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# The Civil Rights Realignment: How Race Dominates Presidential Elections `

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# The Civil Rights Realignment: How Race Dominates Presidential Elections

Timothy J. Hoffman

The evolution of the black vote in presidential elections is one of the most significant changes to the American electorate over the last century. During this period, the black vote shifted to become one of the most solid pillars of the Democratic coalition, culminating with the historic election of Barack Obama as the first African American president in 2008. The race gap is arguably the most influential gap in explaining the political behavior of Americans and affects other behavioral gaps in American politics. This paper will take an historical perspective of presidential elections and political party dynamics since the Civil War and investigate how black voters defected from the Republican Party due to the actions of Democratic presidents who sought to enfranchise African Americans to build a stronger electoral coalition. We will analyze how the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932 began the evolution of the black vote, as the New Deal promised new opportunities for minorities and signaled a shift towards a more involved government that served the needs of the people. We will also examine the pivotal role of Harry Truman in advancing racial equality with his landmark decision to end segregation in the military. The study will continue to the 1960 election of John F. Kennedy and investigate how this election prompted a turning point in black support for the Democratic Party. The presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson will be examined along with the role of the Civil Rights Acts to determine how African American support was cemented, while the South was alienated from the Democratic Party. We will also analyze the presidency of Richard Nixon and how his Southern Strategy invited old Southern Democrats into the Republican coalition. The elections of Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton will be explored, as their electoral coalitions are outliers from all the presidencies examined in this paper. We will conclude by studying the historic black support for Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012 and detail what this means for the future of the Democratic and Republican Parties with the growing racial gap.

**Presidential Action in Focus**

Since the Civil War, the black vote had been a loyal Republican bloc, as African Americans credited the Party of Lincoln for freeing the slaves. The Republican Party also embraced blacks in electoral politics during the Reconstruction era, as they were the first party to allow blacks to run for elected office. Race was a powerful symbolic issue during Reconstruction as Democrats were

viewed as the Party of the solid South and white supremacy, while the Republicans took explicitly pro-black positions and were the Party of Reconstruction (Noel 2012, 159). This positioning isolated the Democratic Party and the South, but a shift occurred within the Republican Party around the 1876 election, where the issue of equality was eliminated from the national agendas of both major parties. The issue of race failed to influence the behavior of the major parties, and blacks were not even allowed at Democratic Party conventions in any official capacity until 1924 (Jackson 2008). As a result, the black vote in presidential politics remained solidly Republican because of past loyalties to the Party of Lincoln. Only significant changes in the political landscape of the nation would be able to reverse this trend.

The Great Depression and Franklin Delano Roosevelt's subsequent rise to the presidency proved to have a transcendent effect on the future voting loyalties of African Americans. After receiving only 23% of the black vote in the 1932 presidential election, Roosevelt's candidacy was not a catalyst for African Americans to shift allegiances towards the Democratic Party (Greenberg 2000). However, Roosevelt's presidency would prove to have a monumental impact on African American perceptions of the Democratic Party due to his New Deal economic policies and outreach to the black community. When Roosevelt assumed the presidency, he quickly began social and economic programs to try to lift the nation out of the Great Depression. Programs and federal agencies created through the New Deal sought to bring money to the unemployed, create jobs, and rebuild the nation's infrastructure. Roosevelt actively used government to improve the economy by creating agencies like the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, Works Progress Administration, and Public Works Administration, and his National Recovery Act helped workers by requiring a minimum wage of 40 cents an hour and giving labor the rights to organize and strike (Walsh 2008). Roosevelt also made inroads with African Americans by choosing Harold Ickes, a Republican from Illinois, as Secretary of the Interior. Ickes was a strong proponent of civil rights for African Americans and sought to make great strides to improve the quality of life for blacks in the country (Golway 2009, 53). FDR's efforts did not go unnoticed by African Americans, as Roosevelt won reelection in 1936 with support from 71% of blacks (Bositis 2012a, 9). This represented a huge jump from 1932, and shows how African Americans perceived benefits from the New Deal. The economic reforms favored whites, but they offered opportunities for many African Americans to advance and recover from the Great Depression, which enabled Roosevelt to gain stronger electoral support.

Roosevelt's presidency also began to force political change in the South. His rise to power coincided with new political forces aligning together to support the Democratic Party. The powerful governing coalition that enabled Roosevelt to win three reelections consisted of working-class whites, union members, immigrants, Northern African Americans, Southern whites, Catholics, Jewish voters, small farmers, liberals, radicals, and city dwellers (Walsh 2008). This large coalition diminished the preeminence of the Southern bloc, and during FDR's presidency, the Democratic Party continued to embrace civil rights reforms, which caused Southern Democrats like South Carolina Senator Jimmy Burns to warn that the South "could not stay solid if the Democrats insisted on pushing a civil rights agenda" (Winter 2014, 99). Other Southern leaders were wary of the support that the South's blacks gave Roosevelt. Since some Democrats were resistant to Roosevelt's more inclusive agenda, he sought to shape the Democratic Party through primary challenges to rid the Party of conservative Democrats, most of whom were from the South (Golway 2009, 122). His attempts to reshape the South were largely unsuccessful, as the established Southern Democrats were able to retain their seats, but the primary challenges further strained relations with powerful Southern leaders in the Democratic Party. Nonetheless, Roosevelt understood that African Americans were playing a crucial role in his electoral base. He won in 1940 with 67% of the black vote and again in 1944 with 68% (Bositis 2012a, 9). As a result, he encouraged his wife to speak out forcefully on civil rights and gave African Americans hope that the country would come to embrace greater equality.

