

Polls and Elections

Southern *Discomfort*? Regional Differences in Voter Decision Making in the 2000 Presidential Election

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The South has undergone dramatic changes in population, economics, and partisanship in recent decades, leading scholars to conclude that the New South has lost many of its unique patterns of voting behavior. Using an extensive data set that contains sufficient sample sizes for regional comparisons, we estimate an interactive model of vote choice in the 2000 presidential election to compare the decision making of Southern and non-Southern respondents. We find that the voting calculus of Southern voters remains distinct, particularly for those struggling with cross-pressures between ideology and party identification. These findings have theoretical implications for general models of presidential voting behavior and practical relevance for understanding election outcomes and the future of party politics in the South.

The contemporary American South continues to experience dramatic changes in population, economics, and partisanship that have fundamentally altered the political landscape of not only the region but the entire nation. The wide-ranging effects of these developments on electoral behavior are not entirely understood, but it is unquestionable that the New South remains as important in American politics—particularly presidential elections—as the Old South. With nearly two-thirds of the Electoral College votes needed to win the presidency, the South is a considerable electoral prize.¹ More than a

1. The South is typically defined as the original 11 states of the Confederacy: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, Tennessee, and Virginia.

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decade ago, Black and Black concluded that “as the united South goes: so goes the nation” (1992, 344). It is no coincidence that the only Democrats to win the presidency since 1960 have hailed from former Confederate states (Lyndon B. Johnson from Texas, Jimmy Carter from Georgia, and Bill Clinton from Arkansas). Despite the critical political relevance of the region, Southern voting behavior has been an understudied area research.² To be sure, there is a rich descriptive literature detailing voting trends in the contemporary South (e.g., Black and Black 1992, 2003). Missing, however, is a comprehensive empirical study of the individual-level underpinnings of Southern voting behavior—not only how Southern voters compare to the rest of the electorate but also how they match up to our general theories of political behavior.³

Existing research has long noted that residents of America’s Southern states demonstrate unique patterns of voting behavior—ranging from a substantially lower propensity to register and vote, to an increased likelihood of casting split-ticket ballots (i.e., most often voting for Republican presidential candidates and Democratic congressional candidates), to the transformation from a Democratic stronghold to an increasingly loyal Republican base in recent years (Burden and Kimball 2002; Frymer, Kim, and Bimes 1997; Wattenberg 2002). Empirical models of political behavior regularly include a “South” dummy variable to account for this Southern distinctiveness (e.g., Alvarez and Nagler 1998). Ultimately, however, an indicator variables tells us nothing about why Southern voters are unique or even what factors influence their singular patterns of political behavior. Are these trends attributable to simple differences in the distribution of fundamentals (such as demographics, ideological perspective, or partisan affiliation), or are the decision-making processes of Southern voters actually distinct from the rest of the electorate? More importantly, given the recent partisan realignment of the South, have the distinctive patterns of voting behavior disappeared? Cowden (2001) suggests that we are witnessing the “Southernization of the Nation and the Nationalization of the South.” Shafer and Johnston similarly find evidence of “the nationalization of partisan politics” and the “closing of North/South comparisons” (2001, 623). Is the “South” dummy variable no longer necessary in our general models of presidential vote choice and turnout? Answers to these questions will speak not only to our understanding of recent political transformations in the South but also to our theoretical understanding of voter decision making, and even to our expectations about the future strength of the Republican and Democratic parties in the South.

Using survey data from Knowledge Networks in the 2000 election, we compare the voting calculus of Southern and non-Southern voters. Despite arguments that regional differences may be in decline, we find that the voting calculus of Southern voters differs from the rest of the electorate, with ideology weighed more heavily in the vote choice decision in the South. This effect is particularly pronounced among individuals cross-pressured between their party identification and ideological preferences. These findings suggest that general models of voting behavior should more carefully consider the

2. The more common focus of recent research on Southern politics is related to partisan realignment and race relations in the region (e.g., Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Glaser 1996; Petrocik 1987; Stanley 1988).

