
Ten Years after the Revolution

1994 and Partisan Control of Government

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The elections in 1994 produced a truly remarkable set of outcomes. Rarely in American history has one party so clearly dominated electoral contests across the country. Republicans gained fifty-four seats in the U.S. House of Representatives and eight seats in the U.S. Senate. Not one single Republican incumbent in the House was defeated, while thirty-four Democratic incumbents lost. The magnitude of this change is well illustrated by the remarkable transformation in the Washington State delegation, which went from eight Democrats and one Republican to seven Republicans and two Democrats. The Republicans picked up seats in thirty-three of forty-one state senates and forty-three of forty-six state lower chambers holding elections in 1994. Finally, Republican candidates defeated five incumbent Democratic governors and won fifteen open seat elections, while all Republican incumbent governors won their reelection bids. These sweeping events caught many of those who studied American politics by surprise. In fact, 1994 had seen the publication of *Congress' Permanent Minority? Republicans in the U.S. House* (Connelly and Pitney 1994). Clearly, there were few who predicted these sweeping gains and the return of the Republican party to majority status after a long hiatus.

As a result, after the 1994 elections, there was a flurry of questions and research about what exactly had happened. Did “the elections reflect *only* a short-term rebellion against the Democratic Party in general and Bill Clinton in particular? Were the results due to *enduring* structural shifts in the parties’ electoral coalitions? Was 1994 a ‘critical election’ indicating that a *realignment* has occurred?” inquired Tuchfarber and Rademacher (1995, 689). Abramowitz asked, “Can we explain the Republican victory? . . . Was it a temporary aberration caused by short-term forces or does it signal a long-term realignment of party strength in the United States?” (1995, 874).

Many of these studies developed (often conflicting) theories to explain the Republican gains of 1994, but almost all agreed that looking at this election with a short-term focus meant that many questions about 1994 had to remain unanswered. As Little (1998, 188) suggested, more time was needed to determine the degree to which the fruits of the Republicans' successful strategy in this election cycle were merely temporary or more durable.

But despite the near-universal agreement on the need for perspective, little research has been done that looks at the implications of the 1994 elections historically. Most research on the 1994 elections was published in 1998 or earlier, and 1994 is the last election included in those studies examining that election as part of electoral trends. This chapter returns to the questions surrounding the 1994 elections with the goal of developing more definitive answers now that we have the vantage point of time. Was 1994 a watershed election or simply the culmination of gradual processes of change? To what extent have the Republican gains of 1994 persisted through 2004? Are there regional variations to the national trends? Have these changes played out against a backdrop of change with respect to the nationalization of American electoral politics?

To begin answering these questions, we utilize data on the partisan balance in the U.S. Congress and state legislatures and control of the fifty governors' mansions from 1984 through 2004. Generally speaking, the results reveal that 1994 was indeed a revolutionary election; there was little evidence of Republican gains prior to and immediately after the 1994 elections. Furthermore, while the Republican gains of 1994 have for the most part persisted, there have not been additional gains. However, there are clear regional variations to these trends, particularly at the state level. Southern state legislatures, rather than being part of the revolution, were undergoing evolutionary change that predated 1994 and continued after. These changes, both nationally and in the South, suggest American politics became more nationalized, although in the period since 1994, Southern congressional delegations have become as distinctively Republican as they were Democratic for most of the twentieth century.

Early Explanations for the Republican Surge

On November 8, 1994, many politicians and political scientists alike were stunned by the results of the congressional and state elections. Even Republican congressional leaders were surprised—and unprepared for their new role as a majority. As one newly elected Republican U.S. representative noted, “I never dreamed I would serve in the majority. I expected a 20-seat gain. . . . I don't care what those leaders say, they didn't know we were going to win either. If they had, they would have known what to teach us in

orientation” (Gimpel 1995, 16). Political scientists were caught off guard, too. Abramowitz described the election as a Republican “tidal wave” (1995, 873), while Gimpel used words such as “landmark,” “spectacular,” and “stunning” (1995, 1) to describe the turn of events. Almost immediately, researchers turned to the task of explaining what happened in these elections and why almost everyone failed to predict these results.