Franklin Roosevelt's death brought Vice President Harry Truman into office. Truman guided the United States through the conclusion of World War II, and during this time, the National Democratic Party had become increasingly divided over civil rights (Shelley, Zerr, and Proffer 2007, 17). Black veterans began to exert pressure on the Truman administration to force action on civil rights, and in 1947, Truman responded with a call to end racial discrimination (Winter 2014, 99). This call angered many Southern Democrats and continued to strain the Party. Despite this, Truman continued to support civil rights, and in 1946 sent a letter to the National Urban League president which stated that government has "an obligation to see that the civil rights of every citizen are fully and equally protected" (*Harry S. Truman Library* 2014). Truman's support rankled Southern governors like Strom Thurmond of South Carolina and threatened the Democrat's hold on the presidency for the 1948 election.

However, as the election approached, Democrats realized they could gain votes in the North with a platform in favor of civil rights, especially from African Americans (Noel 2012, 159). This strategy was derived from a memo by Clark Clifford to President Truman in 1948 that argued potential gains in the North among blacks and whites outweighed the risk of losing Southern Democrats for promoting a pro-civil rights agenda (Noel 2012, 159). This signaled a significant turning point for the Democratic Party, because Roosevelt's ability to act on civil rights had been limited by the power of the Southern Democrats. Now with Truman at the helm, there was an opportunity to shift the Democrat's base of power to liberals in favor of civil rights reforms. Truman understood that his path towards a new term in office was through securing the votes of blacks in swing states such as Illinois (McKee 2012, 99). He openly campaigned for the support of Northern blacks and sought to advance the cause of civil rights. Most notably, Truman desegregated the military through an executive order in July 1948.

Truman's actions caused Southern governors in the Deep South to rebel against the Democratic Party. Strom Thurmond launched a campaign for the presidency with the backing of Southern Dixiecrats who sought to protect segregation. Thurmond managed to win Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina, as the Dixiecrats were labeled as the Democratic Party on the ballot in many Southern states (McKee 2012, 100). However, Truman's strategy to enfranchise black support ultimately succeeded as he won the 1948 election with 77% of the black vote, almost a ten percentage point gain from Roosevelt's 1944 totals (Bositis 2012a, 9). Also, for the first time in American history, a majority of blacks identified themselves as Democrats. In 1948, 56% of blacks identified themselves as Democrats, which was a sixteen percentage point increase from 1944 (Bositis 2012a, 9). This was a pivotal point in black support for Democrats, as African Americans continued to increase their loyalties to the Democratic Party from this point forward. A study by Norpoth, Sidman, and Suong (2013, 162) found that the Democrats gained a considerable edge in party identification, among all Americans, not just blacks, during this era due to the wartime experience and postwar prosperity. The Democrats seized an electoral advantage, and by incorporating a bold and progressive civil rights agenda, Northern liberals began to take the reins of the Party. Truman winning the 1948 election without the solid Democratic South enabled him to immediately isolate the Deep South from the National Democratic Party – a move that would have long-term implications for the party coalitions.

After twenty years of a Democrat in the White House, the nation elected Republican General Dwight D. Eisenhower to the presidency. His candidacy had strong reverberations in the South, as many military-conscious Southern Democrats could relate to the former General (Winter 2014, 100). His candidacy against liberal Adlai Stevenson enabled some life-long Southern Democrats to consider voting for a Republican, however, the Solid South remained Democratic, with Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and West Virginia being the only states in the Union to vote Democratic (*Government Printing Office* 1953). During Eisenhower's presidency, the United States Supreme Court outlawed segregation in public schools with the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case. Chief Justice Earl Warren was an Eisenhower appointee, and as a result, many of Eisenhower's Dixiecrat supporters from 1952 felt betrayed by the Republican administration, and remained loyal to Stevenson and the Democratic Party in 1956. The issue of civil rights was largely ignored in the 1956 election, but some African Americans rallied to Eisenhower, as he increased black support from 24% in 1952 to 39% in 1956 – the most black support a Republican nominee had since Hoover, and the most a Republican would ever have again (Bositis 2012a, 9). Eisenhower was no civil rights activist, but his presidency enabled modest gains for African Americans as he was intent on enforcing the law. He sent federal troops to Little Rock to enforce school desegregation orders in 1957 and was not a roadblock to the Civil Rights Movement.

**Civil Rights Propels Electoral Change**

The 1960s would forever redefine the issue of race on the national level of politics and contributes to the race gap that exists today. As the 1960 presidential election approached, it was clear that John F. Kennedy was in strong position to win the Democratic nomination. Lyndon B. Johnson, the Senate Majority Leader from Texas was a strong candidate, and Johnson knew that in order to win the White House, he had to establish himself as a national leader supportive of giving African Americans full constitutional rights. Kennedy also understood this and mapped out a strategy to accommodate all factions of the Democratic Party on the civil rights issue in the late fifties. Kennedy's strategy appealed to black voters, because they were viewed as holding the balance of power in many swing states that could determine the outcome of elections (Dallek 2013, 215). The 1960 Democratic National Convention produced a platform that gave extensive civil rights promises and threatened to alienate Southern Democrats (Beschloss 2007, 240). At the

Convention, Kennedy won the nomination and asked Johnson to be his running mate. This offer was made because of Johnson's ability to help in carrying Texas and the South.

After securing the Democratic nomination, John F. Kennedy waded delicately into the issue of civil rights. In order to have a chance at winning the presidency, Kennedy needed the New Deal Democratic coalition built by Franklin Roosevelt to hold together. However, there was growing tension within the Party as African Americans were pushing a civil rights agenda, while Southern Democrats were fighting to maintain the status quo. The stark divide left Kennedy with no strong political options to manage the issue (Dallek 2013, 291). One of Kennedy's main concerns was maintaining support in the Democratic South. Despite this, Kennedy began to overtly reach out to African Americans. In a speech, he criticized the Eisenhower administration for failing to integrate public housing, and described civil rights as a "moral question"; he also promised to support civil rights legislation and explained that he would take executive action "on a bold and large scale" to address the issue (Dallek 2013, 292). African American leaders were visible on the campaign trail for both Kennedy and the Republican vice president, Richard Nixon. Jackie Robinson had endorsed Nixon, and the Kennedys actively sought the support of Martin Luther King Jr., who eventually came to JFK's side. The election was fiercely contested and Kennedy ended up winning with only 49.72 percent of the popular vote as Virginia Senator Harry F. Byrd collected 500,000 votes as a segregationist (Dallek 2013, 294). Byrd also gained 15 electoral votes from unpledged delegates from Mississippi, Alabama, and one unfaithful elector in Oklahoma (*Government Printing Office* 1961). Despite the closeness of the overall electorate, JFK did well with African Americans, as he won 68% of the black vote (Bositis 2012a, 9). He also carried the South with the help of Johnson, but the stage was set for a transformational presidency as civil rights was moving to the forefront of the national agenda.

