

Southern Republicans in Congress during the pre-Reagan era: An exploration

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Abstract

We examine the composition, background, and voting behavior of Republican members of Congress from the ex-Confederate states in the 1952–1980 period—a time during which Southern GOP membership in Congress began to increase steadily. We find that this new generation of Southern Republicans were often born in the South, came from the private sector—where they previously worked in business like much of the non-Southern wing of the Republican Party—and had few meaningful prior connections to the Democratic Party. In terms of voting behavior, Southern Republicans behaved similarly to non-Southern Republicans—generally voting with their party, and more conservatively on most issues than the Southern Democrats they replaced. However, we find that Southern Republicans and Democrats voted alike in one important way: against civil rights legislation. This latter finding of racial conservatism is consistent with other recent work arguing that the Southern GOP had to become a “White party” to win elections in the former Confederacy.

Keywords

Republicans party, South, pre-Reagan era, Congress

Introduction

In the modern American political system, the Republican Party’s electoral base is in the South. Since 1980, every Republican presidential candidate has carried a majority of ex-Confederate states, and in three elections (1984, 1988, and 2004) swept the region entirely. In Congress, the GOP has won a majority of Southern seats in both the House and Senate since the 1994 midterm elections. At the state level, Republicans have also won a majority of Southern governorships since 1994 and, since 2010, hold majorities in most Southern state legislatures. In sum, Republican success in the South is now pivotal to its ability to win presidential elections and congressional majorities and influence policy at every level of government.

The modern GOP’s Southern dominance stands in stark contrast to its poor performance in the region in the late-19th and early-to-mid-20th centuries when the ex-Confederate states formed a solid block in support of the Democratic Party.¹ In recent years, political scientists have extensively

investigated the causes and consequences of the GOP’s emergence and ascendancy in the South (see, e.g., [Black and Black 2002](#); [Lublin 2004](#); [Glaser 1996](#)). Most of these accounts begin in the mid-to-late-1960s with the rise of the Civil Rights Movement, Barry Goldwater’s racially conservative presidential campaign in 1964, the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and Richard Nixon’s “Southern Strategy” in 1968. From there, they describe how conservative White Southerners first came to vote Republican—for president initially, and then later for congressional and subnational offices—and ultimately to identify as Republicans. But while this

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scholarship covers the 1960s and 1970s, the greatest emphasis is on the post-1980 period, with the presidency of Ronald Reagan and the rise of the conservative movement.

But the years prior to the “Reagan Revolution” already saw a crucial change in the GOP’s electoral success rate in the South. While the Republican Party had been virtually non-existent in Southern elections for much of the first half of the 20th century, a Republican resurgence in Congressional elections began shortly thereafter as the GOP’s share of Southern House seats went from less than seven percent in the early 1960s to almost 30% by the late 1970s. Similarly, the GOP’s share of Southern Senate seats went from zero percent in the early 1960s to over 27% by the late 1970s. Thus, in less than a generation, the Republican Party went from an electoral afterthought in the ex-Confederate states to a meaningful political force—with considerable evidence that more was left to come.

Who were these new Southern Republicans? Were they, as often claimed, simply a replacement of traditional Southern Democrats? Or did these Southern Republicans represent a new brand of politician reflecting a changing Southern electorate? We examine these questions by first providing a history of the GOP’s electoral performance in the South, for both the House and the Senate, through the late 1970s. We then collect basic biographical information for each Southern Republican member, including their state of birth, professional background, and any elected offices they may have held prior to winning a seat in Congress (as well as their partisan affiliation while they held these offices) and compare them to their Republican counterparts outside the South and to Southern Democrats. Finally, we examine how Southern Republicans voted in Congress—and in comparison to Southern Democrats and non-Southern Republicans—using a variety of measures including party unity scores, Nokken-Poole NOMINATE scores, and conservative coalition scores.

Our findings suggest that the Southern Republicans elected to Congress in the 1960s and 1970s—with few exceptions—were not former Democrats who abandoned their party as it embraced civil rights. Rather, these Southern Republicans’ biographical backgrounds are in line with the image of a “new” Republican Party in the South, centered increasingly around business professionals, often with no government or elected office experience prior to winning congressional election. Once in Congress, Southern Republicans in this period generally were loyal to their party—even more so than non-Southern Republicans, and in notable contrast to Southern Democrats who often voted against the majority of their caucus. Thus, these new Southern Republicans largely looked and voted like Republicans from other regions of the nation. However, there was one crucial exception: on civil rights roll calls, Southern Republicans were more likely to vote with Southern Democrats, thereby producing a sectional conservative

coalition in Congress. This Southern Republican opposition to civil rights supports other recent research that has argued that Republican state leaders in Jim Crow South strategically re-branded the GOP as a “White party” to allow it to compete more effectively for White Southern votes (Heersink and Jenkins, 2020).

The Republican Party in the South through 1980: A short history

In the aftermath of the Civil War, Republicans in Congress sought to reorient Southern society both politically and economically. “Congressional Reconstruction” required Southern state constitutions to be rewritten, and Black former slaves to be granted civil and voting rights. And thanks to the votes of ex-slaves and the temporary disfranchisement of many ex-Confederates, a multiracial Republican coalition—comprised of local Southern Whites (“scalawags”), former Northern Whites (“carpetbaggers”), and Black former slaves (“freedmen”)—came to power throughout the South by the late-1860s. In Congress, the GOP controlled a majority of Southern House seats from the 40th (1867–1869) through the 43rd (1873–1875) Congresses. However, the combination of a significant economic downturn and constant insurgent violence against (mostly Black) Republicans in the South led to a Democratic resurgence. Following the 1874 elections, Democrats regained majority control of the House and drove most Southern Republicans from office. Three years later, the Democrats had “redeemed” every Southern state government.

Despite this Democratic resurgence, Republicans initially held out some hope for a GOP revival in the South. Throughout the remainder of the 19th century, Republicans won occasional elections in the South, while GOP majorities in Congress used their discretion to “flip” some seats that were lost but for which the result was contested because of fraud and violence (Jenkins 2004). Still, the party was unable to regain anything close to its prior standing. Beginning in the 1890s, Southern White elites (embodied in the Democratic Party) successfully ensured their electoral success via the enactment of disenfranchising laws—poll taxes, literacy tests, residency restrictions, etc.—which would largely eliminate Black voters from the voting rolls (Keele et al., 2021). By 1908, every Southern state adopted some set of disenfranchising provisions to go along with “Jim Crow” laws that would segregate the races (Kousser 1974; Perman 2001).

