Partisanship and Ideological Changes in an Evolving Southern State

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Introduction

Similar to some other southern states, politics in the Old North State is only competitive at select levels of government. The Democratic Party in North Carolina typically has relative success across state and local elections, but the Republicans Party dominates national-level elections. Yet, like much of its southern brethren, North Carolinians have witnessed a growing number of Republicans elected to state and local offices, evident in the results of the 2010 state legislative elections. Like other one-party southern states, North Carolina developed into a politically competitive, two-party state. Despite this increasing party competition, there are certain offices that remain the purview of one party or the other; the Democratic Party, for example, routinely controls the Governor’s mansion as there have been only two Republican Governors since World War II, while the Republican Party has largely represented North Carolinians in the United States Senate (at least since the 1970s).

North Carolina appears to have ushered in a new era of politics with the new century, raising novel questions about state politics and voting behavior. In addition to understanding within state political dynamics, politics in many southern states are demonstrating a renewed interest as researchers seek answers to questions about southern partisanship and ideology, which is the focus of this exploratory research. I examine similarities and differences of party affiliation and ideology among North Carolinians in the 2000s; recognizing the unexpected turn of events observed during this period, I assess whether this period is a beginning to a slowing of the Southern Republican rise of the previous 40 years, or whether these changes are simply a temporal anomaly.

Since the 1960s, southern voting behavior has gradually developed from the Solid Democratic South into a competitive region enabling both parties to be viable at the state, local, and national level (Black and Black 2002). Changes in the composition of the southern electorate, due to the in-migration of
non-southerners, increasing urbanization, and growing minority populations, have created more politically diverse state populations (Winders 2005; Hood et al 2004; Shafer 2006). This diversity contributes to the complex and evolving relationship between party affiliation and ideological preference among southern voters. Understanding the interplay of this newly diversified south and voters’ partisan and ideological incongruence dictates a distinct per state approach to analyze and predict voting trends in this dynamic and influential region.

The Establishment of New Southern Politics

The success of Republican presidential candidates in the south beginning in the late-1960s did not immediately translate to success in state and local races or a dramatic shift in party identification. According to Abramowitz and Saunders (1998), a majority of southern whites (64%) identified with the Democratic Party in 1978. By the mid-1990s, southern white support for the Democratic Party fell to 48 percent, while northern white support decreased by only 5 percent (Abramowitz and Saunders, 1998). Borch and Weakliem (2006) confirm this Democratic decline and the slower levels of change in affiliation by southern white voters compared to their northern counterparts. Their study shows that between 1976 and 1994, Democratic Party identification declined to 48 percent from 54 percent while identification for the Republican Party increased from 32 percent to 41 percent (Borch & Weakliem, 2006). Although Republican support grew exponentially in the south, registered southern Democrats continued to outnumber southern Republicans by more than a three-to-two ratio during this same time period, revealing the enduring strength of the conservative Democrat (Black & Black 2002) and the distinct influence of ideology on southern voting behavior (Stanley 1998, Hillygus & Shields 2008).

Ideology has a more pronounced effect on southern voting behavior than in any other region in the country, often leading to the use of divisive issues such as race and religion to pressure voters against their party identification (Hillygus and Shields 2008). Hillygus and Shields (2008:518), in their research on presidential vote choice, contend that the Southern party transformation “. . . to a two-party competitive region has had a number of dramatic political implications, [and] this realignment has not
entirely resolved individual-level ideological cross Pressures among voters in the South.” From Nixon’s Southern Strategy to the influence of conservative evangelicals in subsequent decades, southern voters’ decisions are repeatedly complicated by the choice between ideology and party identification (Hillygus and Shields 2008, Sears and Valentino 2005).

Carmines and Stimson (1989) contend that the issue evolution of race begins with the passage of the Civil Rights Act, which divided southern voters in particular, and influenced the perception and change of the terms ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ to be defined by racial policy preferences. Yet, this growing polarization increased voters’ ideological constraint between policy positions on race and other issues, such as the economy (Carmines & Stimson 1989). Valentino and Sears (2005: 284-286) confirm the increased polarization and suggest that while Jim Crow racism is declining, symbolic racism or resentment toward blacks remains unchanged and has a substantial impact on voting behavior among southern white voters (Knuckey 2005, Valentino & Sears 2005). However, their research reveals that “. . . some regularization of ideology and partisanship has occurred independent of race” (Valentino & Sears 2005: 686). Such increased consistency between ideology and partisanship among Southerners provides further evidence of improved stability in party affiliation and voting behavior (Hood et al. 2004).