3. See Shafer and Johnston (2006) for a notable exception.

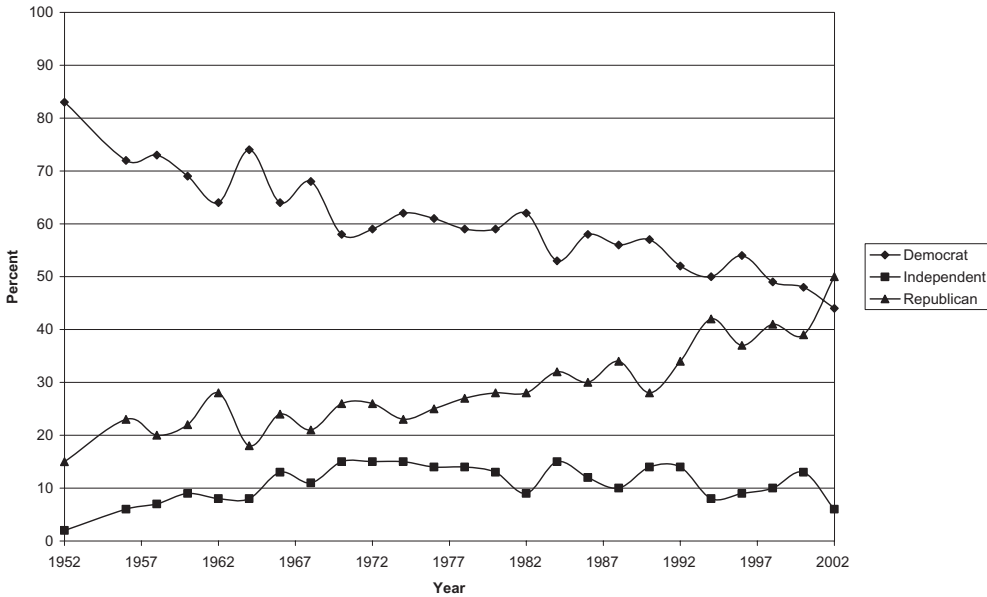


FIGURE 1. Party Identification in the South: 1952-2002.

Source: American National Election Studies Cumulative File 1952-2002.

importance of individual-level differences in decision making if we are to gain a full understanding of presidential voting behavior.

The New South

The Southern region of the United States, defined here as the 11 states of the Old Confederacy, has changed dramatically in recent decades (Lamis 1984; Petrocik 1987; Shafer and Johnston 2006; Stanley 1988). According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the South was the second-fastest-growing region in the country (closely following the West) with a 17% increase in population from 1990 to 2000, adding an additional 14.8 million people.⁴ Furthermore, metropolitan growth increased dramatically in the South—as did the influx of Hispanic residents. Increases in education, income, and the median age have also contributed to the changes across the South (Cobb 1993). Most notable, however, has been the transformation of the South from the heart of Democratic strength during the first part of the twentieth century to the foundation of the contemporary Republican resurgence (Black and Black 2003; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006).

As shown by the now-familiar pattern in Figure 1, increases in Republican Party identification expanded rapidly in the South during the final decades of the previous

4. See the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau Report, <http://www.census.gov/main/www/cen2000.html>.

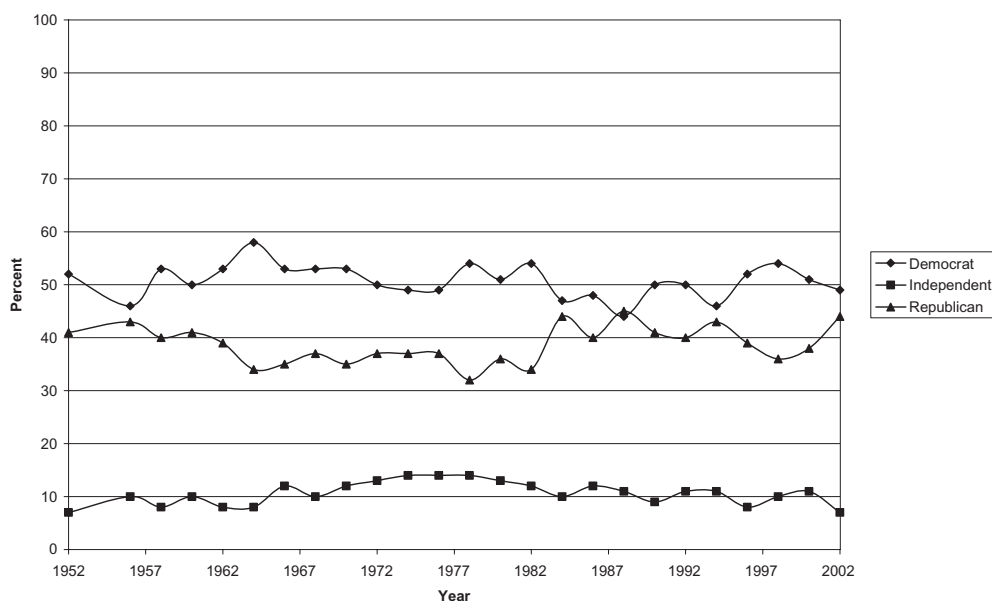


FIGURE 2. Party Identification in the Non-South: 1952-2002.