In response to this Democratic disfranchisement, many Republican state organizations in the South began to restrict leadership positions in the party to Whites only. While this “whitening” of the Southern GOP was framed as a way to compete more effectively in the new, almost-exclusively

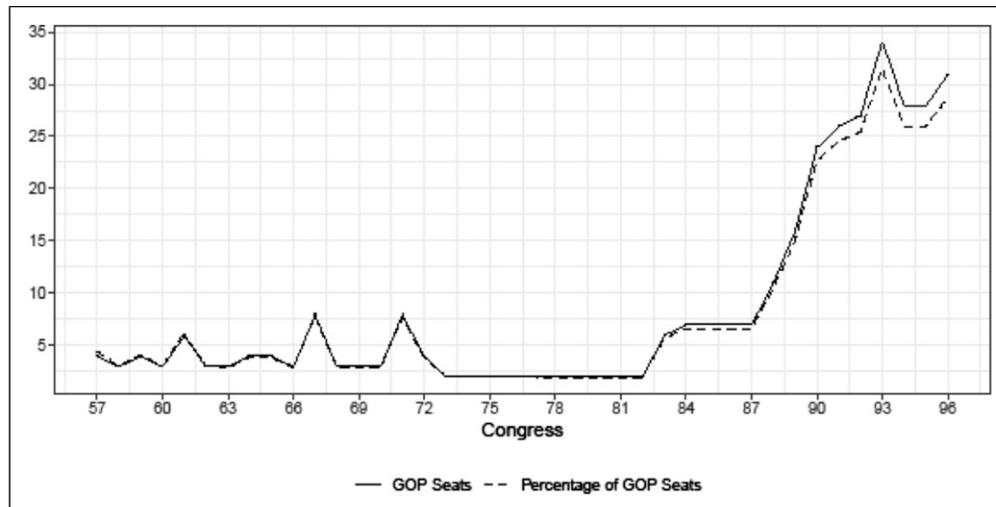


Figure 1. Number and percentage of Republican house seats in the South, 57th (1901–1903) through 96th (1979–1980) Congresses.

White electoral environment, much of the “Lily-White” takeover was more about White politicians trying to gain control over patronage (as Republican state parties continued to be moribund electorally). But, as Heersink and Jenkins (2020) have argued, this strategy did provide some small electoral gains for the GOP as the party’s vote share increased as the party’s level of White control did. While this was not enough for the GOP to begin winning elections at the time, it made the local GOP a more “acceptable” party for White voters, and set it on a path for an eventual resurgence in the South in the second half of the 20th century.

Thus, in the early 20th century, the GOP had transformed itself into a “White party” but remained little more than a skeleton organization throughout the South, electorally viable only in small geographic pockets and surviving mostly on executive patronage (Grantham 1963; Heersink and Jenkins 2020). As Figure 1 illustrates, for the half-century covering the 57th (1901–1903) through 82nd (1951–1953) Congresses, the GOP won only 86 of 2655 House elections in the ex-Confederacy, or 3.24%. And during this time, those 86 wins occurred in only four states: Tennessee, North Carolina, Virginia, and Texas. For the most part, outside of a single district in Texas,² the Republican Party was only competitive in a small area of Appalachia, comprising eastern Tennessee, southwestern Virginia, and western North Carolina.³

But, over time, the South would become more hospitable to the GOP again, at least in part due to a demographic change in the region. As Polsby (2004) argues: “Northern retirees came to live in the South in large numbers after the introduction of residential air conditioning in the 1950s” (80) and “a fair number of them were used to voting Republican at home and would continue to do so after they relocated” (86). In addition, ambitious young professionals and their wives also migrated to Southern cities from the

North as well as from small towns and farms of the South, and they gravitated to the GOP. “These rootless young couples,” as Bass and DeVries (1995, 25) note, “found in the Republican Party a pathway to social acceptance in their communities, and the new leadership skillfully tapped the energies of young executives and professionals and their capable and highly competitive wives.” Gritter (2014, 198) calls these ambitious young people the foundation of the “New Guard” Republican movement in the South, which “attracted disgruntled white Democrats as well as whites who were economically conservative and antiunion.” Importantly for party building in the South, they also largely opposed civil rights measures.

Amid these demographic changes in the South, the popular World War II general Dwight D. Eisenhower ran as the Republican presidential nominee. In 1952 and 1956, Eisenhower won four and five Southern states, respectively. While this was a major GOP breakthrough in the South, it did not produce much in the way of coattails.⁴ Following the 1952 election, the Republicans controlled six Southern House seats—up from two in the previous Congress. The GOP added one additional seat in the 1954 midterms and it remained at these seven Southern seats through the 1960 election (despite GOP presidential candidate Richard Nixon carrying Florida, Tennessee, and Virginia). And little was new about these House gains, as they occurred in states—Virginia, North Carolina, and Texas—where the GOP had achieved some success in the early part of the 20th century. But the Republicans did pick up a seat in Florida (in 1954) for the first time since 1880.⁵

The GOP’s true resurgence in the South began on June 14, 1961, when John Tower (R-TX) won a special election to the Senate to replace Lyndon B. Johnson (who ascended to the Vice Presidency). As Figure 2 indicates, Tower was the first Republican elected to the Senate from an ex-

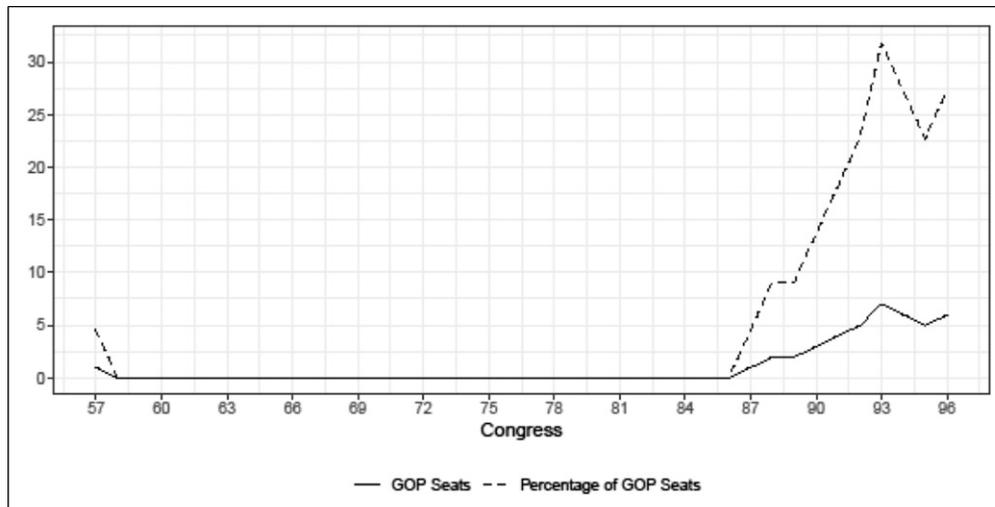


Figure 2. Number and percentage of Republican senate seats in the South, 57th (1901–1903) through 96th (1979–1980) Congresses.