Kennedy came into office during a tumultuous era in American politics. The Cold War served as a constant backdrop and came too close to home with the Cuban Missile Crisis. The failed Bay of Pigs invasion hurt Kennedy's foreign policy credentials, and Kennedy still had an aggressive domestic agenda that he wished to pursue. With all this, civil rights remained an issue as protests, clashes, and riots occurred throughout the nation. Kennedy approached civil rights cautiously and refused to initiate any comprehensive civil rights program because he feared any legislative attacks on segregation would antagonize Southern Democrats, which would make passage of his desired tax, education, and medical reform bills nearly impossible (Dallek 2013,

589). His inaction angered many African Americans because of his strong civil rights stances during the 1960 campaign, but this dismayed Kennedy as he felt he had exercised the strongest executive leadership in support of racial equality in American history. He used U.S. Marshals to allow James Meredith to become the first black student to enroll at the University of Mississippi, he appointed forty blacks to important positions within his administration, and his Justice Department had filed forty-two lawsuits in support of black voting rights (Dallek 2013, 591). However, to many these actions were not enough.

Kennedy was the leader at a crossroads for the Democratic Party. African American voters remained one of the Party's most reliable voting blocs, and the Democrats' support for civil rights aided in cementing this group. However, as a result of the civil rights pressures, the traditional Democratic South was growing tired of being marginalized. The South had long been leaders in the Democratic Party, but the civil rights issue was threatening their ability to remain part of the governing coalition. In June of 1963, John F. Kennedy gave a speech asking for the most far-reaching civil rights bill in American history. The proposed legislation sought to eliminate discrimination from all public places, such as hotels, restaurants, amusement facilities, and retail establishments (Dallek 2013, 604). Kennedy's call to action had immediate repercussions, as a routine public works bill was killed by Southern Democrats in Congress a day after his speech (Beschloss 2007, 273). However, this moment marked an historic shift in American politics as Kennedy sought bipartisan support for civil rights legislation in order to overcome Southern Democratic opposition. Kennedy met with Republican House and Senate leaders, and even President Eisenhower, to garner wider support, and asked every member of Congress to "put aside sectional and political ties for the sake of the national well-being" (Dallek 2013, 605). He urged comprehensive action that would bring the nation together.

Kennedy's call to Congress threatened the Southern establishment. The South recognized Kennedy's desired legislation would take time to craft, searched for options to maintain segregation. In Florida and Louisiana, segregationists wanted to test their waning influence, and threatened that they could join Alabama, Mississippi, and Georgia as unpledged states of presidential electors for the 1964 election. Then they could try to force JFK and his Republican opponent to bargain for their support by pledging a halt to civil rights reforms (Beschloss 2007, 277). However, the assassination of President Kennedy denied the South this opportunity.

**Lyndon Johnson Acts on Civil Rights**

Lyndon Johnson assumed the presidency, and as Kennedy's successor, also inherited Kennedy's agenda. However, Johnson moved quickly to abandon the distance that the Kennedy White House kept from the Civil Rights Movement. Johnson recognized that an alliance with the Civil Rights Movement would risk substantial Democratic losses in the South, but he saw the growing power of the Civil Rights Movement as an opportunity for the White House to build a new reform coalition, and seized upon the moment by tapping into Kennedy's legacy (Milkis, Tichenor, and Blessing 2013, 644). He persuaded Congress to pass Kennedy's civil rights proposals as the late president's most fitting memorial (Beschloss 2007, 279). Consequently, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed in Congress with strong bipartisan support and signed into law on July 2, 1964. The Southern delegation of both parties opposed the legislation, and after signing the bill into law, Johnson foreshadowed a looming electoral realignment, as he is believed to have said "we have lost the South for a generation" (*The Economist* 2010). Nonetheless, the legislation passed and represented a landmark moment for African Americans in the United States, and Johnson welcomed the Civil Rights Movement for its ability to disrupt Washington's politics-as-usual approach and its propensity to spur action.

Johnson's support of the Civil Rights Movement mirrored Truman's support sixteen years earlier, as both understood that a pro-civil rights position was a vote winner (McKee 2012, 99). Johnson's promotion of civil rights brought enormous and lasting political fallout for himself and the Democratic Party in the 1964 election (Milkis, Tichenor, and Blessing 2013, 643). This election is viewed as a turning point in American politics as the black vote has been overwhelmingly Democratic ever since (Fisher 2014, 111). Johnson secured 94% of the black vote in 1964, a staggering majority on the heels of enacting the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This coincided with Democratic Party identification also skyrocketing up to 82% among African Americans (Bositis 2012a, 9). It is clear that passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 under Johnson's leadership bolstered black support for the Democratic Party in the 1964 election. However, the Party sustained heavy losses in the South, losing Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina to Republican Barry Goldwater. Outside of the South, the only other state Goldwater won in 1964 was Arizona (*Government Printing Office* 1965). This election was extremely significant as Johnson broke FDR's record for electoral votes with 486 and carried 61% of the popular vote, the largest percentage since 1820. This is viewed as a transformational election

as national liberalism peaked, New England shifted from the Republicans to the Democrats, and the South shifted from the Democrats to the Republicans.