Source: American National Election Studies Cumulative File 1952-2002.

century.⁵ Simultaneously, the ranks of the Democratic faithful declined. In the rest of the country, changes in party identification were much less dramatic. As shown in Figure 2, party identification in non-Southern states remained comparatively stable, albeit with some growth in Republican identification during the 1980s and the latter part of the 1990s. It is clear that the once solidly Democratic South has now shifted to become a competitive two-party region.

A great deal of research has investigated the rise of the Republican Party across the South, and many scholars have examined the role of race, the influx of new voters, the parental transmission of partisanship to children, and other important political issues and ideological dimensions (see excellent reviews in Cowden 2001; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002). In their seminal work, Abramowitz and Saunders (1998) argue that since the late 1980s and 1990s, Americans have become more willing and able to distinguish between the political parties' ideological positions and thus better able to select the party closest to their own ideological preferences. Ultimately, they conclude that the dramatic change in party fortunes across the South has been the result of increased ideological polarization among elites and political parties at the national level, which, in turn, has made it easier for voters to perceive correctly the ideological distinctions between the two parties and choose an affiliation accordingly.

Historically, Southern voters often found their issue positions or ideologies at odds with those of their national party, most markedly among conservative Southern Demo-

5. Self-identified independents who lean toward the Democratic or Republican Party are classified as partisans throughout our analysis. The results remain largely unchanged if we collapse leaners with independents.

crats.⁶ But the ideological realignment literature suggests these conservative voters have realigned themselves with the GOP, whereas liberal voters have found their way to the Democratic Party, largely eliminating differences between the South and non-South.⁷ Indeed, the 2000 Knowledge Networks data used in our analysis reveal only marginally more conservative Democrats in the South (10%) than in the non-South (8%) and show almost no difference in the distribution of liberal Republicans in the South (5%) and in the non-South (6%).

With the partisan realignment across the South, several scholars have argued that the distinctiveness of Southern political behavior is diminishing. Bartels (2000), for instance, concludes that there are no longer regional differences in the relationship between party identification and presidential vote choice. His analysis finds that the relationship between partisanship and presidential vote choice in the South began to grow during the early 1970s, and by 1996, there were almost no differences in the impact of partisanship on presidential vote choice between the South and non-South. This research suggests that, with the ideological realignment of the electorate, party identification should now enter the voting calculus of Southern voters in the same way it does for voters across the nation.

Yet, even as individuals are realigning themselves along ideological lines, there remain those voters who are cross-pressured between their ideological views and their partisan attachments, and it remains unclear whether Southerners and non-Southerners resolve these tensions in different ways at the ballot box. Existing research has not adequately tested for differences in the voting calculus of Southern and non-Southern voters. Bartels's regional comparison considers only the bivariate relationship between party affiliation and the vote decision, so it cannot tell us whether conservative Democrats in the South vote in the same way as conservative Democrats in the non-South. As Southern voters have become more aware of the ideological positions of the national political parties, and some have subsequently revised their partisanship based on these ideological comparisons (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998), we expect that ideology may actually weigh *more* heavily than party identification in the vote decisions of Southern voters compared to those outside the South. In other words, we expect that Southerners remain distinct in their voting calculus and that this distinctiveness is rooted in how they weigh policy preferences and partisan attachments in their vote decision.

To a large extent, data limitations have limited a more rigorous regional comparison of voting behavior. Most national surveys include fewer than 300 Southern white voters in an election (Bartels 2000, 41). Furthermore, many Southern respondents reside in more populous rim states such as Florida and Texas—the 2000 National Election

6. These conflicts were at one time based primarily on racial issues (Carmines and Stimson 1989) but in recent years have included a diverse set of policies ranging from gun control to national defense and the welfare state (Abramowitz 1994).

7. Alternatively, new voters have simply entered the voting population aligned with the ideologically correct party. In fact, a good deal of evidence suggests that much of the aggregate change in party identification reflects the entrance of new voting cohorts (Beck 1976; Black and Black 2003; Carmines and Stimson 1989).

