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Racial context, the 1968 Wallace vote, and southern presidential dealignment: evidence from North Carolina and elsewhere

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Introduction

There is a good deal of evidence in support of white voting behavior being dependent in part on the racial context. Key (1949) reminds us that the historical pattern of Republican support in the South was in the areas (often hill country) that were unsuitable for cotton and thus had few black slaves. These were also the areas that tended to vote against secession. The five states that went for Goldwater were among those with the highest black population. It is also well known that the intensity of resistance to desegregation in the South varied as a function of state and local black population concentration, with the greatest resistance in the areas of greatest black population concentration. For example, Alt (1994), in looking at the ratio of county-specific and state-specific barriers to southern white to southern black registration as a function of county-specific and state-specific barriers to participation and socioeconomic factors, finds blacks most likely to be disenfranchised in the pre-Voting Rights Act South in those areas with highest black population. Recent academic work by Carmines and Stimson (1989), Huckfeldt and Kohfeld (1989), and Black and Black (1992), among others, finds strong confirmation for the popularly held view (see, e.g., Edsall and Edsall, 1991) that race-related issues played a major role in accounting for loss of southern support for Democratic presidential candidates over the last several decades. For example, Carmines and Stimson (1989) show that changes in the racial issue positions of the Democratic and Republican parties at the national level triggered changes in white support for the parties. Using NES and other data disaggregated to the state level, Black and Black (1992) find, for states in the South, that the mean white vote share of Democratic presidential candidates in elections from 1964 to 1988 is inverse with the black population in a state. Using survey data, for the 1988 election, Glazer, et al. (1993) have shown that, across states, the white level of support for Michael Dukakis and for Jesse Jackson fell inversely with the black population in the

state. In his 1988 convention address, Jesse Jackson proudly noted the fact that 36 of 82 county Democratic chairmen in Mississippi were black. Yet Dukakis apparently won fewer white votes in Mississippi than anywhere else.[1]

Usually we do not have survey data with a large enough sample reliably to infer voting patterns broken down by race for relatively small geographic units. And we almost never have data that allow us to study the effects of growing black political mobilization. Thus, we often must seek to make inferences about contextual effects from election returns aggregated into units like counties whose racial composition (and other characteristics) are known. The purpose of this chapter is to apply two simple models for ecological inference with aggregate-level data that allow us to analyze the impact of racial context on political choice. One of these is the quadratic contexts effects model of Boudon (1963). This model we use for cross-sectional analysis. The other is a linear ecological regression that uses *change* in voting behavior across elections as its dependent variable, rather than looking solely at voting behavior on an election-by-election basis. These models are used to show that the magnitude of the Wallace vote in 1968 was closely tied to racial context; that voting for Wallace appears to have been a way-station for many Democrats whose allegiance to the Democratic Party (at least at the presidential level) was weakening and who subsequently voted for Republican presidential candidates; and that the long-run Democratic decline in southern presidential vote support is directly and clearly related to race in terms of a racial context effect, such that white support for the Democratic national ticket has fallen off from earlier levels as a linear function of the percent black in the geographic unit. Thus, both the 1968 Wallace vote and subsequent Democratic decline are linked to racial context.

The Wallace vote

The focus of this section is on the Wallace vote. It is well known that the Wallace vote was related to black population proportion in both the state and the county (Wright, 1976, 1977).[2] It is known, too, from 1972 survey data, that when voters were asked both how they voted in 1972 and how they had voted in 1968, a very high proportion of Wallace voters (roughly three-quarters) said that they had voted for Richard Nixon in 1972 (Martin Wattenberg, personal communication, 9 May 1993). Furthermore, it is often asserted that Wallace voters defected to the Republican Party in subsequent presidential elections. However, as far as we are aware, there has been no real hard evidence for this latter assertion beyond the 1972 election. We provide new evidence both about racial context effects in the 1968 presidential election and about the link between sectional realignment and the Wallace vote in subsequent presidential elections, to test the hypothesis that voting for Wallace was a way-station for many Democrats whose allegiance to the Democratic Party (at least at the

presidential level) was weakening, and who subsequently voted for Republican presidential candidates.