Lyndon Johnson used his record-breaking performance at the polls as license to continue his aggressive domestic reforms. He continued a strong commitment to the Civil Rights Movement, and expanded upon reform with his "Great Society" plan. Johnson had already begun a "War on Poverty" with his Economic Opportunity Act in August of 1964, which benefited African Americans, and he expanded that fight over the next four years. He made major changes to the American healthcare system through the creation of Medicare to reduce costs for the elderly, and sought to improve the nation's educational system through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. He instituted urban renewal and conservation projects, and strived to address the shortage of affordable housing available by way of additional funding through the creation of the Department of Housing and Urban Development with the Urban Development Act of 1965. During Johnson's administration, discriminatory quotas based on ethnic origin ended with passage of the Immigration Act, consumer safety standards were raised, and the Wilderness Protection Act saved 9.1 million acres of forestland from industrial development (*UShistory* 2014). These achievements improved the quality of life for many Americans, especially African Americans. One of the most important legislative achievements from Johnson's elected term was the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The Act banned literacy tests and other discriminatory practices that had denied African Americans their right to vote, and further advanced the Civil Rights Movement. This had lasting implications, and Shelley, Zerr, and Proffer (2007, 20) note that the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 led to the subsequent enfranchisement of many Southern African Americans who had been denied the right to vote.

During Lyndon Johnson's presidency, African Americans experienced real societal changes that began the process of fully integrating the nation. He built upon the smaller achievements of Roosevelt and Truman in civil rights, and combined with John F. Kennedy to make permanent changes to the country. Kennedy lost his life in the struggle for equality, and Johnson used Kennedy's legacy to push through historic civil rights legislation that would redefine the country, and the political landscape of the nation. FDR's civil rights and economic reforms were often tempered by Southern Democrats, which led him to attempt to purge the Party of their influence. Truman won the presidency without support from the Southern Democrats, and even though Kennedy pursued Southern support in 1960, his actions in office alienated the South as he

continued to advocate on behalf of the Civil Rights Movement. Johnson's presidency was viewed as a final straw for Southern Democrats as passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and other "Great Society" legislation, were too much for the Southerners who were lifelong members of a party that once embraced white supremacy. Milkis, Tichenor, and Blessing (2013, 652) explain that Johnson had been successful where FDR failed, as he was able to join civil rights activists to condemn the South and discredit Southern resistance to racial justice without a purge of conservative Democrats from the Party. He was able to bridge bipartisan support for his actions by uniting the country after Kennedy's death, and pushing through civil rights reforms that would forever change the country.

**Republican Resurgence**

Johnson's legacy of civil rights and social justice did not lead to an era of dominance for the Democratic Party. Instead, the Vietnam War severely damaged Johnson's popularity, and set the stage for the Republican resurgence that catapulted Richard Nixon to the presidency. After a failed bid for the White House in 1960, Nixon won in 1968 with 301 electoral votes, beating Democrat Hubert Humphrey, and third-party candidate, George Wallace from the American Independent Party (*Government Printing Office* 1969). Nixon sought votes by expanding upon Barry Goldwater's "Operation Dixie" to galvanize the support of old segregationist Southern Democrats through his "Southern Strategy" (Greenberg 2000). However, George Wallace captured the votes of the South with his third-party platform based upon segregation and a response to the civil rights legislation passed under Kennedy and Johnson. Wallace won Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and North Carolina and amassed 46 electoral votes, the last time a third-party candidate succeeded in winning any states (*Government Printing Office* 1969). Despite Wallace's supremacy in the South, Nixon's Southern Strategy paid long-term dividends for Nixon and the Republican Party. The Southern Strategy used states' rights and other racially tinged appeals to court white conservative voters and exploited dissatisfaction with Johnson's liberal racial and economic policies. In a 1970 *New York Times* interview, Nixon's political strategist, Kevin Phillips, who popularized the Southern Strategy, explained the repercussions of the strategy with African Americans:

> From now on, the Republicans are never going to get more than 10 to 20 percent of the Negro vote and they don't need any more than that…but Republicans would be shortsighted if they weakened enforcement of the Voting Rights Act. The more Negros

who register as Democrats in the South, the sooner the Negrophobe whites will quit the Democrats and become Republicans. That's where the votes are. Without that prodding from the blacks, the whites will backslide into their old comfortable arrangement with the local Democrats. (Boyd 1970)

Just as Johnson understood that the Democrats lost the South for at least a generation due to the Party's support of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Kevin Phillips understood that the Republicans were forfeiting the black vote for just as long with the Southern Strategy. However, Phillips believed there would be an electoral gain from such a strategy, and that the Republicans could thrive with strong support from whites. There is ample evidence to prove the success of this calculated risk. After Johnson had won 59% of the white vote in 1964, Hubert Humphrey received only 38% of the white vote in 1968, as Nixon garnered 47%, even with George Wallace siphoning away votes in the South (*Gallup* 1968). The Southern Strategy, coupled with efforts from Nixon and his team to reform the Republican National Committee, would enable the Nixon presidency to have a long-term impact on the future of the Republican Party.

As president, Nixon and his team sought to institute changes in the Republican National Committee that would make the Party more viable long-term. The Southern Strategy ensured that the Republican base of power would slowly shift to the South, but to succeed, this required an organized effort to overhaul the Party apparatus. The Nixon team worked to build a "New Majority" which could dominate American politics for at least a generation or more (Galvin 204, 108). The reform of the Republican Party apparatus and the Southern Strategy paid off in Nixon's reelection bid. He won every state in the country, with the exception of Massachusetts, and the District of Colombia, and won 520 out of 538 electoral votes (*Government Printing Office* 1973). This landslide was also evident from the popular vote, as Nixon won 17,838,725 more votes than his Democratic opponent, Senator George McGovern (*Government Printing Office* 1973). Despite the overwhelming support that Nixon enjoyed around the country, he garnered only 13% of the black vote in the 1972 election, which was down from 15% in the 1968 election (Bositis 2012a, 9). However, the success of the Southern Strategy was apparent as he earned 68% of the white vote in 1972, a clear indication that the racially tinged campaigning worked to an electoral advantage (*Gallup* 1972). This great disparity between the races was a direct effect of the Southern Strategy, but the overwhelming margins for Nixon in the popular vote and in the Electoral College

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demonstrate the strategy's success in winning elections, something Ronald Reagan would capitalize on in 1980 and 1984.