Confederate state since Jeter Pritchard (R-NC), who was reelected on January 20, 1897 and served until March 3, 1903.⁶ The 1962 midterms then started the gradual process of building up the GOP presence in the House. The Kennedy administration—under major pressure from civil rights activists—had begun to take a more positive stance on Black civil rights, supporting the anti-poll tax amendment, helping to protect the freedom riders, and aiding in the integration of the University of Mississippi. As a result, the 1962 elections saw Republicans increase their share of Southern House seats from seven to eleven. These gains, however, occurred within states in which the GOP had already had a House presence (Tennessee, Virginia, North Carolina, Texas, and Florida).

The 1964 election began a new phase for the GOP in the South. As President Lyndon Johnson and the Democratic Congress enacted the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Republican presidential nominee, Senator Barry Goldwater (AZ), actively courted White conservatives in the South. While he was defeated badly by Johnson in the election, Goldwater won the Deep South states of Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina and, in doing so, helped build the GOP brand outside of established areas. And, unlike Eisenhower and Nixon, Goldwater had coattails in the South in 1964, as Republicans were elected in seven ex-Confederate states, including three new states: Alabama, Mississippi, and Georgia. In all, 16 Republicans represented Southern House districts in the 89th (1965–1966) Congress, a six-seat increase. In addition, during the campaign, on September 16, 1964, Senator Strom Thurmond (D-SC) announced that he was leaving the Democratic Party to become a Republican and work for Goldwater's election. As a Republican, Thurmond was reelected to the Senate by a wide margin in 1966.

Led by President Johnson, the 89th Congress produced a series of landmark domestic initiatives, including the

Voting Rights Act of 1965, which would go a long way toward assuring Black registration and voting in the South. In response, Republican gains continued in the ex-Confederate states, and more White conservatives flocked to the party. The 1966 midterms saw the GOP capture 24 House seats, including seats in Arkansas and South Carolina. Moreover, the Republicans also won another Senate seat—in Tennessee (Howard Baker) to go along with the Texas (Tower) and South Carolina (Thurmond) seats.

In subsequent elections, the GOP's expansion in the South continued. The 1968, 1970, and 1972 elections yielded 26, 27, and 34 Republican House seats. The GOP also captured Senate seats in Florida in 1968 (Edward J. Gurney), Tennessee in 1970 (William E. Brock III), and North Carolina (Jesse Helms) and Virginia (William L. Scott) in 1972. The 34 Southern seats in the 93rd (1973–1974) Congress was the GOP's high-water through the 1970s, and as Table 1 indicates, it represented the first Congress in the 20th century in which every state in the ex-Confederacy was represented by at least one Republican.⁷ In the shadow of the Watergate scandal, a slight dip in GOP representation in the South occurred, as the 1974, 1976, and 1978 elections produced 28, 28, and 31 seats, respectively, though the party did capture a Senate seat in Mississippi in 1978 (Thad Cochran).

By the late-1960s, then, Republicans had managed to capture more than a fifth of House seats in the South—up from under seven percent early in the decade. And through the 1970s, the GOP averaged more than a quarter—about 27.5%—of Southern House seats. The Senate results were similar: as Table 2 indicates, by the early-1970s, the Republicans controlled more than a fifth of Senate seats in the South. And through the 1970s, the GOP averaged more than a quarter—around 26.4%—of Southern Senate seats.

Table 1. Number of Republican house seats in the South by state, 87th (1961–1962) through 96th (1979–1981) Congresses.

State/Congress	87	88	89	90	91	92	93	94	95	96
Alabama	0	0	5	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Arkansas	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	2
Florida	1	2	2	3	3	3	4	5	5	3
Georgia	0	0	1	2	2	2	1	0	0	1
Louisiana	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	3	3
Mississippi	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	2	2	2
North Carolina	1	2	2	3	4	4	4	2	2	2
South Carolina	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	1	1	2
Tennessee	2	3	3	4	4	4	5	3	3	3
Texas	1	2	0	3	3	3	4	4	2	4
Virginia	2	2	2	4	5	6	7	5	6	6
TOTAL	7	11	16	24	26	27	34	28	28	31

Note: Two separate Republican members held a Tennessee House seat in the 87th and 88th Congresses.

Table 2. Number of Republican senate seats in the South by state, 87th (1961–1962) through 96th (1979–1981) Congresses.

State/Congress	87	88	89	90	91	92	93	94	95	96
Alabama	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Arkansas	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Florida	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0
Georgia	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Louisiana	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mississippi	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
North Carolina	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1
South Carolina	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Tennessee	0	0	0	1	1	2	2	2	1	1
Texas	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Virginia	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1
Total	1	2	2	3	4	5	7	6	5	6

Backgrounds of Southern Republican members of Congress, 1901–1980

Between 1901 and 1980, 96 different Republicans served in the House of Representatives and 12 served in the Senate from the eleven ex-Confederate states. For each member, we collected basic biographical information—including their state of birth, professional background, and any elected offices they may have held prior to winning a seat in Congress, as well as their partisan affiliation when they held these offices.⁸ Additionally, we collected state of birth and professional background for Southern Democrats and non-Southern Republicans for the same time period. These descriptive data provide some insight into who won congressional office as a Republican in the South during this period, how this group changed, and how it compares to Southern Democrats and other Republicans in the same period.⁹

GOP state organizations across the South during Reconstruction were dominated by politicians who had moved from other parts of the country (most often, the Northeast) in the wake of the Civil War. The presence of these so-called carbetbaggers—combined with the more important issue of the GOP's image in Southern Whites' minds as the "Black party"—hurt the GOP in the South (Heersink and Jenkins 2020). By the first half of the 20th century, however, Republican members from the ex-Confederacy were mostly locals: the large majority represented districts in their birth state and, to the extent that they did not, most were from other Southern states (see Table 3). Between 1953 and 1980, the number of Southern transplants increased considerably: almost 17% of Southern Republican members were born outside the region, compared to about four percent in the earlier period.¹⁰ This increase in Southern Republican members who were transplants mirrored the broader geographic change occurring in the country (mentioned earlier), as large numbers of Northern retirees and young professionals—many of whom were Republican—moved to the South and voted for GOP candidates (whether those candidates were born in the region or not). The same pattern of change was found in the geographic backgrounds of Southern Democrats, though to a much lesser degree. In the 1900–1952 period, less than four percent of Southern Democratic members of Congress were born outside the South, while in the 1953–1980 period, that number jumped to almost eight percent.

