

Polls and Elections

Reversal of Fortune: The Political Behavior of White Migrants to the South

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What are the political implications of domestic migration to the American South? Using the American National Election Studies, we track the changing dynamic of party identification and presidential voting among white southern in-migrants and natives. Although it was once thought southern in-migration from the rest of the country contributed to Republican ascendancy in the region, we find that is no longer true. In the 1970s and 1980s, white migrants to the South were more Republican than natives. Today, white southern in-migrants are more likely to affiliate with the Democratic Party and vote Democratic, suggesting population change could ultimately shift the partisan balance in the region.

Keywords: South, voting, party identification, migration, population change

Since the 1960s, the erstwhile Democratic Solid South has transformed into a Republican stronghold at national, state, and local levels (McKee 2012). Beginning with the pivotal 1964 election (Carmines and Stimson 1989), white southerners defected in droves from the Democratic Party (Hillygus and Shields 2009), first in support of Republican presidential candidates and then in their party identification (Black and Black 2002), making them a core component of the national Republican coalition. The South now holds the undisputed status as the most Republican region in the country (Black and Black 2007). While there remains considerable debate over the exact causes of this partisan transformation (see Black and Black 2002; Lublin 2004; Valentino and Sears 2005; Shafer and Johnston 2006; Hayes and McKee 2008; Hood, Kidd, and Morris 2012), scholars have long noted that population change, including white in-migration from the North and African American out-migration during the mid-twentieth century,

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contributed to the Republican realignment of the American South (Wolfinger and Hagan 1985; Bass and De Vries 1995; Scher 1997; Lublin 2004).¹

The pace of domestic migration to the South has increased substantially in recent years. The 2010 decennial census found that the southern population increased 14.3% between 2000 and 2010, more than any other geographic region in the United States (Goldberg 2011).² As Robert Groves, director of the U.S. Census Bureau noted, “The center of population has moved south in the most extreme way we’ve ever seen in history” (Tavernise and Gebeloff).³ Population growth translates into political power, and southern states have seen a net gain of seven electoral votes in the 2010 reapportionment (adding to the six electoral votes gained following the 2000 decennial census). In his analysis of projected changes to the Electoral College between the 2010 and 2020 censuses, Burmila (2009) predicts southern population growth will contribute to the continuing success of Republican presidential candidates. Yet, such a prediction assumes that southern political attitudes and voting patterns are not significantly altered by the growing influx of new migrants.

In this research note, we examine the changing implications of in-migration for party identification and presidential voting patterns in the South. More than 60 years ago, V. O. Key (1949, 83) asked, “What are the political consequences of a veritable flood of newcomers?” Thus, the question we ask is not a new one, but our analysis suggests that the answer has changed. Whereas in-migration from the North was once thought to help the Republican Party, we find that white migrants today are more Democratic in their partisanship and voting behavior than their native southern counterparts. Although political observers have long speculated about this transition and scholars have shown suggestive evidence within individual states and particular elections (e.g., Hood and McKee 2010), the current analysis offers a more complete view of the changing patterns of political behavior in the American South since the 1970s.

Migration and Political Behavior

The southern United States has long been an attractive destination for domestic migrants in search of better job opportunities and warmer weather, but the pace of population growth has increased dramatically since the turn of the century. During the 2000s, the South experienced consistently higher levels of domestic migration compared to the rest of the country. As Wendell Cox (2009) writes, “The 2000s are best characterized as the demographic ‘decade of the South’ because the vast majority of Americans moving between states moved South.”⁴ And, although not the focus of our analysis, the South has

1. Throughout this study we define the South as the eleven ex-Confederate states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.

2. Together, the South and West accounted for 84.4% of the U.S. population growth from 2000 to 2010 (Goldberg 2011).

3. See, for instance, Tavernise and Gebeloff (2011).

4. See the following report that documents the greatest domestic migration since the new millennium has been to the southern United States: <http://www.newgeography.com/content/001294-the-decade-south-the-new-state-population-estimates> (accessed February 23, 2017).

also experienced a surge in foreign immigration, especially from Latin America (McClain et al. 2007). Rising in-migration has been attributed to economic conditions that are favorable to business (e.g., a weak union presence and lower taxes, see Wright 1986), and a more hospitable climate thanks to the invention and widespread use of air conditioning (Arsenault 1984). The primary question motivating our analysis concerns the political implications of these migration patterns. That is, does the political behavior of in-migrants differ from that of native southerners?