Nixon's efforts to overhaul the Republican Party would lead to an era of Republican dominance at the presidential level of politics as five out of the six elections from 1968-1988 produced a Republican president, as did seven out of the ten elections from 1968-2004. The Watergate scandal blocked the Republicans from the White House in 1976, as political outsider Jimmy Carter ascended to the presidency. However, the hiatus was short-lived, as the Republican Party rebounded in 1980 with Ronald Reagan taking the helm of the Party. Reagan sought to build upon Nixon's Southern Strategy, as it became the blueprint to his Southern inroads campaign, which garnered major support in the South (Greenberg 2000). To cement the South as a Republican voting bloc, Reagan pursued a narrower strategy that sought to engage small and ideologically homogenous groups. Christian conservative groups, gun rights advocates, and right-to-work groups were targeted to bolster the Republican ranks (Galvin 2014, 115). Reagan strengthened the coalition established by Nixon, and won 480 electoral votes in 1980 (*Government Printing Office* 1981). The coalition's strength was apparent again in 1984, when Reagan won 525 electoral votes to Walter Mondale's 13 (*Government Printing Office* 1985). 1988 again produced a Republican president, as Reagan's vice president, George H.W. Bush, was elected with an overwhelming majority of electoral votes, 426 to 111 (*Government Printing Office* 1989). During this time, the black vote remained a crucial part of the Democratic vote, with 86% going to Jimmy Carter in 1980, 89% supporting Walter Mondale in 1984, and 88% supporting Michael Dukakis in 1988 (Bositis 2012a, 9). However, the Republican Party successfully employed a strategy to negate this overwhelming Democratic advantage by following Nixon's Southern Strategy and appealing to whites in the South.

**Democratic Victories**

The Republican coalition that emerged from the Southern Strategy propelled Nixon, Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and George W. Bush into office. Only two Democratic candidates were successful in breaking up the coalition's string of victories: James "Jimmy" Carter and William "Bill" Clinton. The 1976 election thrust Democrat Jimmy Carter to the presidency. He won with 297 electoral votes, and won every state in the South, except Virginia (*Government Printing Office* 1977). Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina all voted for Carter, despite having voted for segregationist candidates like Strom

Thurmond and George Wallace in the recent past. Jimmy Carter was a former Georgia governor with a mixed record on civil rights issues, which enabled him to cobble together an interesting electoral coalition. He drew support from industrial Northern liberals, white Southern Democrats, and blacks (*Miller Center* 2014a). He was the first president elected from the Deep South since Zachary Taylor in 1848, which partly explains his Southern appeal, despite his support of racial equality (*270towin 2014*). He managed to have support from George Wallace's earlier supporters and strong support from African Americans, as he won with 85% of the black vote (Bositis 2012a, 9). Carter benefited from the Watergate scandal and a weak economy which favored a challenger, especially as the American people were growing wary of government. Carter's outsider appeal was attractive to many voters throughout the country.

The election of 1992 had a similar dynamic to the 1976 election as a Southern Democratic governor was running for the presidency. Five-term Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton secured the Democratic nomination and had an established national profile after serving as chairman of the National Governors Association. He championed reform and helped guide the Democratic Leadership Council, where he led the Council's efforts to attract white males to the Democratic Party without alienating blacks and women. He argued that Republicans were using the issue of race to gain political advantages, and insisted race should not divide Americans who could agree on economic and social issues (*Miller Center* 2014b). Despite this plea, Clinton would win only 39% of the white vote, and 41% of men in 1992 (*Gallup* 1992). Ross Perot's strong third-party candidacy contributed to these numbers, but they also show the sustained impact of Nixon's Southern Strategy, as white support for Democratic candidates has never risen above 46% since 1964, when Johnson won with 59% of the white vote (*Gallup* 1964). At the same time, Clinton maintained the Democratic lock on the African American community, garnering 82% of the black vote in 1992 (Bositis 2012a, 9). Although Clinton's success resembled Jimmy Carter's 1976 triumph, the Southern Democrat could not win Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, or Virginia in 1992 (*Government Printing Office* 1993). With the exception of Virginia, Carter was able to win the Solid South, but by 1992, the Southern Strategy's success had given Republicans an advantage in these states – even with a Southerner running for the Democrats. Similar dynamics played out in the 1996 election, where Clinton won 84% of the black vote (Bositis 2012a, 9). However, Clinton managed to narrowly win the white vote with 46%, as opposed to Republican Bob Dole's 45%, as Perot, again, siphoned off votes as a third-party

candidate (*Gallup* 1996). Carter and Clinton are two outliers in the era of the Southern Strategy and its aftermath. As the only two Democratic presidents elected between the 1968-2004 elections, each had to build coalitions that could garner support from the South, something they succeeded in because of their Southern ties.