Some have argued that these Republican victories were a function of unique conditions in 1994. Tuchfarber and Rademacher conclude that the 1994 elections were both a rejection of Bill Clinton, the Democratic party, and liberalism *and* an embrace of conservatism (1995, 694). Little (1998) argues state-level victories for the Republican party were a function of unprecedented, coordinated national party activity that induced state-level parties to adopt state-specific Contracts with America.¹ The Republicans also efficiently targeted resources to those races where they would make the most difference, which had a noted impact in these races (Abramowitz 1995). According to these arguments, then, in the absence of these specific conditions in future elections, one would predict that Republican gains would not persist or, at the very least, that such gains would not continue.

But others argued that these victories were simply a part of larger trends or explanations of midterm elections generally. For example, Coleman (1997) argues that these victories were not altogether surprising due to a long-standing Republican advantage in midterm elections. The congressional parties have different fortunes in midterm elections where—even when controlling for factors such as presidential approval, economic growth, surge and decline, and safe seats—Republicans lose fewer seats than do Democrats. The Democrats lost so badly in 1994 because they were Democrats, serving under a Democratic president, the reasoning goes. Thus, if presidential party is incorporated into existing models of midterm elections, the results are almost entirely explicable.

Campbell (1997) argues that the results of the 1994 elections are consistent with a revised theory of surge and decline. The results of the election are due to a staggered realignment in the South, where the South had become solidly Republican in presidential elections in the 1980s, but only became solidly Republican in congressional elections in the 1990s. The 1994 elections, he claims, mark the unification of the South into the Republican camp. Thus, Republican gains were so large because of two forces, the realignment of the South and midterm decline, both of which worked against the Democrats.

Some have argued that changes in the electorate led to the sweeping Republican gains (Abramowitz 1995). The electorate had grown less Democratic and more conservative since the 1980s. At the same time, ideology and party became far more important predictors of vote choice in 1994, particularly for Republicans and conservatives. From these findings, then, one

could argue that the Republican gains should continue past the 1994 time period. While the changes in the 1994 election may have been large, they are explainable by minor revisions to existing models and are not a historical anomaly.

Additionally, there is disagreement over the extent to which these victories were driven by changes in the South. While Campbell (1997) attributes much of the observed change in congressional elections to changes in the South, Little (1998) finds state-level gains by the Republican party are not related to region. Thus, it is not clear to what extent regional changes in the South were generally important or whether such changes were critical only at the congressional level.

Despite their disagreement over the causes of the 1994 Republican victories, all these findings seem to suggest congressional elections are increasingly responding to national-level forces. While previous research has shown congressional elections have not become nationalized and are more responsive to state and local forces (Vertz, Frendreis, and Gibson 1987; Claggett, Flanigan, and Zingale 1984), the widespread nature of the Republican gains in this election cycle suggest that voters have been responding to national forces when making choices in congressional elections. Was this nationalization of midterm elections a one-time event or have the midterm elections become more nationalized since the 1980s?

Finally, despite the contradictory claims about the nature of these victories, what all authors seems to agree upon is the fact that it is difficult to find definitive answers about the long-term significance of the 1994 elections from a short-term vantage point. For example, Tuchfarber and Rademacher (1995, 694) note that only future elections will allow us to tell if 1994 marks the beginning of a period of Republican dominance or a continuation of a period of electoral dealignment. Abramowitz (1995, 885) wonders whether the changes he identifies represent long-term changes in the electorate or short-term reactions to the perceived failures of the Clinton administration and the Democratic Congress. Without examining elections beyond these events, it is difficult to answer these questions or determine to what extent the Republicans continued to make gains in Congress and in the states beyond the 1994 election or even the extent to which the gains made in the 1994 elections persisted.

Reexamining the Revolution Ten Years After

In order to develop answers to questions surrounding the 1994 election results, we utilize data on the partisan balance in the U.S. Congress and state legislatures and control of the fifty governors' mansions from 1984 through

2004. This time frame was chosen to allow analysis of the data ten years before and ten years after the 1994 election.

At the national level, we collected data on the partisan balance of each state's delegation to the U.S. House and the U.S. Senate after each election cycle.² Data were coded so that any gains or losses from a given election were associated with the year of the election, not the year in which the winners actually served. So, for example, changes in a state delegation to Congress in the 1994 election year are reflected in the data for 1994, not 1995. Because the overall data set is yearly, the data for the odd years, when no elections were held, simply reflect the data for the previous year.