If there is a contextual effect such that white support for Wallace increases with the percent black in the geographic area, the aggregate ecological relationship between percent black and Wallace vote will not be linear.[3] We may illustrate this point by letting the contextual relationship between white support for Wallace and black population proportion be (approximately) linear, while positing that black support for the Democratic nominee is (approximately) constant. The model we offer is a variant on one proposed in Miller (1977).[4]

We can represent these assumptions in the two equations below:

$$W_{\text{WALL}} = m_1 B_{\text{POP}} + \text{constant}_1 \tag{8.1}$$

$$B_{\text{WALL}} = \text{constant}_2 \tag{8.2}$$

where

W_{WALL} = the proportion of whites who vote for Wallace
B_{WALL} = the proportion of blacks who vote for Wallace
B_{POP} = the black population proportion in the geographic unit
    (e.g. state/county).

For simplicity, let us confine ourselves to a black and white world, i.e.

$$W_{\text{POP}} = 1 - B_{\text{POP}} \tag{8.3}$$

We have the identity

$$\text{WALLACE VOTESHARE} = W_{\text{WALL}} \, W_{\text{POP}} + B_{\text{WALL}} \, B_{\text{POP}} \tag{8.4}$$

For notational simplicity, let constant$_1$ = c_1 and constant$_2$ = c_2. If the four equations above hold, then we have

$$\text{WALLACE VOTESHARE} = -m_1 (B_{\text{POP}})^2 + (m_1 + c_2) B_{\text{POP}} + c_1. \tag{8.5}$$

Hence, under our simplifying assumptions, we anticipate a quadratic relationship between Wallace vote share and proportion black in the area.

Moreover, if we let $B_{\text{POP}} = x$, and WALLACE VOTESHARE = y, we may use the data from the fitted quadratic

$$y = a_1 x^2 + a_2 x + a_3 \tag{8.6}$$

to estimate the key parameters of interest:

$$-m_1 = a_1$$
$$c_2 = a_3$$
$$c_1 = a_1 + a_2 + a_3 \tag{8.7}$$

Thus, the estimated black support for Wallace is given by a_3, while the estimated white support for Wallace in an all-white area is given by a_2, and the

estimated white support for Wallace in an area with a black population of x is given by $-a_1x + a_3$.

Using this model, we now look at the relationship between the Wallace vote and racial context using ecological regression, rather than individual-level survey data such as that used by Wright (1976,1977).

Wallace and the racial context effect: estimating the quadratic model with North Carolina county-level data

Because there is not adequate variation in the independent variable (percent black) when we look at data at the level of whole states, it is impossible to use state-level data to estimate our quadratic context effects model. When we do ecological regression with states as our units, the Wallace vote appears to rise with the black population in the state – a nonsensical result that occurs because there are no states with a black population sufficiently large to outweigh the gains in Wallace vote that occur as a result of the large context effect of increasing white support for Wallace as the black population grows. This reminds us that, in looking at ecological correlations, we must be careful not to misinterpret a positive correlation obtained in an ecological regression as a sign of a positive relationship at the level of individual behavior (Robinson, 1950). However, such a finding does not mean we should give up our aim of making use of aggregate-level data to study racial effects. When we look at data from the South disaggregated to the county level, a state like North Carolina does have a wide enough range in both the dependent and the independent variable to permit us to estimate the proposed quadratic contextual effects model.

When we run the 1968 Wallace vote versus black population at the county level in North Carolina, the linear fit ($y = 0.21 + 0.55x$, $r^2 = 0.56$) shows Wallace vote rising with black population, with an all-black area estimated to give three-quarters of its votes to George Wallace – a result that again makes no empirical sense.[5] Again, rather than discouraging us, we should simply think about what we ought to expect the data to look like. The quadratic regression, in contrast, gives us the more intelligible expectation of a fall-off in Wallace support in the most heavily black areas because the x^2 coefficient is negative and large relative to the coefficient on x ($y = -1.45x^2 + 1.29x + 0.16$). The r^2 value for the quadratic using black population as the independent variable is 0.66, a correlation that is considerably higher than the corresponding linear correlation (0.56); moreover both the x and the x^2 coefficient are statistically significant at the 0.0001 level.