Prior to their election to Congress, many members engaged in more than one profession.¹¹ However, in both time periods, the most common professional backgrounds included stints in business, law, or government (see Table 4). Notably though, the number of Southern Republican members who had a career in some type of business prior to winning their seat increased substantially in the later period: 35% of Southern Republicans in the 1953–1980 period had a business background, compared to around 20% in the 1901–1952 period. At the same time, the percentage of prior careers for Republican members in law and government declined. While 75% of Republican members had been lawyers in the 1901–1952 period, only 44% of those serving in the 1953–1980 period were. Similarly, the percentage of Republicans members who had been government officials declined from about 71% in the earlier period to about 56% in the later period.

This pro-business development also distinguished the "new" Republicans from Southern Democrats. While Southern Republicans' professional backgrounds in the 1900–1952 period resembled those of Southern Democrats, Southern Republicans' professional backgrounds in the 1953–1980 period were more similar to those of their non-Southern co-partisans. While Southern Democratic MCs remained mostly former lawyers and government officials, Republicans of all geographies now were more likely to have been businessmen rather than lawyers before their election to Congress. Post-1952, the business world was

Table 3. Geographic backgrounds, 1901–1980.

	1901–1980		
	Southern Republicans	Southern Democrats	Non-Southern Republicans
Born out of state	25.1	18.7	35.8
Born out of South	13.7	5	—
	1901–1952		
	Southern Republicans	Southern Democrats	Non-Southern Republicans
Born out of state	21.3	19	39.8
Born out of South	4.3	3.8	—
	1953–1980		
	Southern Republicans	Southern Democrats	Non-Southern Republicans
Born out of state	26.3	18.1	26.3
Born out of South	16.7	7.6	—

Note: Numbers in cells represent percentages. Source: [McKibben \(1992\)](#).

Table 4. Professional backgrounds, 1901–1980.

	1901–1980		
	Southern Republicans	Southern Democrats	Non-Southern Republicans
Lawyer	51.5	78.8	51.2
Business	31.5	10.8	34.4
Government	59.9	86.3	79.5
News	4.6	3.1	7.5
Education	7.6	2.6	4.2
Medical	0.8	0.4	1.9
	1901–1952		
	Southern Republicans	Southern Democrats	Non-Southern Republicans
Lawyer	74.5	82.3	52.8
Business	20.2	9.2	35.1
Government	71.3	85.6	79.8
News	6.4	3	8.2
Education	2.1	2.2	3.9
Medical	1.1	0.4	2.1
	1953–1980		
	Southern Republicans	Southern Democrats	Non-Southern Republicans
Lawyer	44.3	71.4	47.5
Business	35	14.2	32.7
Government	56.3	87.9	78.7
News	4	3.4	5.9
Education	9.3	3.5	4.9
Medical	0.7	0.5	1.3

Note: Numbers in cells represent percentages. Source: [McKibben \(1992\)](#).

Table 5. Political background of Southern Republican MCs, 1901–1980.

	1901–1980	1901–1952	1953–1980
Elected office prior to Congress	40.7	60.0	31.1
Local elected office	13.2	10.0	14.8
State-legislative elected office	34.1	56.7	23.0
Previous elected as Democrat	4.4	3.3	4.9

Note: Numbers in cells represent percentages. Source: Biographical Directory of the United States Congress.

increasingly becoming the feeder into the congressional GOP, regardless of region.

Looking specifically at Republican members, another clear difference emerges between those elected pre- and post-1952 (see [Table 5](#)). Prior to the slow reestablishment of the GOP as a competitive force in the South, a majority of Republican members (60%) held some form of elected office prior to winning a seat. However, this political career path became less common after 1952. Of those members elected between 1952 and 1978, only 31% held some form of elected office before they won their seat. Additionally, while the proportion of members who held local elected office increased slightly (from 10% before 1952 to 15% after), a state-legislative background became much less common. Almost 57% of members elected between 1900 and 1950 previously had been in their state’s assembly, senate, or both. This was true for only 23% of those elected between 1952 and 1978.

Notably, very few Southern Republican members of Congress previously held office as Democrats. For those elected prior to 1952, this was not particularly surprising, since there generally was little political benefit to switching to the GOP in the Democratically dominated South. However, as the Democratic Party—especially at the national level—began to embrace a more liberal position on civil rights and Southern segregationists within the party began to lose influence ([Heersink 2018](#); [Schickler 2016](#)), the national Republican Party began to actively compete for White votes in the South. As a result, some Southern Democrats could potentially benefit politically from jumping ship and joining the GOP. Strom Thurmond, as noted, did exactly that in 1964. Yet, this type of party switching was rare: even in the 1952–1980 period, only three Southern Republican members of Congress previously held office as a Democrat.¹²

Having held office as a Democrat, of course, is a strict definition of having a “Democratic background.” Some Republicans elected after 1950—such as William Cato who represented Florida’s first district in the 84th through 91st Congresses—were registered Democratic voters at some point but changed their party registration before they ran for political office. More importantly, several other future GOP House members had professional connections to Democratic politicians prior to winning election as Republicans. For example, Jon Hinson—who represented Mississippi’s fourth

district in the 96th and 97th Congresses—worked as a political assistant to Rep. Charles H. Griffin (D-MS). He later worked for Rep. Thad Cochran (R-MS), and successfully ran to succeed him after Cochran won a Senate seat in 1978.¹³ Similarly, Trent Lott—who would go on to be Senate Majority Leader—began his political career as an administrative assistant to Rep. William Colmer (D-MS), a segregationist who represented Mississippi’s fifth district.¹⁴ Colmer decided not to run for reelection in 1972 and endorsed Lott as his successor, even though Lott ran as a Republican. Still, the majority of Republicans elected from 1952 onwards had little formal connection to the Democratic Party.

Since only a few senators throughout this time period were Southern Republicans, we can provide a deeper dive into their backgrounds. Prior to John Tower’s 1961 victory in Texas, no Southern Republican had been elected to the Senate in the 20th century. Tower had joined the Republican Party in college and taught at Midwestern University in Wichita, Texas before running in the 1960 and 1961 Senate races in Texas. While he failed to beat Lyndon Johnson—who was also on the ticket as John F. Kennedy’s running mate—in 1960, Tower eked out a close victory in 1961 (once LBJ had left to become Vice President). Tower’s success in Texas inspired further investments by the Republican National Committee in Southern races ([Klinkner 1994](#)) and, in the years that followed, the GOP managed to win a number of other statewide races in the South, including several Senate seats.