Valentino and Sears (2005) also find the elements underlying polarization, while based in racial attitudes, co-opted by other conservative-based issues. In their study of the effect of class on partisanship, Nadeau, Niemi, and Stanley (2004) analyze the inverse relationship between party identification and income among southern white voters through the 1990s. More recently, white southerners are found to base party identification on class and income to a greater degree than white voters outside the south leading to more predictable voting patterns (Nadeau, Niemi, and Stanley 2004). Lublin (2004) takes the issue a step further and asserts that economic issues have a greater impact on vote choice and partisanship than racial or social ideological preferences through the 1980s, though abortion and similar issues reach equality by the 1990s. The saliency of social issues in addition to the discord between secular and
religious factions of the Republican Party serve to restrict the potential of a dominant southern Republican Party and sustain a polarized south (Glaser 2006).

Over time the ideological continuum among Southerners, which was once quite constrained, has begun to vary and settle into more conventional distributions. The generally accepted partisan alignment of Southerners across issues suggests the South is no longer the aberrant region of the early 20th Century. More recent research on southern political behavior suggests it is now time to examine the more nuanced aspects of the South – ticket splitting, population dynamics and racial mobilization, and participation (Wattenburg 2002; Shafer 2006; McCarty et al. 2006; Cowden 2001; Burden and Kimball 2002). Yet, there are many Southerners, in keeping with their unique cultural disposition, who are slow to disaffiliate and coordinate their ideological and partisan preferences with apposite precision. Despite contentions that the South has largely assimilated with the rest of the nation, Southern voting remains distinct.

As noted by Abramowitz and Saunders (2008), the changing partisanship among Southerners is deliberate, gradual, and generational. The diffusion of Republican affiliations across Southern states has stabilized as the percentage differences between parties across states have aligned somewhat over the last decade (Hood et al 2003). As Southerners wrestle to reconcile their partisan tendencies with their ideological dispositions, particularly across issues, these efforts are complicated further by growing population diversity and religious factions (Hillygus and Shields 2008). Consequently, given the ideological fissures that arise based on such pressures – e.g., increased Latino populations and intra-party estrangement over socially conservative issues – ideological dispositions across the South will likely remain unclear. In fact, Hillygus and Shields (2008: 518) suggest that this dissonance of ideological “… preferences in the South are unlikely to change dramatically in coming years.”

North Carolina: Anomalous or Analogous?

North Carolina’s history of fairly competitive elections, particularly since the 1960s, and unique demographic characteristics make it an appropriate selection for further investigation of Southern partisan identity and political ideology. In fact, as Christensen (2008) succinctly illustrates, North Carolina is a
political paradox; in comparison to its Southern neighbors, it is one of the more progressive southern states (Knotts and Cooper, 2008). Still, the 2008 selection of President Obama challenged the conventional wisdom of North Carolina politics. Since President Carter’s election in 1976, the only presidential Democratic candidate that came close to victory in North Carolina was fellow southerner Bill Clinton. The 1992 election was followed by successive Republican victories even with native son John Edwards on the 2004 Democratic Party ticket. President Obama’s win in North Carolina was the Democrats’ first presidential victory in North Carolina since 1976 (and third since 1964); yet, the margin of victory was by less than one percent. And, thus the evolving paradox: over the last decade, North Carolina politics has comprised of Democratic Party control in elections for state and local offices, Republican Party dominance in elections to national office (US Senate and Presidential), and a fairly consistent division between parties across the North Carolina Congressional delegation. However, the Democrats’ success in national campaigns in 2008 and the 2010 Republican takeover of the state legislature challenge these assertions.

Exemplified in the state’s moderate stance towards civil rights legislation and opposition to the candidacies of George Wallace and Barry Goldwater, North Carolina’s partisan diversity emerged much earlier than other Southern states (Lassiter 2006; Eamon 2008; Prysby 2008; Fleer 2008; Cooper 2008). Conversely, voters still chose to support arch-conservative Jesse Helms for over 20 years (Cooper 2008). The most competitive southern state, North Carolina’s elections for statewide and national offices are generally decided by margins of less than 10 percentage points (NC SBOE 2010). Also deemed the most competitive state nationally in terms of U.S. Senate elections from 1990 to 2008, North Carolina has more experience with viable two-party politics in addition to Republican Party identification and voting patterns than the rest of the South. Cooper and Knotts aptly summarize the resulting picture of North Carolina (2008: 302):

Not surprisingly, the new politics of North Carolina differ substantially from politics during Key’s time. Two-party competition is alive and well, and increasing numbers of
African American and women officeholders have changed the way the state is governed. New voters are pouring into the state in record numbers, and these voters do not look like the old ones – they are more likely to be Hispanic, less likely to be African American, more likely to have grown up in the Northeast, less likely to be born-again Christians, and more likely to have graduated from college.