There are reasons to suspect few political differences, if any, between migrants and natives. For one, some studies show that migrants move to areas that match their partisan and ideological predispositions (Gimpel 1999; McDonald 2011; Cho, Gimpel, and Hui 2013), suggesting there should be little net political change. For example, Bishop and Cushing (2008) argue that the polarization we see in the country today is attributable in part to geographic political sorting. As such, we might expect that those most willing to migrate to a Republican-dominated southern state are those most favorable to such political leanings.⁵ Another line of research emphasizes the tendency for migrants to change their beliefs to match their political environment (McBurnett 1991; MacDonald and Yantek 2004; Lyons 2011). From this view, the process of assimilation should bring the party preferences of migrants in line with their new surroundings, again resulting in no net change in the politics of the region.

Others, however, conclude that large migrant populations can create a fundamental political shift in their new community (e.g., in the case of Florida, see Parker 1988; for Texas, see Frenreis 1989; for North Carolina, see Hood and McKee 2010). Historically, scholars have concluded that northern in-migration contributed to the realignment of the South to the Republican Party (e.g., Wolfinger and Hagan 1985; Bass and De Vries 1995; Scher 1997; Lublin 2004). In-migrants' influence was particularly important during the early stages of building the Grand Old Party (GOP). For instance, in the 1950s the first southern Republican congressmen to win seats outside traditional mountain Republican strongholds located in east Tennessee, western North Carolina, and south-western Virginia (Heard 1952), represented "New South" districts in burgeoning metropolitan centers (like Charlotte, NC and St. Petersburg, FL) attractive to northern in-migrants (see Black and Black 2002). In these settings, Republican migrants established a critical mass that assisted in mobilizing native southern conservatives to shift their party identification and voting behavior (Niemi, Weisberg, and Kimball 2010). According to Scher (1997, 143–44), "one of the most important factors contributing to the growth

5. There is, of course, considerable heterogeneity in the political environment within the South; for instance, urban areas are more Democratic than rural areas (e.g., McKee 2008). For instance, in an assessment of partisan polarization in Texas, Myers (2013) finds that the Republican Party has grown in suburban and rural areas heavily populated by Anglos whereas urban sections of the state that also contain a higher share of African Americans and Latinos are becoming more Democratic. And at the neighborhood level, an experimental study by Gimpel and Hui (2015) finds that individuals rely on partisan and demographic cues to sort themselves into politically like-minded communities. Hence, it might be the case that northern liberals are more willing and likely to move to the most liberal areas of an otherwise red state. This more microlevel analysis is definitely needed, but this paper is concerned with the macropattern of whether white migrants to the South behave differently than their native counterparts. In other words, we recognize that in specific locations all kinds of differentiable migratory effects are possible. Here, we are simply examining the question of the broad pattern of potential differences between white migrants and white natives.

of Republican success in the South has been in-migration since World War II . . . that this group has formed the core of modern Republicanism in the region has been noted for some time.”⁶

Of course, regional political dynamics have been anything but static (Mellow 2008). As the South morphed into a Republican bastion, other sections of the United States, like the Northeast in particular, have become decidedly more Democratic (Reiter and Stonecash 2011). Indeed, except for the interior West and Great Plains states (Black and Black 2007), where relatively fewer migrants to the South come from (see McKee and Teigen 2016), the northern United States is not nearly as red as the South. This simple observation on the contemporary state of partisan strength in and outside the South leads to the expectation that new arrivals to the South should be more Democratic than the native population.

Beyond hypothesizing that the typical white southerner should be more Republican (less Democratic) than the typical white migrant because the South is more aligned with the GOP than the rest of the nation, we also know that recent migrants to the South are younger, more diverse, urban, educated, and less likely to be married (MacManus 2011). Additionally, research on public opinion trends has also found that southern migrants are more racially tolerant than native southerners (Glaser and Gilens 1997; Rice and Pepper 1997).⁷ For instance, Frey (2004) argues that the influx of young, black professional migrants is likely to reduce the Republican domination of states like Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. In presidential politics, Obama carried Florida, North Carolina, and Virginia in 2008 and Florida and Virginia again in 2012—southern states that have some of the highest percentages of in-migrants from the Northeast—the bluest section of the country (McKee 2010; McKee and Teigen 2016). Hood, Kidd, and Morris (2010, 384) contend that “the influx of non-Southerners into the region, especially the rim South, may be indicative of a long-term pattern benefiting the Democratic Party.”