Aside from Tower, eight other Southern Republicans won Senate elections between 1962 and 1980. Of these, four—Thad Cochran (R-MS), William L. Scott (R-VA), Bill Brock (R-TN) and Edward Gurney (R-FL)—previously held House seats before moving to the Senate, all of them served as Republicans, all were lawyers or businessmen before they won their House seats, and—with the exception of Gurney—none held prior elected office. Of the remaining four GOP senators, two—Howard Baker (R-TN) and John Warner (R-VA)—mostly fit the image of the “New Republicans” elected to the House. Prior to winning his Senate seat in 1966, Baker practiced law and held no government positions. Warner, elected in 1978, did serve in the Nixon administration, notably as Secretary of the Navy, but held no prior elected office. The two remaining senators—Strom Thurmond (R-SC) and Jesse Helms (R-

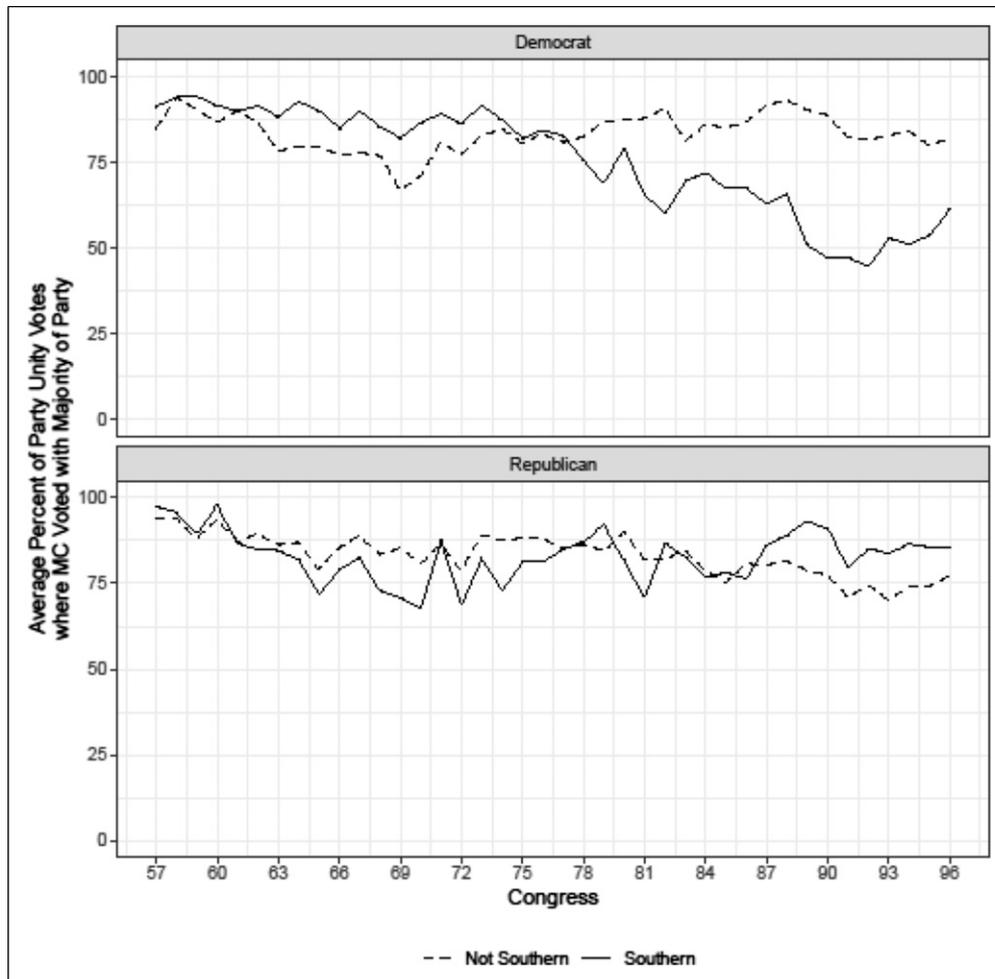


Figure 3. Party Unity by party and region, 57th (1901–1903) through 96th (1979–1980) Congresses.

NC)—were the outliers of the group. Thurmond—who switched to the GOP in 1964—was previously elected as state senator, governor, and senator as a Democrat, but also ran as the Dixiecrat presidential candidate in 1948. Helms was an advisor and administrative assistant to two Democratic senators—Willis Smith (NC) and Alton Lennon (NC)—and won a city council seat in Raleigh as a Democrat. After gaining local fame as a conservative commentator on the local CBS news, Helms ran and won as a Republican in the 1972 Senate race.

Combined, these descriptive data indicate that Republican members of Congress in the South from 1952 onward were notably different from their predecessors in a variety of ways. Unlike those elected before 1952, these “New Republicans” had less experience in terms of holding elected office at the state level or other government positions. Instead, many came to Congress after working as lawyers or business executives; more than half had no prior history of elected office and had professional backgrounds in either law or business. Additionally, from 1952 onward, Southern Republicans’

professional backgrounds looked much more like other Republicans than they did Southern Democrats. Overall, these data suggest that the new Republican Party in the South—at least in terms of members elected between 1952 and 1978—was predominately shaped by white-collar candidates with relatively little political experience and no previous connections to the Southern wing of the Democratic Party.

Voting by Southern Republican MCs, 1901–1980

Once elected, how did Southern Republicans compare to both non-Southern Republicans and their Democratic counterparts in the South? Ideologically, Southern Republicans were slightly more conservative with respect to civil rights than Republicans outside the South, but less conservative than the Southern Democrats they replaced. However, Republican campaigns in the South still relied on appeals to White voters, explicitly stoking White racial anxiety as Blacks in the South continued to secure more federally protected rights.