Data on state-level election returns came from Klarner 2003. For each state, the percentage of Republicans in the upper and lower chambers, as well as a variable indicating whether Republicans controlled each chamber, is included for each year.³ Where there was a tie in a chamber, these cases were coded as non-Republican controlled. Finally, this data set contains a variable indicating the party of the governor. There are twenty-six cases where the party of the governor switched midyear or there was a minor-party governor. Once again, these cases were coded as non-Republican control of the gubernatorial post. Finally, in the state data, because different states hold elections in different years, the statistics reflect who actually served in that year, rather than gains/losses from elections that year. So, for example, gains in the 1994 election are reflected in the 1995 totals.

Because much of the speculation surrounding the changes in 1994 involves regional variation, the data have also been split into non-South and South, with the latter composed of the eleven ex-Confederate states (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia).

The primary means of analysis is an examination of trends in the variables during the twenty-one-year period centered on 1994. In each figure, a vertical line indicates the first year reflecting the effects of the 1994 elections: for the congressional data, this is 1994; for the states, this is 1995, because these data record the numbers serving each year, rather than election returns. The analysis also includes an assessment of the trends before and after 1994. To measure these trends, the variable of interest was regressed on the time variable (year) separately for the early period (before the Republican revolution) and then again for the later period.⁴ The slope from these regressions serves as a good measure of trend, capturing the average annual change in each period.

Two additional statistics are helpful in understanding the dynamics in the time series. First, the difference between the mean level of each variable in the early and later periods is calculated. This change, which we have termed the "bump," indicates the durable gains made by the GOP. A second statistic, termed the "jump," measures the specific increase in the variable

as a result of the 1994 elections. For the congressional data, the jump is the gain from 1993 to 1994; for the state data, it is the difference between 1994 and 1995. If the 1994 election was truly a revolution, we would expect to see a large jump that is equal to or larger than the bump; in such situations, all of the change between the two periods would be explained by the jump in 1994. However, if 1994 were part of an evolutionary process, then we would expect to see a bump that is larger than the jump. This would suggest that while the Republicans made some gains in 1994, there were also gains that occurred outside this election.

The Nature of the Republican Revolution in Perspective

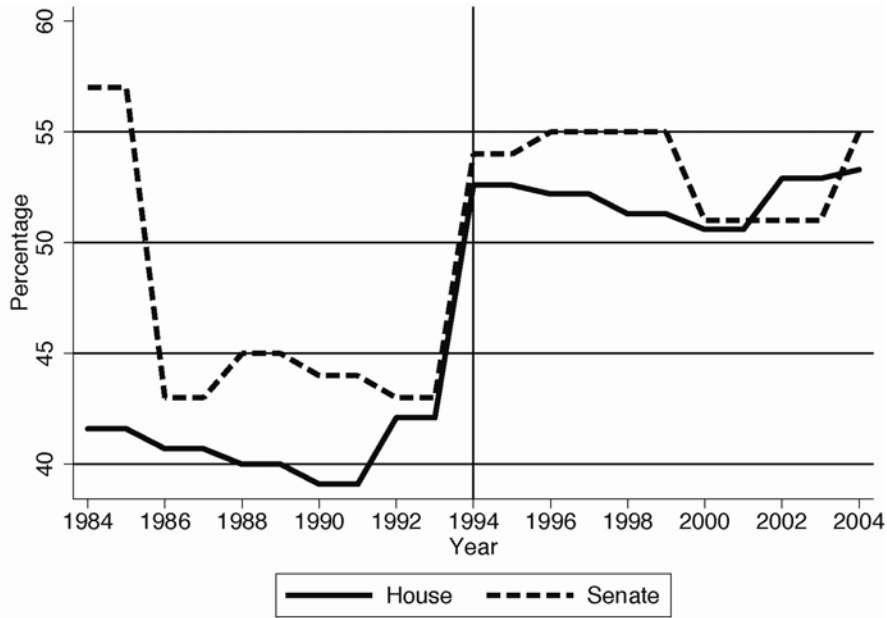
The 1994 election is often referred to as the “Republican revolution,” but to what extent were the changes truly revolutionary? Did any of the outcomes reflect evolutionary processes that had been unfolding in the years prior? The story told by the data initially appears fairly clear: 1994 truly *was* a revolution. Consider first the Republican share of seats in the U.S. Congress. Figure 22.1 graphs the series for the House and Senate separately. The trend in the House prior to 1994 is essentially flat—the slope during this period is -0.03 . At this rate, it would have taken the Republicans more than thirty-three years to lose one percentage of their seats. The trend is similarly flat after 1994—the slope is an equally small but positive 0.03 . As a result, almost all of the change in representation of Republicans in the House comes as a result of 1994. The *bump* in the Republican percentage—the increase from the mean level in the early period to the mean level in the later period—is 11.3 points, as Republicans went from controlling about 40 percent of the seats to having a bit over half. But most of this comes from the *jump* from 1992 to 1994—10.5 points. Indeed, no one could have seen this revolution coming. And, moreover, once the revolution was over, equilibrium returned.