In an analysis of in-migration effects on the 2008 presidential election in North Carolina, Hood and McKee (2010, 268) conclude that “the growing presence of migrant Tar Heel voters was a primary reason for Democrat Barack Obama’s North Carolina victory.”⁸ They find that in-migrants were more supportive of Obama, and more likely than native North Carolinians to be unaffiliated with a party according to registration records. This conclusion is consistent with Brown (1988), who finds that when confronted with a new political environment that is contrary to one’s own beliefs, migrants disaffiliate from a party. Brown concludes that migration “turns projected partisans into political independents” (1988, 153). Thus, “when in Rome . . .” migrants may be inclined

6. In a broader look at the impact of migration throughout the United States, Gimpel and Schucknecht (2001) assert that migrants are more likely to affiliate with the Republican Party than their native neighbors simply because moving requires wealth. They find this to be a particularly strong relationship in southern, Pacific, and New England states and these differences persist even when controlling for income.

7. Rice and Pepper find differences in racial and religious attitudes between native and migrant southerners using the U.S. Census South definition (the eleven former Confederate states plus Delaware, District of Columbia, Kentucky, Maryland, Oklahoma, and West Virginia). Also, they claim the differences do not have an effect on aggregate voting trends. Glaser and Gilens (1997) only observe differences in racial attitudes.

8. Similar to Brown (1988), Hood and McKee (2010) find that migrants are less partisan than natives, making them swing voters rather than loyal Democrats.

to withdraw from their party in response to the pull of the dominant party in their new community. In sum, the existing literature offers conflicting expectations as to the political attitudes and behaviors of contemporary southern migrants compared to native southerners. To examine the changing nature of the relationship between these groups, we turn to the American National Election Studies (ANES).

Data and Methods for Analysis

The ANES cumulative file allows us to compare the party identification and voting behavior of migrant and native white southerners over the past four decades. Although our analysis focuses only on white southerners to ensure observed patterns are not conflated with the racial makeup of migrants (and given limited minority sample sizes), it is worth emphasizing that the overall prospects of the parties in the South are very much tied to the size of African American and Hispanic populations.

The data are confined to respondents living in any of the 11 states of the former Confederacy. In-migrant status is an indicator for an individual reporting growing up in a non-southern state. This is by no means the only or the best measure of migration status. There has been considerable research documenting the challenges of accurately measuring migration even with direct census estimates (Kaplan and Schulhofer-Wohl 2011). Some research relies on “length of residence” to measure migration status. In research using such a measure, some have found that shorter residence in the South is related to GOP identification (Gimpel and Schuknecht 2001), while others find no relationship between length of residence and partisanship (McBurnett 1991). Unfortunately, we are unable to use length of residence in our analysis because the ANES measure is evaluated at the community level, which is problematic because most changes in residence are made within a state. Nevertheless, where a respondent grew up⁹ is a reliable proxy for evaluating differences in one’s attachment to a region and it has figured prominently in past and present research on southern politics (see Black and Black 1987; McKee and Teigen 2016).

Our dependent variables of interest are party identification and presidential vote choice. Our models include basic demographic characteristics, including gender (1 = female), income, education (dummy coded 1 for college graduate), and age (in years). While the demographic characteristics of migrants and native southerners are no doubt related to their political attitudes and behaviors, we are interested in any difference above and beyond such distinctions. The models have been delineated into four time periods: the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s.

9. This question was added to the ANES time series in 1968. Analysis ends in 2008 because, as of February 2016, the question asking where a respondent grew up had not yet been released for the 2012 ANES. The results examining party identification remain unchanged if we restrict the analysis to presidential election years.

Results

We begin with an analysis of party identification. Figure 1 displays the average marginal effect of southern in-migration on party identification (positive values are more Republican) by decade. The full model results are presented in Table A1.¹⁰ As expected, in-migrants were more likely than natives to identify with the Republican Party in the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1990s the in-migrant coefficient is not statistically significant and this null result captures a transitional period, as native white southerners were moving away from dealignment in the 1980s to realignment in the 1990s (Petrocik 1987; Stanley 1988; McKee 2010). By the 2000s, however, the effect of in-migrant status had reversed; southern whites who spent their formative years outside of the South, were significantly less likely to identify with the Republican Party.