Study (NES), for instance, contains just 123 respondents from the Deep South. A sample size of 300 respondents has an imprecise margin of error of $\pm 5.7\%$ at the 95% level of confidence. While the NES is an invaluable data set for national-level analyses of political behavior and attitudes, subsample regional analyses must be conducted carefully and with a good deal of caution given the potential for error with such small regional samples (Hadley 1981).⁸

Partly because of these data limitations, previous research has typically included a simple dummy variable to control or test for the distinctiveness of Southern voters relative to non-Southern voters (Burden and Kimball 2002). Although this approach estimates the mean vote in the South relative to the non-South, it assumes that the population parameters of the theoretically relevant covariates are equal for the two regions. Such an approach assumes, for instance, that the effect of being a Democrat in the South is the same as the effect of being a Democrat in the non-South—perhaps a dubious assumption given the dramatic political and historical forces facing Southern partisans (Black and Black 2003; Shafer and Johnston 2006).⁹ In the analysis that follows, we are able to take advantage of a large election study to better test for differences in the voting calculus of Southern and non-Southern voters.

Data and Methods

Our analysis of Southern distinctiveness in presidential voting relies on the 2000 Knowledge Networks election study. During the 2000 presidential campaign, Knowledge Networks repeatedly interviewed individuals about their presidential vote choice and conducted a massive postelection survey of more than 12,000 respondents, including some 2,500 respondents living in one of the former states of the Old Confederacy.¹⁰ Importantly, although our analysis relies on a postelection measure of presidential vote choice, many of our predictor variables—party identification, ideology, presidential

8. As Prysby correctly argues, "One can use regional subgroups with confidence only when the number of respondents and sampling points is large enough to bring the sampling error within tolerable bounds" (1982, 423).

9. Another approach is to estimate separate regressions for the two regions. This approach, however, does not allow statistical tests of the potentially different impacts of the independent variables (Jaccard and Turrisi 2003).

10. The Knowledge Networks Internet panel consists of a national random sample of households recruited by random-digit dialing who either have been provided Internet access through their own computer or given a WebTV console. Thus, although the surveys are conducted over the Internet, respondents are representative of the U.S. population. By using a methodology that produces a representative sample of the U.S. population, Knowledge Networks overcomes the most common shortfall of previous Internet surveys. The viability of the Knowledge Networks methodology was recently demonstrated in an objective comparison test. Krosnick and Chang (2001) commissioned a set of side-by-side surveys using a single questionnaire to gauge public opinion and voting preferences regarding the 2000 U.S. presidential election from national samples of American adults. The study found that the Knowledge Networks survey is comparable to the random-digit dialing telephone survey and is representative of the U.S. population with respect to respondent demographics, attitudes, and behaviors. Detailed information on the Knowledge Networks methodology can be found on their Web site, <http://www.knowledgenetworks.com>.

approval, and so on—were collected before the beginning of the fall campaign, so that they were not influenced by the campaign itself.¹¹

To compare the voting calculus of Southern and non-Southern voters, we estimate an interactive model of presidential vote choice in the 2000 presidential election. Before comparing the predictors of vote choice of Southern and non-Southern voters, we must first define the “standard” vote choice model. Presidential voting models abound and include all number of predictor variables, ranging from candidate attractiveness to the integrity and trustworthiness of presidential candidates. For the sake of parsimony, we include only variables for which there is a general and unquestionable consensus regarding their theoretical importance in vote choice models. In general, there are two influential schools of thought in American political behavior that have contributed to our standard empirical analyses of individual-level voting behavior. The first, based on the seminal work of Campbell et al. (1960), contends that vote choice is the product of long-term political predispositions and personal background characteristics. The second, the retrospective voting model (Fiorina 1981), suggests that elections are referenda on the performance of the incumbent presidential party. Following previous research (Holbrook 1996), we define the “standard” vote choice equation as the integration of these two models.

The dependent variable in our model is a dichotomous variable scored 1 for those supporting Bush and 0 for those supporting Gore in the 2000 election.¹² Included as independent variables are typical demographic and group controls, including gender, age, and race. The political predisposition variables include party identification (Democrat and Republican indicator variables) and ideology (self-reported liberal to conservative scale). Also included in the model is an interaction of party identification and ideology to capture the effects of individual-level cross-pressures. Again, we hypothesize that the interplay of ideology and party affiliation in the voting calculus of Southern voters is somewhat different from that in the rest of the electorate.¹³

Retrospective evaluations of the incumbent administration are captured with two variables. The retrospective variable often included in forecasting models and models of vote choice is presidential approval—the degree to which the respondent approves of the job the president is doing.¹⁴ We expect, however, that presidential approval is not sufficient to capture retrospective evaluations in the 2000 election. Given the complexity of opinions toward the Clinton administration—a White House characterized by a strong

11. Existing research on the Knowledge Networks data has found minimal panel effects or selection bias (Dennis 2001).

12. Minor party supporters and nonvoting respondents are omitted from the analysis but account for a small percentage of respondents. Ralph Nader supporters accounted for 3.4% of the original sample (2.0% among Southern respondents), and Pat Buchanan supporters accounted for less than 1% of respondents in both the South and non-South.