The story is similar in the Senate, although the first two years reflect the Republican majority during the Reagan era (see figure 22.1). As a result, the slope in the early period is negative and sizable (-1.31). This also means the bump in the average percentage Republican, 7.0, is smaller than the jump in 1994, 11.0. In other words, although the Republicans picked up eleven Senate seats in 1994, their average in the post-1994 period was only seven seats greater than in the ten years prior to 1994. Despite this characteristic of the changes, there is certainly no evidence of secular gains prior to 1994 and equally little evidence of continuing progress after the revolution—in fact, the slope in the later period is slightly negative (-0.28).

The national-level changes clearly fit the revolution mold, but what about the dynamics in the states? Figure 22.2 graphs the number of Republi-

(AU: I don't follow this, unless you're looking back before the period shown on the chart. From 1984–1990, the slope is much more negative than -0.03 , with the Republicans losing some three percentage points (7 percent of the Republican delegation) in six years. And from 1984–1992, the trend is positive, not negative. What am I missing?)

Figure 22.1 Republican Percentage in the U.S. House and Senate



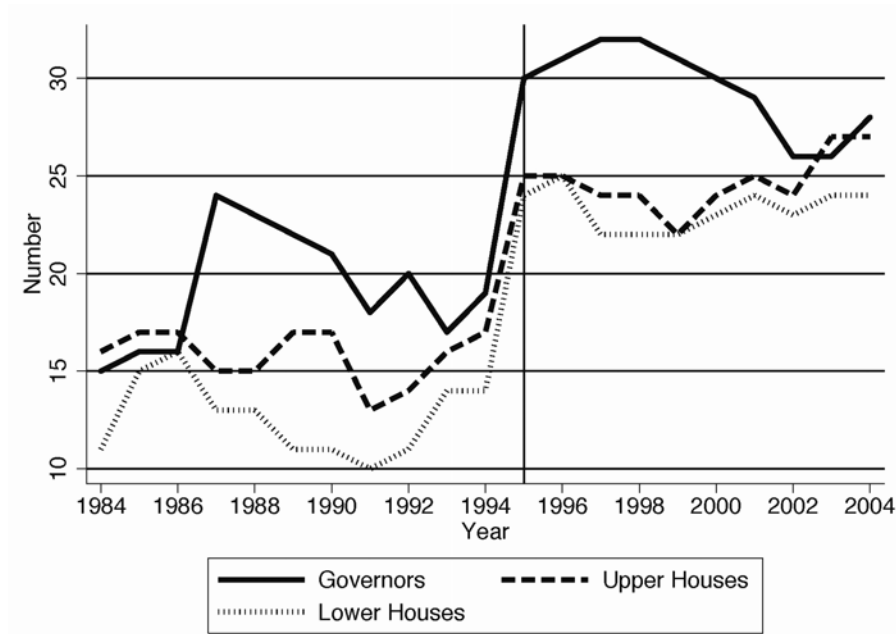
can governors, along with the number of state upper and lower houses controlled by Republicans. Here, too, the changes are much more revolutionary than evolutionary. The Republicans were gaining a governor at the rate of about one every five years in the period before 1994 (slope = 0.20). This was progress for the GOP, but it pales in comparison to the jump in 1994 of eleven gubernatorial positions. This completely accounts for the bump of 10.3 positions from the early to later period. Interestingly, the Republican party has been handing back keys to a number of governors' mansions since 1994, losing one position every two years on average (slope = -0.56).