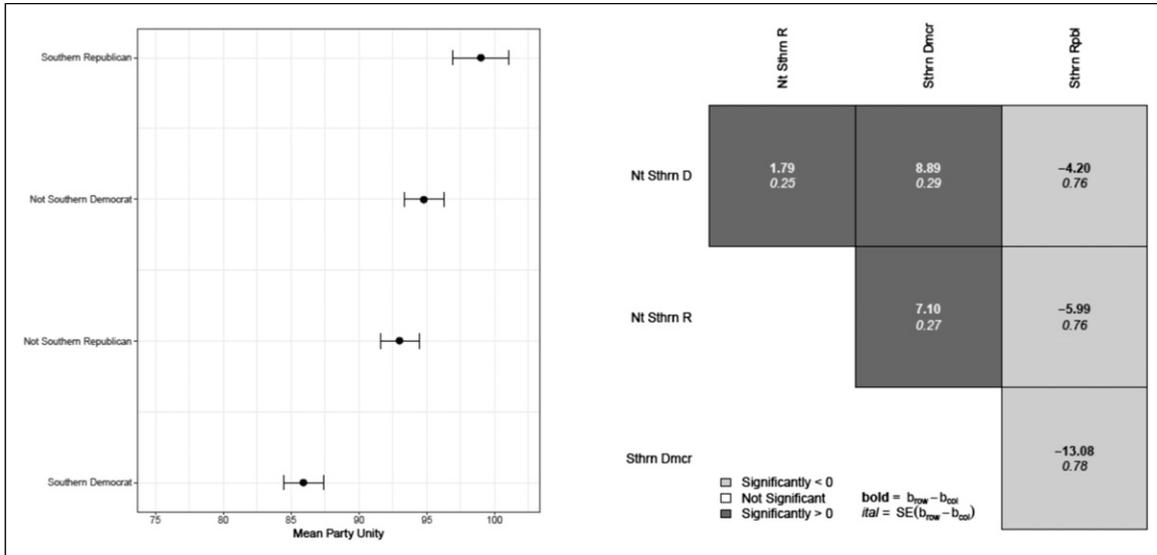


Figure 4. Average Party Unity by Party and Region, 57th (1901–1903) through 96th (1979–1980) Congresses. Note: Left panel displays predicted values from OLS regression. Right panel displays differences between region-parties; dark gray boxes indicate the row condition is larger than the column condition at the .05 level and light gray boxes indicate the row condition is smaller than the column condition at the .05 level. *p*-values adjusted for multiple hypothesis tests.

On other dimensions of congressional behavior, however, Southern Republicans looked very similar to other Republicans. Figure 3, which plots party unity scores—how often a member voted with their party on votes in which at least 50% of Democrats opposed at least 50% of Republicans—from the 57th through 96th Congresses, shows that Southern Republicans and non-Southern Republicans voted with the party at comparable rates. Southern Democrats, by comparison, voted against the party much more frequently (starting around the 78th Congress) than non-Southern Democrats. In some cases, Southern Democrats voted against their own party more frequently than they voted with it.

In Figure 4, we drill deeper. The left panel displays estimated, average party unity by region and party. The estimates (and confidence intervals) indicate that Southern Democrats were indeed much less likely to vote with other Democrats. The right panel shows the results of a statistical test comparing party unity across each group. Dark boxes indicate the row condition had a higher party unity score than the column condition; light boxes indicate the converse.

This figure shows that Southern Republicans voted with their party more than any other region-party combination and that Southern Democrats voted with their party the least. Some of the differences, while statistically distinguishable, are substantively small enough to be considered equivalent. The difference in party unity between Democrats and Republicans not representing districts in Southern states, for example, was only about two percentage points (less than a fifth of the standard deviation of party unity). The difference between Southern Democrats and Southern Republicans, however, is substantively large, with Southern Republicans

voting with other Republicans 13 percentage points more than Southern Democrats did with their party. Likewise, Southern Democrats voted against their party about eight percentage points more than all non-Southern MCs.

The roll call data imply that Southern Republicans voted like other Republicans much of the time. Combined with the previous analysis of the backgrounds of Southern Republicans, this evidence suggests that Southern Republicans, on average, were more in the mold of the Republican Party than with their Democratic compatriots in the South.¹⁵ There is, however, a notable exception to this general trend for civil rights roll calls, which we analyze below.

Next, we consider how Southern Republicans compared to other MCs when voting on all bills. Figure 5 displays the distribution of first dimension ideal points for the 87th through 96th Congresses,¹⁶ using Nokken and Poole’s (2004) estimates of legislator ideology.¹⁷ Southern and non-Southern Democrats clearly voted differently on the floor. Southern Republicans, on the other hand, voted similarly to other Republicans, consistent with the party unity measure above. Southern Republicans, however, appear to have voted together more frequently than non-Southern Republicans did, as there is less variation in Southern GOP ideal points. Again, this corroborates that Southern Republicans were more similar to non-Southern Republicans than they were Southern Democrats.

Next, we consider how Southern Republicans voted on roll calls where a majority of both Southern Democrats and Republicans opposed a majority of non-Southern Democrats, so-called “conservative coalition” votes (Manley, 1973; Brady and Bullock 1980; Jenkins and Monroe,