To be sure, the absolute size of the difference between native and migrant southerners is much smaller today than it was in the past. In the 1970s, the model predicts that, on average, migrants were nearly one point more Republican (on the seven-point scale) than were natives, holding all else constant. In the 2000s, by contrast, migrants were predicted to be 0.23 less Republican on average. While these differences have been predicted primarily based on the changing demographics of migrant populations (MacManus 2011), our results make clear that there are differences between migrants and natives that

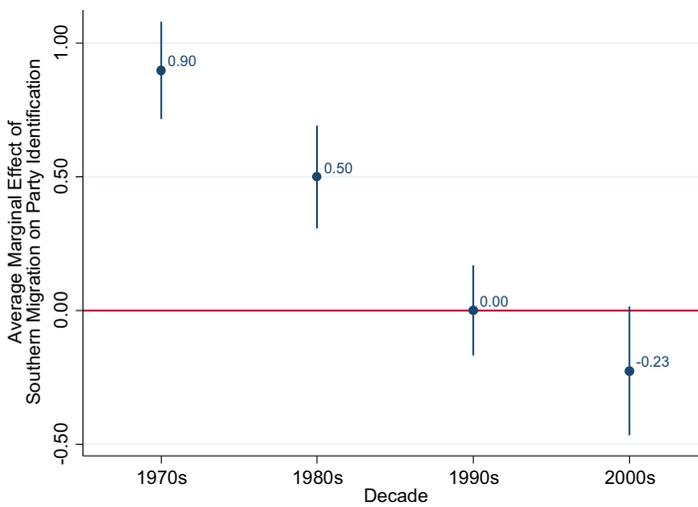


FIGURE 1. Party identification results.

Note: Reported is the coefficient for southern in-migrant (1 = individual reported growing up outside a southern state) from ordinary least squares model predicting party identification among white southerners. Party identification is measured on a seven-point scale where 1 = Strong Democrat and 7 = Strong Republican. Model also controls for gender, income, education, and age. Data are from the American National Election Studies cumulative file.

10. For ease of interpretation we report the ordinary least squares findings, but an ordered logit yields the same substantive results.

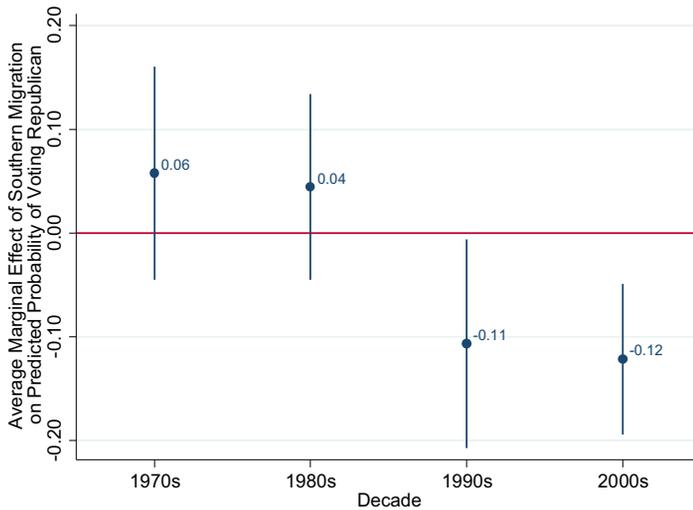


FIGURE 2. Presidential vote choice results.

Note: Reported is the average marginal effect of being a southern in-migrant (1 = individual reported growing up outside a southern state) from logit model of two-party presidential vote among white southerners. Presidential vote = 1 if individual reported voting for a Republican candidate, 0 if individual voted for the Democratic presidential nominee. Model also controls for gender, income, education, and age. Data are from the American National Election Studies cumulative file.

go above and beyond demographic factors. Most notably, the results suggest that even if migrants have higher income levels than natives, socioeconomic status alone cannot explain why migrants were more Republican in the 1970s and 1980s or why that relationship has changed.

Turning next to voting behavior, we present the average marginal effect of southern in-migration on the probability of voting Republican for president by decade in Figure 2. The null effects of the in-migrant coefficient in the 1970s and 1980s are not surprising (see Table A1 for full results), because, by the late 1960s white southerners were already a stalwart faction of the GOP in presidential elections (Aistrup 1996; Black and Black 1987).

In the 1980s Reagan dominated his Democratic opponents—with Carter in 1980 only winning his home state of Georgia in the South (along with five northern states and the District of Columbia) and Mondale in 1984 only carrying his home state of Minnesota (and the District of Columbia). Like Reagan in 1984, in 1988 G. H. W. Bush swept the South.¹¹ Hence, the national dominance of the GOP in the 1980s is a likely macrolevel explanation for why we find no significant difference in the presidential voting preferences of migrant and native southerners.