13. It is important to note that our current focus is on the importance of party identification and ideology in Southern presidential voting behavior. At least in this analysis, we do not enter the debate regarding which particular issues (e.g., race, economic class, defense) lie behind the partisan and ideological orientations of Southern and non-Southern voters.

14. Although a measure of respondents' evaluation of the state of the economy is not available, research has found that presidential approval is a more consistent measure of retrospective evaluations (Holbrook 1996).

economic record but a number of embarrassing personal improprieties—Clinton scored reasonably well in job approval ratings (55% approved) but much worse in favorability marks (only 39% were “somewhat” or “highly” favorable). This disconnect between personal and professional evaluations was unmistakably evident in the 2000 campaign as pundits and journalists debated the role that Clinton should have played in Gore’s campaign, particularly in the South. As reported in the *New York Times*,

Many residents in Arkansas and Louisiana were quite specific in their criticism of Mr. Gore, repeatedly voicing three themes that are leading them to think seriously about voting for Mr. Bush. Most often cited is the vice president’s failure to separate himself from Mr. Clinton’s scandals, which remain an open wound for many . . . And there is also widespread if tentatively voiced sense that Mr. Gore’s personality is simply not as “Southern” as Mr. Bush, that he lacks the easy backslapping boyishness that is the lubricant of the regions politics. (October 15, 2000, p. 28)

Yet others condemned the Gore campaign for not relying more heavily on President Clinton during the campaign. As *New York Times* reporter Rick Perry summarized,

What no Democratic strategist will admit is that there might be a simple, if humiliating, way to galvanize these should-be Democratic states. If anyone can rally the troops across the South, it is Mr. Clinton, but the Gore team remains divided over whether to enlist the President’s help. (October 31, 2000, p. 1)

Recent investigations of the 2000 presidential election have similarly found that presidential approval ratings are an insufficient measure of retrospective evaluations of the Clinton administration (Fiorina, Pope, and Abrams 2003; Hillygus and Jackman 2003). Consequently, we include not only a measure of Clinton’s job approval but also a measure of personal unfavorability toward President Clinton. Our model will allow us to evaluate the relative role of retrospective evaluations in support of Bush or Gore in the 2000 election, but also to determine whether these retrospective considerations were more or less important for Southern voters.

Because we are interested in any differences in the effects of these covariates for Southern voters, we estimate an interactive model in which each of these theoretically relevant variables is interacted with an indicator variable for the South, thereby allowing us to statistically compare the effects of the independent variables for each region. This model allows us to examine the potentially unique decision-making patterns of Southern voters and provides a greater understanding of the role of partisanship on presidential vote choice and a greater understanding of the tumultuous 2000 presidential election.

Findings

Our results show significant differences in the voting calculus of Southern versus non-Southern voters. The conditional coefficients and standard errors from the interactive model (as well as model fit) can be found in Table 1. Highlighted covariates are those for

TABLE 1
Vote Choice in the 2000 Presidential Election

	<i>Non-South</i>		<i>South</i>	
	β	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>SE</i>
Constant	-1.16	1.19	-0.31	0.35
Age	-0.01	0.002	-0.02	0.004
Female	-0.41	0.07	-0.51	0.14
Black	-1.24	0.25	-2.25	0.35
Ideology	1.60	0.18	1.55	0.32
Republican	1.58	0.20	1.30	0.39
Democrat	-0.83	0.16	-1.33	0.30
Ideology * Democrat	-0.46	0.28	0.39	0.52
Ideology * Republican	-0.22	0.30	0.66	0.61
Unfavorability	2.60	0.15	2.72	0.26
Approval	-1.00	0.11	-0.83	0.20
N		10152		
Pseudo R ²		0.52		
% Correctly Predicted		0.86		
Chi-square (df = 10)		18.64*		

Note: Coefficients and standard errors for interactive logit model predicting Bush vote in 2000 election. Chi-square statistic calculated for change between interactive model and restricted model with only South dummy and no interactions between South and other covariates (* $p < .05$). The covariates in bold are those for which there is a statistically significant ($p < .05$) difference between the non-South and South.

which there is a statistically significant difference in effect on presidential vote choice between the South and non-South. The coefficients themselves, however, are not directly interpretable without taking into account both the main and interactive effects (and their standard errors), as well as the values of all other variables in the model. Thus, to evaluate the effect of each of the variables, we calculate the change in predicted probability across each variable's range of values, with the confidence intervals on these predictions calculated using the delta method.¹⁵ These results are presented in Table 2.