In North Carolina in 1968, the blacker the population in the county, the higher the Wallace vote – *until we get to counties that are considerably close to majority black*. From this quadratic regression, we would estimate black support for Wallace as zero ($-1.45 + 1.29 + 0.16$). White support for Wallace

is estimated to be 16 percent in all-white areas and to rise to a high of 100 percent in the most heavily black areas ($0.6 \times 1.45 + 0.16 = 1.03$).[6]

Wallace as a way-station: from voting for Wallace in 1968 to voting Republican in subsequent presidential elections

State-level data

At the state level, support for the Democratic presidential nominee in any given election varies with the Wallace vote in a direction that seems plausible. For elections between the New Deal and the election in 1960, except for the election of 1948, the Democratic vote share is *positively* (and generally quite strongly) correlated with the Wallace vote, i.e. Wallace was strong in states where Democrats had traditionally been strong. However, in elections from 1968 to 1988, except when Carter was running (when the correlations were positive but not statistically significant), there was a negative correlation between the Wallace vote and Democratic vote share – albeit generally a small one with a small slope parameter (with r^2 values of 0.03 in 1984, 0.15 in 1988, and 0.36 in 1972).

But we can learn considerably more about the geographic link between the Wallace vote and post-1968 Democratic dealignment by looking at changes over time. Here we find a striking *loss in support* for Democratic presidential nominees since 1960[7] in the areas where Wallace did best. For example, when we look at the difference in Democratic vote share in 1988 as opposed to 1960 plotted against the Wallace vote, we obtain the equation

(88–60) DEMVOTESHARE = -0.34 WALLACEVOTESHARE + 0.78

This equation, with an r^2 of 0.50, shows that, at the state level, we find a context effect such that, for roughly every percentage point in Wallace vote in 1968, a state experiences a one-third of a percentage point decline in Democratic presidential percentage between the elections of 1960 and 1988. Of course, the racial context effect observed at the state level is not the same as what we find at lower levels of geographic aggregation. As we show below, within a given state, the decline in Democratic vote share can be even more closely tied to the Wallace vote.

North Carolina county data

In elections since 1968, at the county level in North Carolina, unlike the state-level pattern described above, Democratic vote share in subsequent individual presidential elections is always positively correlated with the Wallace vote.[8]

However, as with the state-level data, our real insight into the impact of the Wallace vote comes when we look at *changes in voting behavior over time*.[9] Here, as expected, we observe a strong pattern of *decline* from earlier levels of white Democratic presidential support as a function of *decline* of Wallace support. For example, when we look at the difference in Democratic vote share in 1984 as opposed to 1960 plotted against the Wallace vote, we obtain the equation

$$(84-60) \text{ DEMVOTESHARE} = -0.75 \text{ WALLACEVOTESHARE} + 0.073$$

This equation, with an r^2 of 0.68, shows that Democratic vote share in North Carolina counties dropped three-quarters of a percentage point between 1960 and 1984 for every percentage point of Wallace vote in 1968. It suggests that almost all of the gain in North Carolina in Republican presidential voting strength between 1960 and 1984 can be attributed to Wallace (or at least, what we might call Wallace-type) voters who voted for Reagan in 1984 but Kennedy in 1960.[10]

When we look at county-level data for North Carolina, we believe that it is not a fallacy of ecological inference to attribute gains in Republican strength to Wallace (or Wallace-type) voters – as we showed earlier the Wallace vote was strongest in the heavily black areas of the state and we can be sure that it is not the blacks in these areas who are now deserting the Democratic presidential ticket. Indeed, they are more loyal Democrats then ever, and voting in greater numbers than ever. Thus, if heavily Democratic counties where Wallace did well have shifted in a Republican direction, it *must* be because the white Democrats in them have changed in their presidential voting behavior.[11]

Tracking the decline in Democratic presidential support over time using aggregate data