The patterns in Republican control of state legislatures follow the same revolutionary mold (see figure 22.2). The trends in both upper and lower house control in the early period and later period are essentially flat, although the GOP is gaining one upper house every five years or so in the post-1994 period (slope = 0.22). The changes occur almost completely in the jump from 1994 to 1995—eight upper houses and ten lower houses move into the Republican column. Both of these jumps account for almost the entire bump in average number of chambers owned by the GOP—8.9 upper houses and 10.7 lower houses.

So far the conclusion about the nature of change is clear: 1994 was a

{AU: I'm sure this is correct under your methodology, which probably somehow ignores or averages out 2004, but I don't get it. If this statement were correct, I would expect there to be five less governors in 2004 than in 1994, but there are only two less. Obviously, there's something I don't understand about your statistics. Do you think most readers will follow you, or do you think you should add a little more explanation of your methodology?}

Figure 22.2 Number of Governorships and State Legislatures Controlled by Republicans



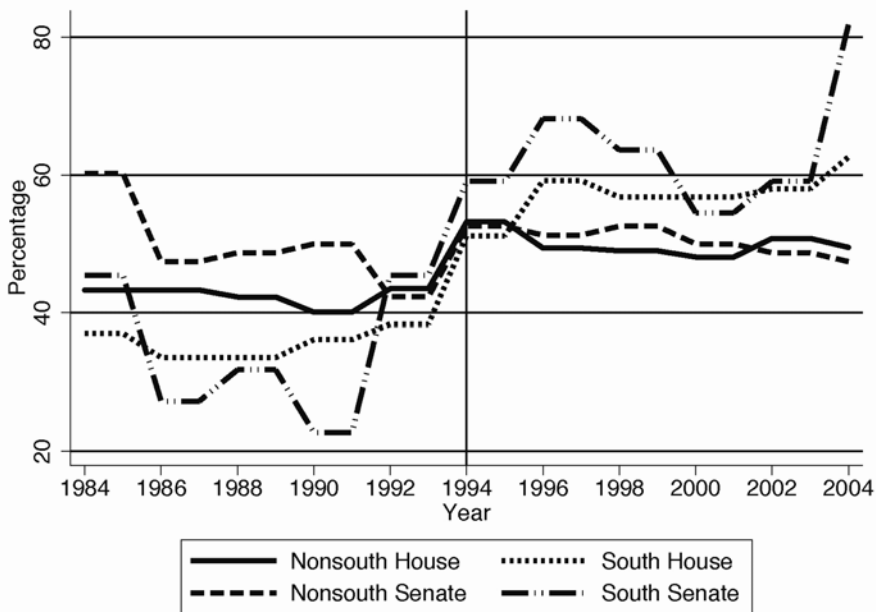
truly remarkable election, in which the Republicans made major gains that were not part of any gradual process of increasing electoral success. Similarly, little has happened since that revolution to alter the basic partisan balance in Congress and in the states. The gains have persisted. On the one hand, given the popular characterizations of the Republican revolution, this conclusion is not surprising. On the other hand, there are good reasons to expect *some* buildup to the “big bang” in 1994. For one, it has been known from survey data that the population has been trending Republican since the mid- to late 1970s. Second, a secular realignment in the South has been under way for some time and started to reach its maturity in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Republican identification in both the non-South and South increased dramatically from the late 1970s into the mid-1980s and then stabilized. The changes in the South were especially pronounced, as the percentage of Republicans roughly doubled in about a decade (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002). And all of the increases occurred well before the 1994 election.