Many voters in North Carolina are of the southern populist persuasion, i.e., it is not uncommon to hear of conservative Democrats voting Republican (e.g., the “Reagan Democrats” or “Dixiecrats”) and moderate Republicans voting for Democrats. These cross-party voting habits are recognizable through the increase in voters registering as Independents (or unaffiliated as it is defined in North Carolina). In 1970, Independents comprised 2.5 percent of registered voters and this low percentage proved rather stable for 20 years (through 1990 at 5.5%). The 1990s proved a point of departure from registration with either of the two primary parties (either Democratic or Republican) resulting in a substantial increase in Independent registration, doubling from almost 9 percent in 1994, to 18.5 percent in 2004 (and by 2010, it was 24%) (NC BOE 2010). While Independents lean toward one party or another and thus, are not truly independent; these registration numbers are evidence of a growing disdain with both parties, indicating that the cross-pressures North Carolina voters experience between partisanship and ideology may continue.

Although North Carolina is more progressive on the issue of race relations than its neighbors, race has and will continue to be a major factor affecting party affiliation and voting behavior in the state. The mobilization of black voters historically generated (by reaction) Republican growth and consequently, sub-state party competition, but this reactive Republican “activism” may be an indicator of the limitations faced by the Republican Party in the south (Hood, Kidd, and Morris 2004, 2008, 2010). Hood, Kidd, and Morris (2010) demonstrate that while black mobilization increases Republican strength for all southern states, Republican strength also results in greater levels of black mobilization, but for only the states of the Deep South and North Carolina. This “feedback loop” could provide further insight into the success of
2010 Republican candidates in southern state legislatures, particularly Alabama and North Carolina, states which experienced increased black mobilization during the 2008 election (Hood, Kidd, and Morris 2010).

Ideology and partisanship changes in North Carolina are also shaped by population shifts, expressly the growing population of Hispanic voters and increasing numbers of in-migrants from the North (Hood, Kidd, and Morris 2010, Hood and McKee 2010). Hood and McKee (2010) contend that migrants are less likely to have strong ideological views or partisan identification than native North Carolina voters, furthermore, natives are more likely to identify as Republicans than are migrants. In addition, the registration levels of migrants are gradually increasing, which could indicate a rise in moderate voting and unaffiliated registration in the state (Hood, Kidd, and Morris 2010, Hood and McKee 2010).

As Lassiter (2006:273) fittingly describes “... rural white residents, working class voters, and affluent suburban professionals do not fit smoothly into a stable political coalition, especially in times of social crisis or economic downturn.” During a time of economic uncertainty, the North Carolina electorate is without a consistent identity. In evaluating whether North Carolina’s fluctuating voting behavior is the beginning of an in-state “realignment,” or merely the function of the atmosphere of the specific elections, I examine trends in political ideology and party identification from 2005 through 2010. By exploring these variables, I assess whether the North Carolina electorate is more analogous to its southern brethren or whether North Carolina is a southern anomaly in which forces that catalyzed partisan realignment are beginning to fade.

Data & Methods

To determine alignment between party identification and political ideology, I use survey data between 2005 and 2010.¹ Using survey data permits us to assess self-placement on both ideology and

¹ All survey data are from the Elon University Poll (http://www.elon.edu/e-web/elonpoll/). To analyze the relationship between party identification and political ideology, survey data from the Elon University Poll are utilized. These data are collected using the following
partisan scales to determine whether citizens are consistent in their evaluation as well as to determine the ideological composition of Independents, who should differ in their behavior. Obviously, the expectation is that those identifying themselves as liberal are likely to identify with the Democratic Party and those identifying themselves as conservatives are most likely to identify with the Republican Party. More difficult is the expectation involving moderates. It is expected that those identifying themselves as moderates demonstrate a greater propensity to identify as Independents, thus hold weaker partisan and ideological ties relative to long term residents (see Hood & McKee 2010). However, we must also consider other partisans that identify as moderates. These trends, in conjunction with observations of those Independents that register ideological identities more consistent with the two parties, will provide information about the overall direction of moderate support.