A fundamental limitation of the type of data customarily analyzed to understand the effect of race on voting patterns is that it is drawn from a single election or, if it does look at multiple elections, it does so only in terms of presenting a set of cross-sectional analyses (or by using pooled data that are analyzed as if they were cross-sectional). For aggregate data, looking only at data in a cross-sectional framework of analysis fails to capture important effects. In particular, as suggested by the analysis of the Wallace vote above, if we focus on *present* levels of support for Democratic candidates in any given election across a set of geographic areas, we miss the dramatic changes in support levels that have taken place over the past decades *compared to previous levels of Democratic support* in those geographic units, and (perhaps most importantly) we miss the way in which those *changes* are tied to black population percentages. The same problem remains if we use pooled cross-sectional data.[12] To compensate for this problem, we again generate regressions that relate *changes* in Democratic presidential vote to black population proportion

for a variety of periods across which we expect historical patterns of decline to manifest themselves: for example, 1900 to 1964, 1940 to 1964, 1960 to 1964, 1900 to 1968, 1940 to 1968, 1900 to 1984, 1940 to 1984, or 1960 to 1984.[13] Now, however, rather than using the Wallace vote as our independent variable, we use black population percentage.

State-level analysis

If we look at individual presidential elections using states as our geographic units, in the twentieth century we find that, prior to 1964, there is a positive relationship between proportion black and Democratic levels of support in every year except 1948; while in the elections from 1964 to 1988, correlations are negative (and statistically significant) in the years when Carter is the Democratic nominee (1976 and 1980), and near zero and not statistically significant in 1968, 1984 and 1988. In general, the correspondence between percent black in the state and Democratic success has been declining. In the early years of the twentieth century, the correlations are quite high. Even as late as 1980 the r^2 is a respectable 0.25. But when we reach 1984 and 1988, the r^2 for this relationship has declined to 0.01 and 0.07, respectively, and is not statistically significant.[14] Since we know that blacks are, in fact, voting overwhelmingly for Democratic nominees, and we also know that states with high black proportions formed the bedrock of Democratic support in the New Deal (and Civil War) realignments, even though blacks were almost entirely excluded from voting, it might seem that this pattern simply reinforces what we learned from Robinson (1950): namely, distrust ecological correlations.

Yet we would draw a quite different conclusion. We would conclude that the more heavily black the state, the greater the white flight from the Democratic presidential ticket relative to earlier levels of support. As argued earlier, a better way to understand the contextual effect of black population on voting for Democratic presidential nominees is to look at *changes* in voting as a function of racial context, rather than at the relationship between racial composition and the voting patterns in individual elections.

When we take this approach, at the state level, we find that the more black the population of the state, the greater the *historical decline* in Democratic share of the two-party presidential vote in the state.[15] The correlations are quite strong: $r^2 = 0.42$ for 64–00; $r^2 = 0.58$ for 64–40; $r^2 = 0.47$ for 88–00; $r^2 = 0.52$ for 88–40; and $r^2 = 0.39$ for 88–60. For the 1988–60 period, the slope of the regression is around -0.5; thus, for example, the white Democratic vote is estimated to have fallen 15 percentage points more from its 1960 levels in jurisdictions that are 30 percent black than in jurisdictions with no blacks, despite the fact that blacks in the latter jurisdiction are a considerably higher proportion of the voters in 1988 than in 1960, and they now vote at somewhat higher rates for the Democratic candidate than they did in 1960.

Visual inspection of the scattergrams suggests that the effect is strongest in states with above 15 percent black population, but it is not merely a southern phenomenon *per se*. Moreover, even *among* southern states, the magnitude of the effect varies as a function of how black the state is.[16]

County-level data from North Carolina

We now look at the historical decline in Democratic share of the presidential two-party vote at the county level within a single southern state with a wide range in the black population proportion in its 100 counties: North Carolina.[17] There is no good reason to expect that the link between black population proportion and Democratic vote will be the same when we look at within-county variations in North Carolina as when we use states as our units of aggregation (Robinson, 1950). If we look at individual presidential elections, for North Carolina *counties*, there is a positive and strong relationship between percent black and support for the Democratic presidential nominee in every election since 1960, even in 1968.[18] Looking at the cross-sectional correlation gives us no clue as to the presence of a racial context effect.