11. Unless stated otherwise, specific facts and data regarding presidential elections were retrieved by the authors from Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections, <http://uselectionatlas.org/> (accessed June 13, 2016).

In the 1990s, however, we find a shift in voting preferences that is once again reminiscent of the changing national pattern in presidential elections. To be sure, Clinton did relatively well in the South in 1992 and 1996, even managing to win the South-wide popular vote in his reelection bid (see Lamis 1999, 48). In fact, Clinton proved that the South was no longer vital (Black and Black 1992) for winning the presidency, because he could have been shut out of the South in both elections and still won the Electoral College (Stanley 2006). But the Democrat was vastly more popular outside his native land—sweeping the Northeast in 1992 and 1996. Although talk of red and blue states did not enter popular vernacular until the 2000 election, it was in the 1990s that so many northern states had become Democratic strongholds exporting the lion's share of migrants to the South. In this decade, in-migrants were significantly more Democratic in their presidential voting preferences than were native southerners. In the 2000s, the model predicts that migrants were 12% less likely to vote for the Republican presidential nominee compared to natives.

Our findings show a notable and important change in the political behavior of white migrants to the South relative to native Southerners. In the 1970s and 1980s, they were more Republican than native southerners in party affiliation, but now the opposite is true: migrants to the South are now more likely to identify as Democrats and vote for the Democratic candidate in southern presidential elections.

Conclusion

Scholars and political observers have long debated the political implications of southern migration. In this research note, we have examined patterns of political behavior for white migrants to the South. With four decades of ANES data we assessed differences between migrant and native southerners with respect to party identification and presidential vote choice. In both affiliations and voting preferences, we see the changing relationship between in-migrants and the politics of the region.

Consistent with the conclusions of many southern politics scholars, we find that white in-migrants contributed to the partisan realignment of the South in the 1970s and 1980s. However, the relationship between in-migrants and natives subsequently flipped, with in-migrants diluting Republican presidential strength in the South by the 1990s. The growing disparity in the political behavior of southern in-migrants versus southern natives warrants closer attention given the role of white in-migrants as an underappreciated component of a Democratic coalition that may be slowly reversing the electoral fortunes of a dominant southern Republican opposition.

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Appendix

Table A1

Estimates of Party Identification and Presidential Vote Choice for Whites in the South, 1970s–2000s

	<i>Party Identification (OLS)</i>					<i>Presidential Vote Choice (Logit)</i>			
	<i>1970s</i>	<i>1980s</i>	<i>1990s</i>	<i>2000s</i>		<i>1970s</i>	<i>1980s</i>	<i>1990s</i>	<i>2000s</i>
In-Migrant	0.89**	0.49**	0.00	−0.23*	In-Migrant	0.26	0.21	−0.45*	−0.58**
	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.10)	(0.14)		(0.24)	(0.22)	(0.22)	(0.18)
Female	−0.11	−0.06	−0.19*	−0.22	Female	−0.24	−0.14	−0.26*	−0.04
	(0.04)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.13)		(0.20)	(0.18)	(0.21)	(0.17)
Income	0.03	0.20**	0.31**	0.46**	Income	0.09	0.40**	0.39**	0.44**
	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.06)		(0.09)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.08)
College Grad	0.26	0.19	0.26*	0.07	College Grad	0.28	−0.30	−0.10	−0.56*
	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.12)	(0.15)		(0.30)	(0.22)	(0.22)	(0.19)
Age	−0.09**	−0.16**	−0.15**	0.01	Age	0.08	−0.09	−0.03	0.06*
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.04)		(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.05)
Constant	3.47**	3.58**	3.70**	3.17**	Constant	0.13	−0.01	−0.79	−0.46*
	(0.17)	(0.19)	(0.17)	(0.22)		(0.40)	(0.43)	(0.42)	(0.35)
N	1,965	1,718	1,679	924	N	479	587	428	629
Adjusted R ²	.06	.06	.07	.08	Pseudo R ²	0.01	0.04	0.04	0.05

Notes: First four models estimate the seven-point party identification scale (1 = strong Democrat to 7 = strong Republican) with ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions and standard errors in parentheses. Next four models are binary logistic regressions of presidential vote choice (1 = Republican, 0 = Democrat) with standard errors in parentheses. In-Migrant is a dummy variable that equals 1 if an American National Election Studies (ANES) respondent lives in the South (in the former Confederate states) but grew up outside the region. All results weighted using the ANES general weight variable. * $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$ (two-tailed).