By delineating the partisan identities as well as delineating moderates by party identity, the partisan and ideological perspectives emerging in North Carolina can be examined. These trends observed in North Carolina may also inform other states as to their potential changes in partisan and ideological orientations. Moreover, this analysis may clarify at whose expense – Democrats or Republicans – are these increasing numbers of Independents being borne. In doing so, it may lend some understanding about which party is alienating potential members and lead to further research that explores the underlying dynamics of these party averse individuals.

Findings

There is evidence of political moderation among North Carolinians. The softening of liberal support for

question: “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?”; “When it comes to politics do you usually think of yourself as conservative, moderate, or liberal?”. For this study, the five surveys used are: November 2005, November 2006, September 2007, October 2008, October 2009. These time frames (months) are used in order to compare changes in party identification and political ideology over the time period 2005 to 2010. The month & year of the survey, sample size, and margin of sampling error are: November 2005-476, +/- 4.5; November 2006-789, +/- 3.9; September 2007-864, +/- 2.7; October 2008-797, +/- 3.5; October 2009-703, +/- 3.8; October 2010-515, +/-4.4.
the Democratic Party, the minimal decline of conservative Democrats, and fairly consistent conservative element among Republicans from 2005 to 2010 show moderate characteristics of the electorate are robust and continuing to expand. Figure 1 depicts relatively stable conservative support for the Republican Party at around 57 percent, however moderates steadily decline to 15 percent by 2010, a 17 percent reduction from 2005. Another significant decrease occurring, shown in Figure 2, is in the strength of liberal Democrats, which experienced a decline of more than 20 percent. These weakening relationships, in addition to the slight decrease in conservative Democrats and the stability of moderate Democrats, provide evidence of moderation. This trend is displayed further in gains made in Independent affiliation (see Figure 3).

**Figures 1 & 2 about here**

As shown in Figure 3, affiliation as an Independent, which addresses one of the central questions guiding this analysis, accounts for much of the direct ideological departure among liberal Democrats and moderate Republicans. Independent identification among all three ideological dispositions significantly increases from 2005 to 2010. Contrary to the assertion that polarization occurs during election years, liberal Independents increase during the election years of 2008 and 2010. From these data, there is a definite surge of Independent affiliation in North Carolina regardless of ideology or electoral circumstance.

**Figures 3 about here**

These changes in ideological dispositions of Independents suggest moderation among North Carolinians. To explore this partisanship and ideological moderation of North Carolinians further, these ideological moderates are evaluated. As confirmed by data displayed on Figure 4, there is definite moderation among Independents, which is to be expected of ‘moderates’; we also see evidence of moderation by Democrats, who mirror the Independent pattern somewhat, but particularly during the past few years. As expected, those who identify as Republicans do not identify themselves as ideological moderates.
The moderation among North Carolinians is confirmed by voter registration figures (see Figure 5); Republican registration shows a 4 percent decline from nearly 35 percent in 2005 to 31 percent in 2010, while Independent (unaffiliated) registration increases 6 percent from 18 percent in 2005 to almost 24 percent in 2010. Democrats experience a 2 percent decline during this same time period, which is similar to the 4 percent Republican decline noted. The declines in Democratic and Republican registration mirror patterns among individuals professing a moderate ideology. Support for such divergence during the election years is confirmed somewhat in an analysis of the relationship between party identification and ideology – these measures strengthen markedly during the 2008 election year (See Table 1). Yet, this same analysis provides some interesting results for other years, particularly for 2010. As is evident in Table 1, the strength of association between party identification and ideology is rather robust across all years; however, in 2010, this relationship wanes considerably, which suggests evidence of a ‘Republican reaction’ (albeit slight) to the moderation trend witnessed in prior years.