Yet, if we look *across* elections in North Carolina, we see that the blacker the county, the greater is the historical *decline* in support for the Democratic nominee. For the period 64–60 the decline in Democratic presidential support in North Carolina counties with respect to black registration proportion has an r^2 value of 0.65 and a slope of -0.62. For the period 80–60 the r^2 value is 0.31, and the slope is -0.40. For the 84–60 period we obtain an r^2 of 0.30, with a slope of -0.46.

Discussion

Our emphasis on data from relatively small units of aggregation exhibiting a considerable range of variation in both the dependent and independent variable, our use of a quadratic context effects model, and our emphasis on *changes* in voting behavior over time allow us to avoid two common mistakes in ecological inference: estimating a non-linear relationship over a data range in which the non-linearities cannot be detected, and failing to detect long-run trends because of a reliance on cross-sectional or pooled-data methods.

We show that Wallace support in 1968 prefigures subsequent drop-off in Democratic presidential support from its pre-1968 levels, and is a harbinger of the geographic patterns of voting that have subsequently characterized US presidential elections (e.g. in 1984 or 1988). This evidence strongly suggests that Wallace voters subsequently regularly deserted the Democratic Party's presidential ticket to vote for Republican nominees, especially when a southerner was not the head of the Democratic ticket. The George Wallace of 1968 is not someone whom today's Republican Party wishes to claim as a spiritual forefather. Yet, the aggregate data analysis above suggests that voting

for Wallace was, for many white Democrats, especially in the South, a way-station on the road to voting Republican at the presidential level.

We also reaffirm the close link between the Wallace vote and racial context at both the state and the county level. Similarly, using aggregate data, we show how the *historical decline* in Democratic presidential vote share since 1960 is inversely associated with the size of the black population in the state, and for North Carolina, in the county. Essentially, the greater the black population in a geographic area, the greater is the extent to which white voters in areas of previously high Democratic support have shifted to voting for Republican candidates for president.[19] The link between race and southern dealignment at the level of presidential voting is a controversial one. We believe the data we have shown, especially those for North Carolina, strongly argue for the conclusion that the link is a strong one. The probable mechanism that underlies the above findings is straightforward. Black political participation rates in the South have been equalizing with those of whites, and since 1964 blacks vote overwhelmingly for Democratic candidates. Increases in black political strength and in black Democratic support levels give blacks greater influence in the Democratic Party at all levels of government (perhaps even control of the local Democratic Party in heavily black areas). This pushes whites toward the Republican Party in jurisdictions where there is a viable Republican candidate. For presidential politics, this leads us to a simple rule to understand what has been happening to the Democrat voting in the South: BIWO – blacks in, whites out (cf. Huckfeldt and Kohfeld, 1989).

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Glazer *et al.* (1993) find similar effects in the nation as a whole for the 1988 presidential election using ABC exit poll data. For the 48 states for which they have

ABC exit poll data broken down by race, the white vote going to Michael Dukakis in the 1988 presidential election fell off linearly with the percentage black in the state, with a slope of -0.58 ($r^2 = 0.47$). When they look only at states with above 12 percent black population, they find an $r^2 = 0.74$ and the estimated slope of the relationship increases. We find that, in the heavily black states of Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia, white support for Dukakis ranged from 21 percent in Mississippi to 35 percent in North Carolina, averaging 27 percent; while in seven outer southern and border states, white support for Dukakis ranged from 34 percent in Arkansas and Tennessee to 43 percent in Kentucky, averaging 37 percent; moreover, outside the South, there are few states where white support for Dukakis was below 40 percent, and most of these were states like New Jersey and Illinois with substantial black populations.

2. See also Black and Black (1973) for analysis of the Wallace vote in Alabama in 1968, and Wrinkle and Polinard (1973) for analysis of the Wallace vote in Texas.

3. Similarly, in looking at the effects of minority population proportion on congressional liberalism, a linear model may misspecify the nature of the relationship, by missing evidence for a curvilinear pattern suggestive of racial backlash at levels of black population sufficient to be threatening to whites, but not large enough to be controlling (Keech, 1968; Grofman et al., 1992).