Looking first at the demographic variables, we find some interesting comparisons between the South and non-South. As expected, gender had a significant impact on the decision to support Bush or Gore, with women predicted to be 10% (12% in the South) less likely to support Bush, controlling for all else. Notably, the difference in the predicted probability of supporting Bush between blacks and nonblacks and between the South and non-South is substantial, in part because of the nonblack baseline prediction in the South. Outside the South, the predicted probability of supporting Bush is .25 for blacks compared to .53 for nonblacks. In the South, the predicted probability of supporting Bush is .15 for blacks compared to .63 for nonblacks. In other words, the model predicts that 25% of independent blacks in the non-South supported Bush, compared to 53% of independent nonblacks in the non-South. In contrast, only 15% of independent

15. All other variables are held at their means (except in the case of interaction effects), and indicator variables are set to zero. The standard errors for these effects are calculated using the delta method. Given the sample size, most effects, unsurprisingly, are statistically significant.

TABLE 2
 Predicted Change in Probabilities, 2000 Vote Choice

	<i>NonSouth</i>	<i>South</i>
Age	-0.14 (0.0003)	-0.30 (0.01)
Female	-0.10 (0.001)	-0.12 (0.006)
Black	-0.28 (0.01)	-0.48 (0.04)
Ideology (Independent)	0.38 (0.003)	0.35 (0.04)
Republican (moderate)	0.30 (0.02)	0.27 (0.06)
Democrat (moderate)	-0.25 (0.01)	-0.27 (0.001)
Conservative Democrat	0.22 (0.05)	0.41 (0.1)
Liberal Republican	-0.20 (0.04)	-0.24 (0.09)
Clinton Unfavorability	0.57 (0.002)	0.57 (0.02)
Clinton Approval	-0.24 (0.0001)	-0.19 (0.01)

Note: Change in predicted probability of supporting bush between minimum and maximum values (all other variables set to means; dummy variables set to zero). Standard errors in parentheses computed using the delta method.

blacks in the South are predicted to support Bush, compared to 63% of nonblacks. Comparing the relative effects of all predictors, the black indicator variable is the second-largest predictor of the 2000 vote in the South.

One of the more interesting findings is the difference in the total effect of age in the South and non-South. Young voters relative to older voters were more than twice as likely to support Bush in the South compared to the non-South (although the difference is also statistically significant in the non-South). Comparing even the bivariate results illustrates the dramatic difference in support among young people in the South versus the non-South—in the South, 53% of 18-34-year-olds reported voting for Bush, compared to just 44% in the non-South. That these effects hold up even controlling for ideology, party identification, and assessments of the previous administration is an interesting finding that deserves further exploration in future research and is certainly consistent with recent research arguing that the partisan realignment in the South can be attributed (at least in part) to more Republican-leaning cohort entering the electorate (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Carmines and Stimson 1989; Cowden 2001).

Turning to our motivating question, we find that ideology had a considerably larger effect on the voting calculus of partisans in the South than on partisans in the non-South. Liberal Republicans in the South are predicted to be 24% less likely to support Bush than conservative Republicans, compared to a predicted difference of 20% in the non-South.