The New Deal coalition enabled Democrats to dominate presidential politics between the 1932-1964 elections. As liberal Democrats began to control the Party's agenda, civil rights became a major focus that quickly brought blacks into the Democratic coalition. This decision alienated white Southern Democrats who were then actively courted by Republicans with Nixon's Southern Strategy. From the 1968-2004 elections, this gave Republicans a significant electoral advantage in presidential elections, as Democrats gained African American votes in urban areas, but Republicans wrestled the Solid South from Democrats to bolster their electoral coalition. The election of 2008 would prove to exacerbate these trends, as Democratic Senator Barack Obama became the first African American presidential candidate from a major party.
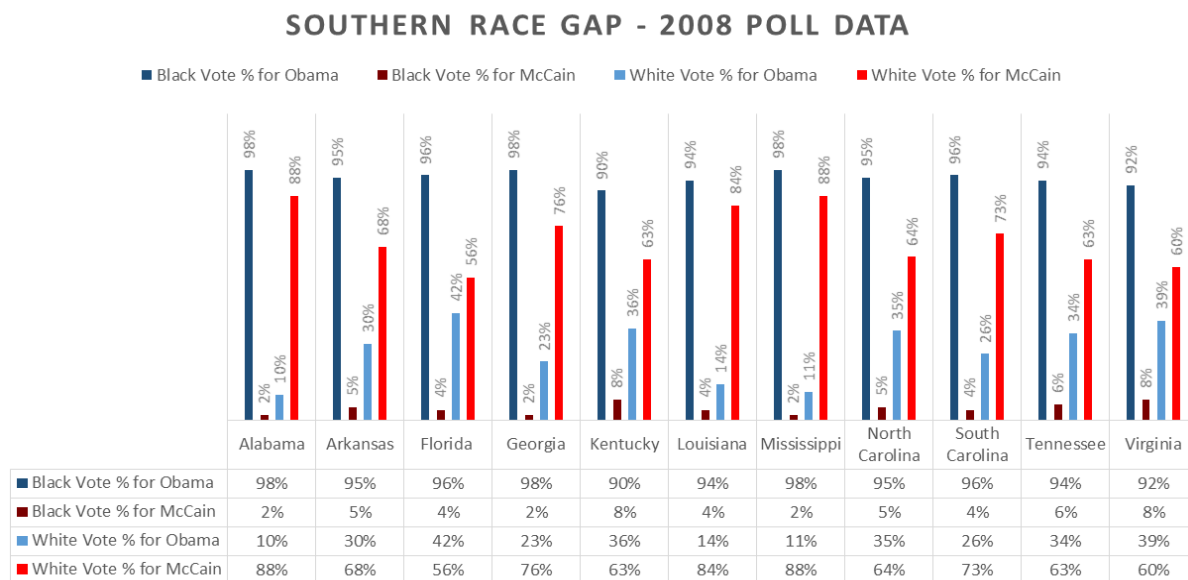
**Barack Obama's Rise to the Presidency**

The 2008 Democratic primaries promised to produce an historic result as the field whittled down to Senator Hillary Clinton and Senator Barack Obama. For the first time in history, either a black male or a woman would be a major party's nominee. When Barack Obama wrapped up the Democratic nomination, this moment was viewed as a turning point for African Americans, as they had finally broken a barrier and now had a candidate for the nation's highest office. This was viewed as an extremely significant event, as 83% of African Americans, and 75% of Democrats, viewed Obama's nomination as either very important or somewhat important for the country (*Pew* 2008). With this historic possibility, voter turnout was the highest it had been in over 40 years (*270towin* 2014). Barack Obama was elected to the presidency with 365 electoral votes, and 69,498,459 popular votes – a record that topped George W. Bush's 2004 performance (*Government Printing Office* 2009). Race became a pivotal issue during the 2008 campaign, and many Americans' views of blacks were associated with their views of Obama, which Sides and Vavreck (2013, 22) assert may have cost Obama about 3 points of the vote in 2008. Obama won the 2008 election with 95% of the black vote, breaking Johnson's 94% record from 1964 (Bositis 2012a, 9). In 2008, Obama also won 43% of the white vote, the highest total for a Democrat since Clinton in 1996 (*New York Times* 2008). Despite this strong performance, the legacy of the racial divide in the South was strongly apparent. As Shelley, Zerr, and Proffer (2007, 25) explain, the

Deep South is much more polarized racially than the rest of the region as the effects of the Voting Rights Act continue to reverberate. Fisher (2014, 118) asserts that the divisions of the Civil War are still remarkably evident, and contributed to Obama's poor performance in the South.

In 2008, the National Election Pool conducted state-specific polls on Election Day, which gave a greater indication into how racially polarized the country really was. Although some would suggest that Obama's election would signal a shift to a post-racial society or a tremendous transformation of racial politics in the United States, the results suggest otherwise. Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton relied upon Southern states in order to win the presidency, but Barack Obama won without many of these states. He lost states where Carter had won such as Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina. The only Southern states he won were Virginia, North Carolina, and Florida (*Government Printing Office* 2009). Table 1 was generated from National Election Pool exit poll data from 2008 and shows eleven Southern states where the race gap played a major role in the election. In states like Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, and South Carolina, Barack Obama garnered an even larger share of the black vote than he did nationally. Conversely, although Obama won 43% of the white vote nationally, in all of these states with the exception of Florida, he vastly underperformed the national average. Race played a major role in these states, as almost all blacks voted for Obama, and almost all whites voted for Republican John McCain. Alabama and Mississippi are two states that highlight this dichotomy, as 98% of blacks voted for Obama and 88% of whites voted for McCain.

Table 1:

### SOUTHERN RACE GAP - 2008 POLL DATA

| | Alabama | Arkansas | Florida | Georgia | Kentucky | Louisiana | Mississippi | North Carolina | South Carolina | Tennessee | Virginia |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Black Vote % for Obama | 98% | 95% | 96% | 98% | 90% | 94% | 98% | 95% | 96% | 94% | 92% |
| Black Vote % for McCain | 2% | 5% | 4% | 2% | 8% | 4% | 2% | 5% | 4% | 6% | 8% |
| White Vote % for Obama | 10% | 30% | 42% | 23% | 36% | 14% | 11% | 35% | 26% | 34% | 39% |
| White Vote % for McCain | 88% | 68% | 56% | 76% | 63% | 84% | 88% | 64% | 73% | 63% | 60% |

Source: 2008 *National Election Pool* exit polls

These results indicate that race played a decisive role in how the South voted. Fisher (2014, 109) identifies the race gap in American politics as the single largest divide in the contemporary electorate by a substantial margin. The gaps in Southern states strongly support this argument.

