politics* 39 (1977):730-761, "Realignment, Party Decomposition, and Issue Voting," in *Realignment in American Politics: Toward a Theory*, eds. B. Campbell and R. Trilling (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1980) pp. 82-109; C. A. Cassel, "Cohort Analysis of Party Identification Among Southern Whites: 1952-1972," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 41 (1977):28-33; N. D. Glenn, "Sources of the Shift to Political Independence: Some Evidence from Cohort Analysis," *Social Science Quarterly* 53 (1972):494-519.

<sup>2</sup>Regarding these trends see N. H. Nie, S. Verba, and J. R. Petrocik, *The Changing American Voter* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976); G. Pomper, *Voter's Choice* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1975); J. R. Petrocik, *Party Coalitions: Realignments and the Decline of the New Deal System* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

<sup>3</sup>Regarding the former opinion see Petrocik; K. Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1969); R. M. Scammon and B. J. Wattenberg, *The Real Majority* (New York: Coward-McCann Publishing Co., 1970); E. M. Schreiber, "Where the Ducks Are: Southern Strategy vs. Fourth Party," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 35 (1971):157-167. Regarding the latter interpretation see P. Abramson, "Generational Change and the Decline of Party Identification in America: 1952-1974," *American Political Science Review* 70 (1976):469-478; Beck; W. Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970); G. Pomper, "From Confusion to Clarity: Issues and American Voters, 1956-1968," *American Political Science Review* 66 (1972):415-428.

<sup>4</sup>E. C. Ladd, "The Brittle Mandate: Electoral Dealignment and the 1980 Presidential Election," *Political Science Quarterly* 96 (1981):1-15.

<sup>5</sup>Campbell, "Realignment," p. 107.

<sup>6</sup>For details of recent Virginia electoral history, especially the crucial election of 1973 see L. Sabato, *Aftermath of "Armageddon": An Analysis of the 1973 Virginia Gubernatorial Election* (Charlottesville, Va.: The Institute of Government, University of Virginia, 1975); *Virginia Votes, 1969-1974* (Charlottesville, Va.: The Institute of Government, University of Virginia, 1976. *Virginia Votes, 1975-1978* (Charlottesville, VA.: The Institute of Government, University of Virginia, 1979).

<sup>7</sup>For earlier applications see Burnham, *Critical Elections*; G. Pomper, "Classification of Presidential Elections," *Journal of Politics* 29 (1967):535-566.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. J. M. Clubb, W. H. Flanigan, and N. H. Zingale, *Partisan Realignment: Voters, Parties, and Government in American History* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1980).

<sup>9</sup>E. C. Ladd and C. Hadley, "Party Definition and Party Differentiation," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 37 (1973):21-34.

<sup>10</sup>For instance, if a five member district totally encompassed county A but only part of county B and if both parties ran five candidates, then the Democratic vote and Republican vote were computed from the total vote in county A only, thus excluding the votes from county B. If the Democrats ran five candidates for the five seats and the Republicans offered only four, then the Democrat who received the most votes in the district was regarded as unopposed. Party vote totals in county A were then computed from the votes for the remaining four Democrats and the four Republicans.