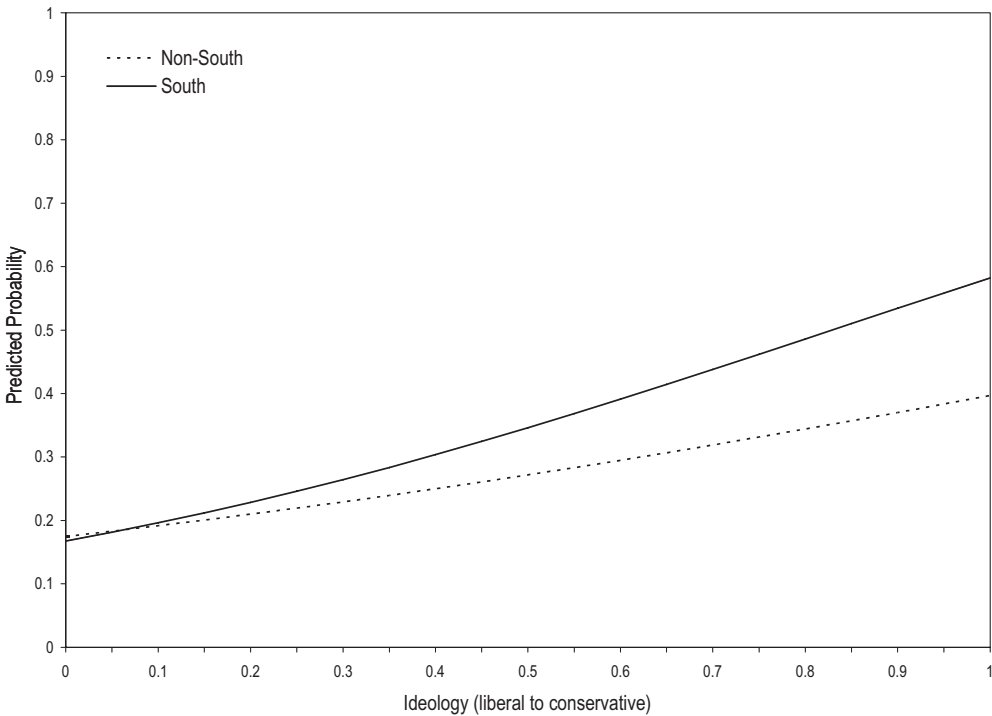


FIGURE 3. Predicted Probability of Bush Vote among Democrats by Ideology.

Notably, conservative Democrats in the non-South were 22% more likely to support Bush over Gore than liberal Democrats. In contrast, conservative Democrats in the South were 41% more likely to support Bush than are liberal Southern Democrats! Figure 3 and Figure 4 graph the predicted probabilities of supporting Bush for Democrats and Republicans across the range of ideology. The role of ideology among Democrats is particularly pronounced. The predicted probability of most conservative Southern Democrats supporting Bush is .58 compared to just .40 for most conservative non-Southern Democrats. So, all else being equal, we would predict that a conservative Democrat in the South supported Bush, whereas a conservative Democrat in the non-South supported Gore.

Finally, we look at the impact of retrospective evaluations of the incumbent administration on vote choice. Perhaps surprisingly, there was no statistically significant difference in the regional effects of these variables on vote choice in the 2000 election. Rather, retrospective considerations played an enormous, but equal, role in the decision making of both Southerners and non-Southerners. As other analyses of the 2000 election have found, the effect of Clinton unfavorability far exceeded the effect of Clinton job approval in both the South and non-South. In other words, Gore was hurt more by feelings of unfavorability toward Clinton than he benefited from positive evaluations of Clinton's job approval. Southerners approving of Clinton were 19% less likely to support