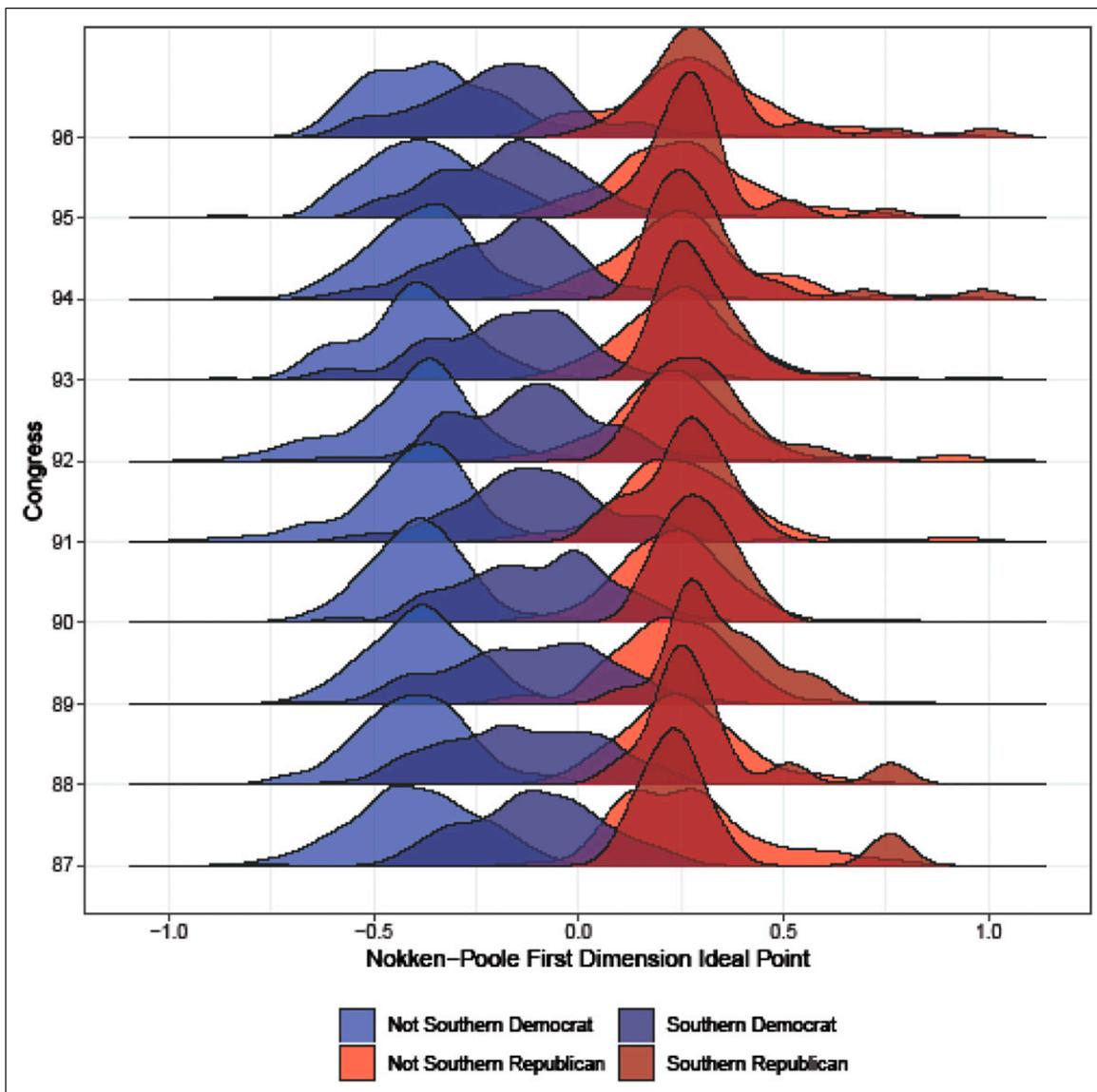


Figure 5. Ideology by party and region, 87th (1961–1962) through 96th (1979–1980) Congresses.

2014). Figure 6 shows the proportion of votes in each Congress where a majority of Southern Republicans voted with a majority of Southern Democrats (dotted line) and non-Southern Republicans (solid line), broken out by conservative coalition votes and all other votes.

On non-conservative coalition votes, Southern Republicans looked much more like non-Southern Republicans than Southern Democrats in the early 20th century. Southern Republicans voted consistently with other Republicans over 75% of the time yet voted with Southern Democrats less than half the time. In the 1960s, however, Southern Republicans voted over half the time with Southern Democrats, illustrating how party realignment changed “revealed preferences” in Congress. For conservative coalition votes, throughout most of the 20th century, Southern Republicans voted with both other

party-regions very frequently. We can learn more, however, by looking at how many conservative coalition votes were *only* conservative coalition votes because of divergence between Southern Republicans and other Republicans. After the 1960s, a full 6.5% of conservative coalition votes in the House and 8.3% of conservative coalition votes in the Senate would not have pitted Republicans and Southern Democrats against non-Southern Democrats *but for Southern Republicans*.

For example, in 1979, Senator Jesse Helms (D-NC) introduced an amendment to an energy bill to ban busing to further racially integrate schools. He argued that the energy bill needed an antibusing provision ostensibly since, by the late 1970s, environmentalists and other concerned parties realized that fuel was in short supply.¹⁸ On June 5, 1979, the Senate voted to table the Helms amendment in an example of



Figure 6. Southern Republican Unity with Southern Democrats and non-Southern Republicans, 57th (1901–1903) through 96th (1979–1980) Congresses.

a conservative coalition vote—with Southern Democrats voting 6-10, non-Southern Democrats voting 30-7, and Republicans voting 17-22. But calling it a conservative coalition vote is too simplistic. When splitting Republicans into regional blocs, Southern Republicans voted 1-6 (mirroring the 6-10 split in the Southern Democratic bloc), while non-Southern Republicans split evenly 16-16. Thus, it is only because Southern Republicans voted with Southern Democrats that the roll call is classified as a conservative coalition vote. This means this particular roll call was more of a sectional vote than a conservative coalition one, as were between 6–8 percent of all votes post-1960. Almost one-tenth

of conservative coalition votes in the latter half of the 20th century were due to Southern Republicans joining Southern Democrats, not a unified Republican Party joining a unified Southern Democratic bloc.

The antibusing-amendment voting blocs were not unique. About 12% of conservative coalition votes that were sectional—where Southern Republicans were necessary to produce a conservative coalition vote—were related to civil rights issues compared to only 3% of non-sectional conservative coalition votes. Table 6 displays the proportion of sectional and non-sectional conservative coalition votes related to civil rights, voting rights, and labor along with

Table 6. Bill issues for conservative coalition votes, 57th (1901–1903) through 96th (1979–1980) Congresses.

Issue	Non-Sectional Conservative Coalition Votes	Sectional Conservative Coalition Votes
<i>Civil rights</i>	0.031 [0.026, 0.036]	0.118 [0.080, 0.156]
<i>Voting rights</i>	0.005 [0.003, 0.007]	0.014 [0.000, 0.028]
<i>Labor</i>	0.036 [0.030, 0.041]	0.025 [0.007, 0.043]

Note: Cell entries are proportions and numbers in brackets are 95% confidence intervals.

95% confidence intervals. Voting rights bills follow a similar pattern with more sectional than non-sectional conservative coalition votes, but the magnitude is much smaller and the difference is not statistically significant. The opposite pattern holds for labor bills, but again the difference is not statistically significant—implying that although much of the conservative coalition supported antilabor bills (Katznelson 2013), the sectional dimension of the conservative coalition brought together the wings of the two parties most adverse to racial equality.

These results suggest that much of the alignment between Southern Republicans and Southern Democrats tapped into views on civil rights, dovetailing with recent work showing that the Republican Party’s viability in the South required it to become a “White party,” supporting exclusionary policies aimed at African Americans and branding itself in accordance with racially conservative White Southerners (Heersink and Jenkins 2020). While Southern Republicans looked like their non-Southern co-partisans in their geographic and professional backgrounds and in their voting behavior on bills in most policy areas, Southern Republicans were more similar to Southern Democrats when it came to votes related to civil rights.¹⁹

Conclusion

This paper examines the composition, background, and voting behavior of Republican MCs from the ex-Confederate states in the pre-Reagan era. While scholars have studied the rise of the Republican Party in the South, much of their attention has focused on the 1980s and beyond—when the GOP became a serious force in Southern politics and eventually came to dominate the region at different levels of government. Thus, we provide some detail on how the Republican Party grew in the House and Senate through the 1960s and 1970s, the geographical, occupational, and political backgrounds of these new GOP MCs, and how they voted once in Congress (using several different measures).