Discussion

In this rather fundamental look at partisanship and ideology of North Carolinians, we attempt to assess the current electoral changes in the state’s voting pattern to determine if North Carolina remains analogous with Southern states or if it is exhibiting anomalous behavior. While the evidence in this research points to a changing North Carolina electorate, a definitive assessment must be deferred until after another Presidential election cycle. Yet, until then, these results do provide insight into North Carolinians’ ideological and partisan dispositions that portend rather interesting assessments for politics in the state.
Our confidence in these preliminary findings is supported somewhat by current research exploring legislative and opinion cohesiveness within states; these results in North Carolina depict the state as somewhat fluid and changing as well as being one of the more conservative states to consistently support Democratic candidates (see Shor 2009; Shor et al 2010). Likewise, we observe an overall trend toward the political center in North Carolina, which is slightly right of center. This recalibrated “center” aids in explaining the state’s move to the political center, which is corroborated by partisan, ideological, and voter registration trends. In addition, over these few years there appears to be a decline among individuals labeling themselves as liberal Democrats. As noted by Shor (2009) and Shor et al. (2010), there may be a changing characterization of Democrats emerging; as moderate Democrats, who now comprised slightly more than 40 percent of the Democratic Party, approach majority status, the party sentiment must follow. Though not earth shattering, the composition of moderates, when viewed compared to the decline in both liberal and conservative Democrats, provides some indication as to where Independents may align, i.e., should Independents prefer moderation as indicated herein, the Democrats stand to benefit from this moderation. If such partisan and ideological patterns sustain, this may rekindle an interest in the prototypical “Southern Democrat” and their presence in North Carolina politics, particularly if, as noted in Hood et al. (2004), that proportion of the electorate that is conservative, but not socially conservative, is forced to choose between the Democratic and Republican parties.

The feedback loop noted by Hood, Kidd, and Morris (2010) appears to have materialized in 2010, but, while it may advantage Republicans during elections, this ‘push back’ appears, as they note, to be more about mobilization, which in this research appears to be the mobilization of Independents (as well as the winning party’s base). Republicans are the electoral benefactors when Independents (as well as Democrats) are not mobilized; as Independents tend to mirror the partisan and ideological composition of Democrats more than Republicans, they are important for Democratic success. Mobilization appears to
be a key determinant of the 2010 elections in North Carolina. Using enthusiasm data\(^2\) as a proxy for likely electoral mobilization during the 2010 election, Republican enthusiasm far outpaced Democrats (by 13%) and Independents (by 22%). More importantly, this mobilization (or lack thereof), while providing electoral windfalls, does not translate into permanent party gains for Republicans. As a result, the ‘feedback loop’ to which Hood, Kidd, and Morris (2010) refer is likely due to the interaction of Republican ‘activism’ and black mobilization appears, at least here, to be more of a function of Independent oscillation across elections.

Another interesting finding related to the changing composition of the Democratic Party is the stability of moderate Democrats over this time period; this pattern seems indicative of a trend that defies Southern political patterns. Results from this analysis offer preliminary insight into a changing electorate that appears to still be influenced by southern ideological foundations, but exhibit characteristics that are more analogous with states outside of the south. This finding speaks to the cross pressures between ideology and partisanship evident among Southerners (Hillygus and Shields 2008). An increase in Independent identification among all ideological groups coupled with a decrease in Democratic identification by liberals, North Carolina is definitely undergoing change; at this point, we just are not sure how much.

\(^2\) Enthusiasm is measured using a scale of 1 to 10 (where 1 means ‘not at all enthusiastic’ and 10 means ‘extremely enthusiastic’) and culling only those respondents self placing as a 9 or 10 on the scale. The question asks: “Using a scale of 1 to 10 (ROTATED: where |1 means ‘not at all enthusiastic’| and |10 means ‘extremely enthusiastic’|), please tell me how [ROTATED: enthusiastic or unenthusiastic] you are, personally, about the elections this year, or have you not really paid much attention to the election yet?
Figure 1. North Carolina Republican Party Affiliation by Percent Ideology

Figure 2. North Carolina Democratic Party Affiliation by Percent Ideology
Figure 3. North Carolina Independent Party Affiliation by Percent Ideology

Figure 4. Moderate Ideology by Party ID
Figure 5. Voter Registration: Party Identification

- Democrat: 46.69%, 45.93%, 44.96%, 45.66%, 45.44%, 44.60%
- Unaffiliated: 34.55%, 34.70%, 34.37%, 32.06%, 31.73%, 31.58%
- Republican: 18.53%, 19.37%, 20.68%, 22.23%, 22.73%, 23.66%
Table 1. North Carolina Ideology by % Party Identification, 2005-10

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<th>Year</th>
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<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Conservative</th>
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<td>35.8</td>
<td>22.8</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>19.1</td>
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<td>Republican</td>
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<td>31.3</td>
<td>58.1</td>
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<td>42.6</td>
<td>17.4</td>
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<td>29.5</td>
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<td>39.0</td>
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Notes: All data are from Elon University Poll; see footnote 1 for explanation of survey methodology. Results are based on adults. Though represented as 100 percent, due to rounding these totals may not equal 100 percent. Party identification and ideology are self-placed by respondents.
References