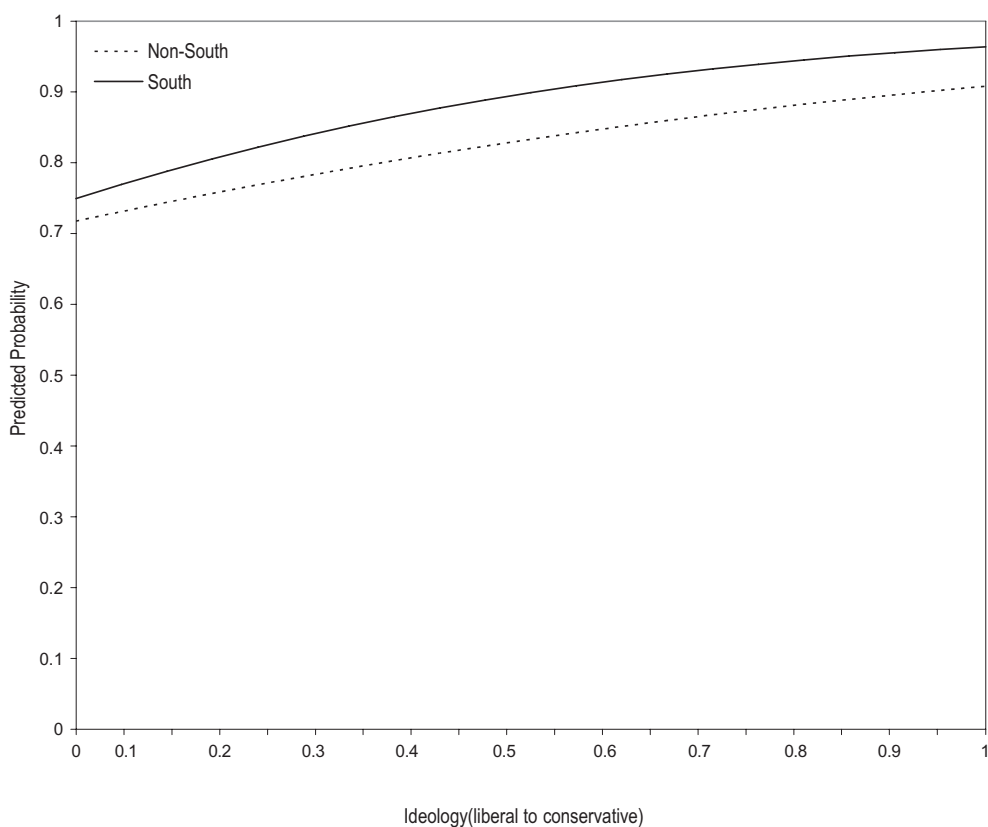


FIGURE 4. Predicted Probability of Bush Vote among Republicans by Ideology.

Bush compared to those disapproving of his job performance (the difference was 24% in non-South). In contrast, those unfavorable toward Clinton were a whopping 55% more likely to support Bush than those most favorable toward Clinton (57% in the non-South). These findings are particularly interesting, as Gore presumably could have played a much greater role in Clinton's job performance than in his personal affairs (no pun intended). Moreover, the Clinton unfavorability measure had a greater substantive effect on the vote decision in the 2000 election than any other variable in the model, including party identification and ideology. Clearly, retrospective evaluations were prominent enough to make the difference between a Bush and Gore vote among both partisans and nonpartisans. These findings may offer one explanation as to why political science forecasting models were so far off the mark in the 2000 election.

As expected, the standard theoretical model of vote choice was an excellent predictor of Bush support in the 2000 election for both Southerners and non-Southerners. The model correctly predicted 86% of votes, including 87% of voters in the South and 85% of voters in the non-South. Critically, the interactive model is a statistical improvement over the typical model including a simple dummy variable for the South instead

of the series of interactions. In assessing the difference in model fit, we find that the chi-square statistic (18.6) is statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Overall, this analysis suggests that the voting calculus of Southern voters in the 2000 presidential election was distinct from the rest of the electorate. We have long known that the South is more conservative than the non-South, but these results suggest that this conservatism plays a larger role in the decision-making of these voters. In contrast, voters outside the South weighed cross-pressures less in their decision making than did Southerners. Furthermore, although our model does not offer a theoretical reason for the difference, young people in the South were particularly likely to support Bush, controlling for all else.

Discussion

In this article, we estimate an interactive model of presidential vote choice in the 2000 election to compare decision making in the South and non-South. We find that the voting calculus of Southern voters remains distinct from the rest of the electorate, with ideological cross-pressures in particular a more prominent consideration in their vote decision. The results suggest that the ubiquitous Southern dummy variable—while still justifiable—is not actually sufficient to account for the differences in voting behavior between the two regions.

Moreover, these findings challenge the suggestion of recent research that the partisan realignment of the South has eliminated the political distinctiveness of the region. Once other fundamental variables are included in a model of vote choice, the finding of Bartels (2000) and Miller (1991) that partisanship has a similar impact in the South and non-South no longer appears to hold true—at least in the 2000 election. Although the transformation of the South from a one-party system to a two-party competitive region has had a number of dramatic political implications, this realignment has not entirely resolved individual-level ideological cross-pressures among voters in the South. In other work, we show that such cross-pressures have a profound impact on how voters respond to campaign information and on the communication strategies of the candidates and parties (Hillygus and Shields 2008).

What are the implications of our findings for the future of the political parties in the South? The fact that Southern voters give less weight to their party identification relative to their ideology than the rest of the electorate suggests that the outlook for the Democratic Party in the South is not as bleak as predicted by some pundits and scholars. Moderate Democratic presidential candidates will no doubt continue to find stronger support in the South than more socially liberal candidates. Furthermore, as long as the growing population of the South includes many who remain divided over ideology and partisan affiliation (e.g., retirees and Latinos), we expect that preferences in the South are unlikely to change dramatically in coming years.

Finally, we should acknowledge that in comparing the voting calculus of the South and non-South, the similarities between the two models are perhaps more striking than the differences. The effects of party identification, ideological considerations, and retro-

spective evaluations (especially unfavorability in 2000) on vote choice indicate that these remain the fundamental predictors of voting behavior. Regardless, the distinctions are certainly notable enough to remind us that there are important differences in the decision-making processes of voters that should be explored more carefully. At a minimum, this investigation begins a long-term research agenda designed to offer a better understanding of the “black box” of Southern voting behavior.

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