The 2008 campaign and Obama's first term heightened the role of racial attitudes in the United States. Sides and Vavreck (2013, 208) note that this was especially true in presidential approval ratings, attitudes towards certain public policies, and at the ballot box. Among African Americans, Obama's presidency was an important personal accomplishment, which propelled them towards the fulfillment of the American Dream (Fisher 2014, 125). A Pew poll conducted in 2009 found that a majority of blacks (54%) believed that Obama's barrier-breaking election improved race relations in the United States. Pew also found that twice as many blacks in the United States (39%) said that the "situation of black people in this country" is better than it had been five years earlier, compared to only 20% saying so in 2007 (*Pew* 2010). These perceived improvements came because of the symbolic nature of Obama's 2008 victory as a success of the Civil Rights Movement. On the other hand, Pew conducted a poll in 2011 as the 150$^{th}$ anniversary of the start of the Civil War was approaching, and found that effects of the Civil War still linger today. More than half of Americans (56%) still say the Civil War is relevant in today's society (*Pew* 2011). The poll also asked whether statements praising Confederate leaders are appropriate or inappropriate today, and found that 49% view such statements as inappropriate, and 36% view such praise as appropriate. White Southerners had a different perspective, as a majority (52%) believed praising Confederate leaders was still appropriate in today's society (*Pew* 2011). This is notable, because it highlights racial tension that still exists, and partly explains how such a wide gap existed in the 2008 election between whites and blacks.

The 2012 election produced a very similar outcome to 2008, as Obama defeated Republican challenger Mitt Romney. Obama's electoral vote count decreased to 332, and North Carolina shifted to Romney, but nonetheless, Obama still convincingly won the election (*Government Printing Office* 2013). He continued to do poorly in the Deep South, as his share of the white vote actually declined from 11% to 10% in Mississippi, and he only garnered 15% of the white vote in Alabama (*National Election Pool* 2012). In recapping the 2012 election, David Bositis (2012b, 3) explains that black turnout was down slightly from its record heights in 2008, but in Ohio, the most important contest of the election, the black share of the vote increased

dramatically. Florida, Michigan, Missouri, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Virginia also saw strong black voter turnout, which benefited Obama.

Barack Obama's two presidential victories produced similar results, as the electorate remained remarkably stable between 2008 and 2012. Obama benefited in both elections because the nonwhite electorate was considerably larger than it had been in previous cycles (Fisher 2014, 116). Obama, like most Democratic nominees, enjoyed substantial minority support, and was able to parlay this support into two victories. One of the more alarming trends from Obama's elections was the fact that negative attitudes towards African Americans appeared to depress support for Obama in the 2008 and 2012 elections (Sides and Vavreck 2013, 176). Despite the economic conditions of the country in 2008 and 2012, Obama performed significantly worse among whites than models expected, and race could have played a pivotal role in this fact (Fisher Forthcoming, 2). Also of note, states with larger African American populations saw their white population vote strongly against Barack Obama (Fisher Forthcoming, 11). Elements of racism clearly played some part in how Americans voted, which reduced Obama's margin of victory.

Nowhere was racism more pronounced than the South during 2008 and 2012. The Republican presidential nominees in both years benefited immensely from the race gap as they won a larger share of the white vote from every state that had been part of the Confederacy than they won nationwide (Fisher Forthcoming, 13). Fisher connects this Civil War disparity to the similarities that the 2008 and 2012 elections shared with the 1860 election. In 2008, Obama carried every state that Lincoln had won in 1860, and in 2012, he won all of the same states again, with the exception of Indiana. Fisher also points out that depending on how well or poorly Lincoln performed in states in 1860, directly correlated to Obama's performance in those states in 2008 and 2012 (Fisher Forthcoming, 13). This close relationship reinforces the findings from the 2011 Pew poll cited earlier, which found that 56% of Americans still said that the Civil War was relevant; because from an electoral standpoint, attitudes towards race have not changed much, only the party voters support has switched (*Pew* 2011). This sway has occurred because the parties have completely reversed their positions on equality for African Americans. The actions of FDR, Truman, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon altered the political landscape, but the electorate has deciphered how the parties changed, and in 2008 and 2012, voters aligned very closely to how they would have in 1860.

Obama's two elections also fit the pattern of how the race gap has unfolded in all presidential elections since the Civil Rights Movement. As Fisher (Forthcoming, 11) notes, Obama overwhelming won the black vote and won the Hispanic vote, while the Republican nominee won the majority of the white vote – minority voters made the difference in Obama's margin of victory in nine states in 2008 and fourteen in 2012, and carried Obama to the presidency. This fits the trend that developed as a result of the enfranchisement of African Americans and minorities by the Democrats and the appeals to whites through the Southern Strategy employed by the Republicans.

**Predictions**

With the 2016 presidential election two years away, it is apparent that there are already national trends in play that will dictate who might win the White House. Throughout the past decades, African Americans have become the most reliable voting bloc for the Democratic Party, and other minorities have become part of the Democratic coalition. On the other hand, following Nixon's Southern Strategy, Republicans have won elections due to overwhelming support from whites. Going forward, the Southern Strategy is unsustainable for the Republican Party because the American electorate is undergoing fundamental changes. Abramowitz and Teixeira illustrate that the size of the nonwhite electorate has been consistently increasing since 1952, and that nonwhite voters are becoming more and more Democratic (Abramowitz and Teixeira 2013). This trend poses a significant threat to the future of the Republican Party, since the current strategy is focused on maximizing white voter support. As the percentage of the nonwhite electorate continues to increase, the Southern Strategy will not be sustainable as overwhelming support from minorities will be able to consistently propel Democratic candidates to the presidency. African Americans and Hispanics are the main minorities that make up the Democratic voting bloc, but it is Hispanics that are seeing a rapid rise in electoral participation. The Hispanic population more than doubled from 22 million to 50 million between 1990 and 2010, and over 12 million Hispanics voted in 2012, representing a 25 percent increase from 2004 (Fisher 2014, 113). This is a concern to Republican strategists, as Latinos represented 9% of the vote in 2008 and supported Obama 67% to 31% for McCain and increased to 10% of the electorate in 2012 and supported Obama in a margin of 71% to 27% for Romney (*National Election Pool* 2008; 2012). The growing size of the nonwhite electorate poses a serious issue for Republican strategists in 2016.