4. It was apparently first proposed by Boudon (1963). See also Sprague (1976) and Grofman (1987). The model above is similar to those in Huckfeldt and Kohfeld (1989) and Glazer et al. (1993), but it is conceptually simpler and somewhat easier to test directly.

5. Cf. Schoenberger and Segal (1971).

6. Because black registration was quite low in the mostly rural majority black counties in North Carolina in 1968, this is almost certainly somewhat of an overestimate, since white registration share was higher than white population share would suggest. A quadratic regression run with 1980 black registration gives us an r^2 of 0.56, but parameters that are less clearly interpretable ($y = 0.171 + 3.303 \cdot x - 4.193x^2$). We did not have earlier registration data by race.

7. We may take 1960 to be the last hurrah of the traditional Democratic coalition. However, we get essentially identical patterns (and very similar correlations) if, instead of using 1960 as our baseline from which to measure change, we use 1940 (the heyday of the New Deal coalition) or even 1900 (when the Civil War coalition was still reasonably intact).

8. Correlations between the Wallace vote percentage and Democratic vote share in North Carolina counties range from 0.12 to 0.28 for the years from 1972 to 1984, with positive slopes from 0.28 to 0.40. Even in 1968 there was a minuscule positive correlation between the Wallace vote share and that of Humphrey in the 100 counties of North Carolina. It is important to realize that Wallace was drawing disproportionately for his support on voters (especially those in counties with substantial black population) who historically had been very likely to vote for Democratic presidential nominees. Thus the areas with high Wallace vote are also areas where Democrats are likely to be concentrated.

9. We might also note that, at both the state and the county level for North Carolina, the Wallace vote better predicts post-1968 Republican gains relative to 1960 Republican vote share than does the Goldwater vote.

10. By 'Wallace-type' voters we mean those who actually voted for Wallace and are still voting, and those who would have been Wallace voters had they been voting in 1968. Obviously, some Wallace voters had died or were no longer politically active in elections subsequent to 1968. Similarly, some had not voted in 1960.

11. Alternatively, readers who are uncomfortable with ecological inferences at the individual level, given the change in the electorate over time, may simply take our results to show that the areas where white voters voted for Wallace are the ones where

present-day white voters are voting Republican in much greater proportions than their predecessors did.

12. We would emphasize, however, that similar problems arise even were we to have survey data on individuals as long as we confine ourselves to a cross-sectional form of analysis.

13. We provide these time points as illustrative so as to develop contrasts between the Civil War pattern visible in 1900, the New Deal pattern visible in 1940 and the pre-Civil Rights Act of 1964/pre-Voting Rights Act of 1965 pattern still visible in 1960, with the Goldwater pattern in 1964, the Wallace pattern in 1968 and the Reagan pattern in 1984.

14. The correlations are with the 1980 black population in the state.

15. Note that, because we are using a *change* variable as our independent variable, our expectation is that the effect will be a linear one rather than quadratic.

16. For only the states with above 15 percent black, the correlations are virtually identical: 0.44, 0.61, 0.53, 0.48 and 0.51 for 64–00, 64–40, 88–00, 88–40 and 88–60 respectively; and the slopes are even steeper.

17. Very few previous authors have looked at within-state context effects on presidential voting at the county level (see, however, Black and Black, 1973; Wright 1977; Alt, 1994).

18. For example, in 1960 the correlation is 0.72 with a positive slope of 0.81; in 1964 it is 0.45 with a positive slope of 0.39; in 1968 it is 0.29 with a positive slope of 0.24; in 1980 it is 0.53 with a positive slope of 0.45, and in 1984 it is 0.51 with a positive slope of 0.45.

19. While it might be said that the counties in North Carolina where Wallace was strongest are areas which are highly conservative as well as being highly black, somehow to regard that conservatism as a fact independent of the historical racial context seems to us to be missing a critical causal arrow. We would also emphasize that, since 1968, no Democratic presidential nominee (not even a southern one) has received a majority of the white vote.

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