We find a small increase in Republican House members in the 1950s (thanks to Eisenhower’s electoral success) and a steady rise in the early 1960s. A significant (50 percentage

point) increase occurred after the 1966 midterm elections, and continued through the 1970s. GOP Senate gains, by contrast, were more gradual in the 1960s and 1970s. In terms of background, we find that Republican MCs from the South were different before and after 1952 in a variety of ways. Those elected after 1952 had less elected- and non-elected office experience, as many came from the private sector where they worked as business executives before running for Congress. Few also had strong previous connections to the Democratic Party. Southern Republicans elected after 1952 were much more similar to non-Southern Republicans than Southern Democrats with respect to professional background.

In terms of voting, Southern Republicans were not that different from non-Southern Republicans, but they were significantly more conservative—further to the right on the main ideological dimension—than Southern Democrats. Crucially, however, when it came to voting on civil rights bills, Southern Republicans were more likely than non-Southern Republicans to vote with Southern Democrats. This meant that on the issue of race, Southern Republicans largely followed the positions taken by Democrats in the region—thus, producing a sectional conservative coalition.

The positions these “new” Southern Republicans took on race and civil rights are consistent with the argument made by Heersink and Jenkins (2020) that the GOP’s ability to compete effectively in the 20th century South required it to become a “White Party.” That is, shortly after Democrats passed disenfranchising laws throughout the South (starting in the early 1890s), Republican state leaders argued that the only way the party could hope to compete in the now, mostly White electoral environment was to become a wholly White-led party. This resulted in Republican state parties in the South systematically excluding Black Republicans from leadership positions. While this only produced small electoral benefits at the time, the “White party strategy” was a necessary condition for the Republicans to succeed decades later, as new generations of White citizens in the South—now long distant from Reconstruction and the view of the GOP as the “Black party”—blanched at the national Democratic Party’s leftward move on civil rights and sought viable electoral alternatives. Thus, while Republicans elected to Congress from the South after 1952 looked similar to non-Southern Republicans in many respects, their conservatism on race remained a core component of their ideology and voting behavior.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. While the GOP ceased to be electorally competitive in the South in this period, a Republican Party organization survived in each state and maintained influence through its voting strength at Republican National Conventions. See Heersink and Jenkins (2020).
2. This was the 14th congressional district in Texas, where Republican Harry M. Wurzbach served from the 67th through 72nd Congresses. He was elected outright five times (67th–70th, 72nd) and successfully contested the election of Democrat Augustus McCloskey to the 71st Congress. Wurzbach died in office on February 10, 1930.
3. Indeed, for the 20-year period between the 73rd (1933–1935) and 82nd (1951–1953) Congress, the GOP's *only* electoral success came in the first and second districts of Tennessee.
4. Between 1880 and 1948, the GOP presidential nominee won exactly six states in the ex-Confederacy: Warren Harding won Tennessee in 1920, while Herbert Hoover won Florida, North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia in 1928. Like Eisenhower, Harding and Hoover had minimal coattails. Following the 1920 election, Republican seats in the South increased from three to eight, but five of those seats were lost in the 1922 midterms. Following the 1928 election, GOP seats in the South increased from three to eight, but four of those seats were lost in the 1930 midterms.
5. William C. Cramer won the seat, in the first congressional district. Cramer had been mayor of St Petersburg and a member of the Florida House of Representatives.
6. Note that Republican Newell Sanders of Tennessee would be appointed to a Senate seat by GOP Governor Ben W. Hooper, after Democratic Senator Robert Love Taylor died in office. Sanders would serve from April 11, 1912 to January 24, 1913, when the Tennessee General Assembly elected Democrat William R. Webb to succeed him.
7. See Appendix (Figure A1) for maps displaying the growth of Republican representation from the South from the 57th–96th Congresses.
8. Unless otherwise noted the source of the data presented in this section is the Biographical Directory of the United States Congress (<http://bioguide.congress.gov/biosearch/biosearch.asp>) or McKibben (1992).
9. In terms of gender there is little variation in this group. Only two of the members were women: Louise Goff Reece and Irene Bailey Baker. Both succeeded their husbands (Carroll Reece and Howard Baker) after their deaths in office. And while both had extensive political experience—on behalf of their husbands as well as in independent political roles they

held within their state parties—neither sought their own terms in subsequent elections.

10. We define a member as being from out of state, or out of the South, on the basis of the state they were born in. In some cases, including that of future Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich (elected to Georgia's sixth district in 1978), members may have been born outside of the South but still grew up there. However, most members who were not born in the South did not move there until later in life.
11. For example, Howard Baker (TN) was both a lawyer and a newspaper publisher, while Walter Brownlow (TN) worked as a locomotive engineer, newspaper reporter, and postmaster. The percentages in Tables 4 and 5 represent the percentage of MCs that meet the specific background listed but may also be included in other categories as well.
12. Perhaps not coincidentally given Thurmond's influence, all three—Albert William Watson, Floyd Spence, and Edward Lunn Young—were from South Carolina.
13. Hinson resigned from Congress in 1981 after he was arrested for having sex with another man in a House of Representatives restroom. He subsequently became an LGBT rights advocate until his death of AIDS-related illness in 1995. See “Jon Hinson, 53, Congressman and then Gay-Rights Advocate,” *The New York Times*, July 26, 1995.
14. Prior to the redistricting in response to the 1960 census Colmer represented Mississippi's sixth district.
15. One dimension on which Southern Republicans were more like Southern Democrats than non-Southern Republicans is individual roll rates, or the proportion of roll call votes where a member casts a vote in the negative while a majority of legislators voted in the affirmative (see Carson et al. 2011; Den Hartog and Monroe, 2019). Southern Republicans and Southern Democrats alike were more likely to be rolled than their non-Southern copartisans, suggesting that the Southern wings of both parties exerted less agenda control. See Appendix (Figures A2 and A3).
16. See Appendix Figure A4 (on the left) for the ideal point distribution from the 57th–96th Congresses by region and party.
17. Nokken-Poole NOMINATE scores, otherwise known as One Congress at a Time DW-NOMINATE scores, allow members to move linearly in either a negative (liberal) or positive (conservative) direction and thus are more flexible than standard DW-NOMINATE scores (Poole and Rosenthal 2007).
18. *Congressional Record*, 96th Congress, 4th Sess., p. 13,431. A similar Helms antibusing-amendment eventually passed in 1982 in an unrelated appropriations bill.
19. Another way to see this is to look at Appendix Figure A4 (on the right), which shows Southern Republicans were more conservative on the second dimension of the NOMINATE scale. For most of this period, the second NOMINATE dimension reflects ideology related to civil rights (Poole and Rosenthal 2007).

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