A Republican nominee could face another challenge in the road to the presidency for 2016. The changing racial composition of voters is accelerating greatly among younger voters. As Table

3 from Pew indicates, among voters ages 18-29, 42% were nonwhite, following the pattern of a steady increase since 2000. Table 4 details how younger voters are also increasingly more Democratic and liberal in their ideology (*Pew* 2012). If this trend continues, the Republican Party must adopt a new strategy to confront the disconcerting fact that their base is naturally shrinking due to a younger and more diverse electorate.
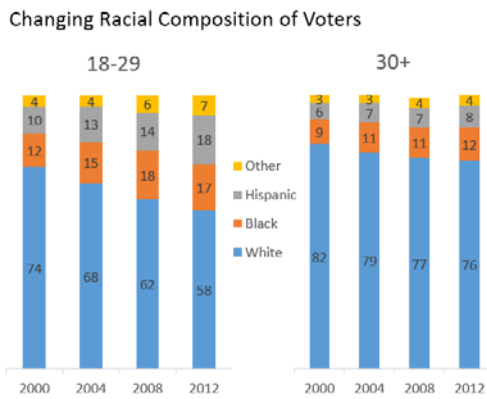
Table 3:                                                              Table 4:



| Young Voters More Democratic, Liberal | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Total | 18-29 | 30-44 | 45-65 | 65+ |
| *Party Affiliation* | % | % | % | % | % |
| Republican | 32 | 26 | 32 | 34 | 37 |
| Democrat | 38 | 44 | 37 | 37 | 36 |
| Independent/Other | 29 | 29 | 31 | 29 | 27 |
| | | | | | |
| *Ideology* | | | | | |
| Conservative | 35 | 26 | 34 | 37 | 42 |
| Moderate | 41 | 41 | 40 | 42 | 39 |
| Liberal | 25 | 33 | 26 | 22 | 19 |

Source: *Pew* 2012

In order to combat this reality, Republicans must become more attractive to minorities and younger voters. As the electorate becomes increasingly nonwhite and younger generations replace the most Republican age group (65+), it will be nearly impossible for Republicans to win the presidency. If Republicans rest in their strong gains in the 2014 Midterm elections, they face a tremendous disadvantage in 2016. The 2014 elections had the lowest turnout since World War II, and a very white electorate. The Republican win highlights how the GOP can successfully win elections with extremely low voter turnout and a white electorate as whites represented 75% of the electorate and voted for Republicans 60%-38% nationally (*National Election Pool* 2014). However, this strategy cannot be sustained with the current trajectory of the parties and their coalitions. Based on the fact that presidential elections have had greater voter turnout of minorities, 2016 presents a real challenge to the Republican Party. This is not to say it is impossible for a Republican to win – President Obama's approval ratings may make it extremely hard for any Democrat to win in a general election, similarly to how Bush's poor ratings impacted Republicans in 2008. However, based on the structural factors facing the parties, Republicans need to make major strides to enfranchise minorities in order to level the playing field for 2016. If the Republican majority in Congress can produce legislation to improve the immigration system and embrace issues that concern Hispanics and African Americans, the road to the presidency may be much easier.

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Conversely, if all things remain the same, and if the extremists in the Tea Party exert further influence over the Republican Party, Republicans may lose all minorities for at least another generation.

**Conclusion**

Obama's rise to the presidency was the culmination of almost eighty years of political change amongst the party coalitions. Franklin Delano Roosevelt initiated the change as he made the Democratic Party acceptable for African Americans to support through his economic policies in the New Deal. The end of World War II and the ensuing post-war prosperity enabled Harry Truman license to expand on civil rights reforms, where he ultimately desegregated the military. John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson would have a profound impact on the plight of African Americans through their support of the Civil Rights Movement and reforms that would get passed during the 1960s. The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 by Democratic presidents won over African Americans and caused blacks to become the most reliable voting bloc for the Democratic Party.

The overt courting of African Americans by Democratic presidents alienated white Southern Democrats, who had inherited the Party of the Confederacy. As racism played a major role in Southern politics, the National Republican Party under Richard Nixon made a tactical decision to appeal to the racist Democratic establishment in the South during the 1968 election. As a result, the Southern Democrats who served as the backbone of FDR's New Deal coalition defected for the Republican Party in 1972, and have now become the strongest bloc for Republican presidential candidates, with the lone exceptions being the candidacies of Southern Democratic governors Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton.

The issue of civil rights and racial equality have either tacitly or overtly dominated presidential politics for almost eighty years. The issue of race gave the Democratic Party a strong governing coalition from the time of Roosevelt's New Deal through Nixon's Southern Strategy. However, the Southern Strategy was the perfect counterstrategy, as it led to an era of Republican dominance for seven out of the ten presidential elections from 1968 through 2004. Barack Obama's victories in 2008 and 2012 signaled a decline in the Southern Strategy's strength and the 2016 presidential election will provide clarity on whether Obama's victories have indicated a larger electoral shift that will make it difficult for Republicans to win back the White House. The Republican Party must make inroads into minority communities in order to have a chance in 2016,

2020, and all future presidential elections. The current electoral alignment built upon racial lines now favors the Democratic Party, which could lead to decades of dominance as the Southern Strategy's influence wanes. How the parties respond will dictate whether race will continue to loom over presidential politics or a realignment of the party coalitions will occur.

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