Certainly, it is reasonable to speculate, these changes in mass partisanship must have had some effects on partisan control of government before

1994. Or did the disparity between macro partisanship and party control simply create increasing tension that was abruptly released in 1994? The answer is that there were, in fact, signs of increasing Republican ascendancy before 1994, but only in the South and particularly in state legislatures.

This fact becomes apparent when the trends examined above are broken down by region. Figure 22.3 displays the Republican percentage of the members in the U.S. House and Senate from non-Southern and Southern regions.⁵ The two House series are basically flat in the pre- and post-1994 periods—all of the slopes are much less than 1 in magnitude. So, on average, gains in each period were offset by losses. But the Southern House series rises consistently between 1990 and 1996. This suggests the Republican revolution in the Southern congressional delegations played itself out over four election cycles. A good indicator of this fact is that only 12.8 of the 21.8 percentage points in the bump in average Republican House percentage in the South was due to the jump from 1993 to 1994. In other words, just under half of the durable Republican gains in the House over the last twenty years occurred in elections besides 1994. In contrast, the 1993–1994 jump in non-Southern states was 9.7 percentage points but resulted in a bump of only 7.5 points. The much smaller, durable change outside the South was therefore clearly limited to 1994.

Figure 22.3 Republican Percentage in the U.S. House and Senate, by Region

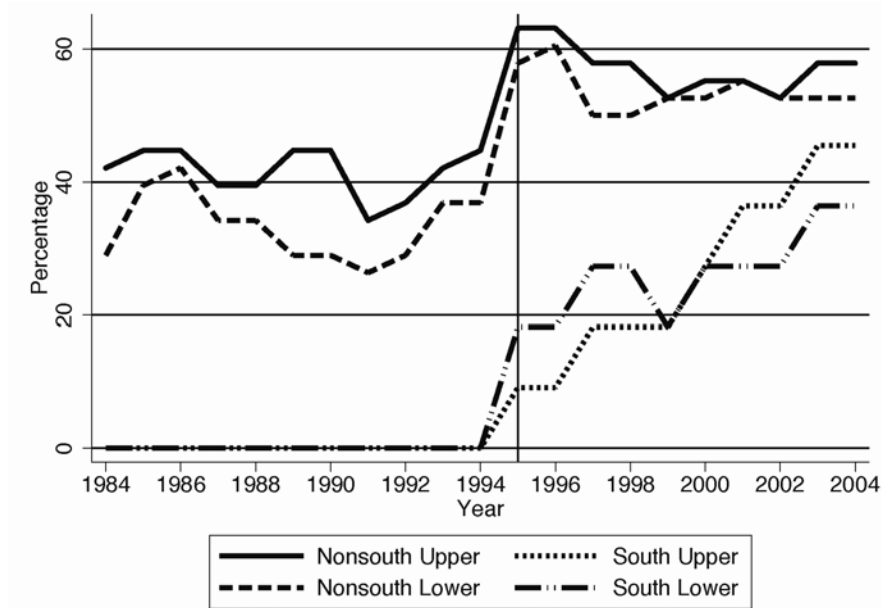


A similar story emerges for the Senate. The increases in the percentage of Southern Republican senators start in 1992 and continue through 1996. This is a shorter span than in the House, but it is still evidence of evolution. In contrast, the non-Southern series looks remarkably stable in both periods and exhibits only a minor jump in 1994 that really only served to make up ground lost in 1992.

Are signs of evolution equally apparent in Southern statehouses? Figure 22.4 shows the percentage of upper and lower chambers in each region under GOP control. The non-Southern series both show the expected jump, though there were some gains in the years prior. But in the South, there were *no* Republican-controlled chambers prior to 1995. After the 1994 elections, however, there is a notable trend upward in both upper and lower houses with GOP majorities. Unlike the congressional trends in the South, which seemed to suggest a series of years surrounding 1994 that were responsible for a Republican “evolution,” the state legislative data portray 1994 as the push that started the ball rolling. In the post-1994 period, the Republicans picked up 4.5 percent of Southern upper houses and 1.8 percent of Southern lower houses per year on average. The immediate post-1994 jump is clear in the lower chambers, but for the upper chambers it is not unusually large

(AU: should that be 3.8?)

Figure 22.4 Percentage of State Upper and Lower Houses Controlled by Republicans, by Region

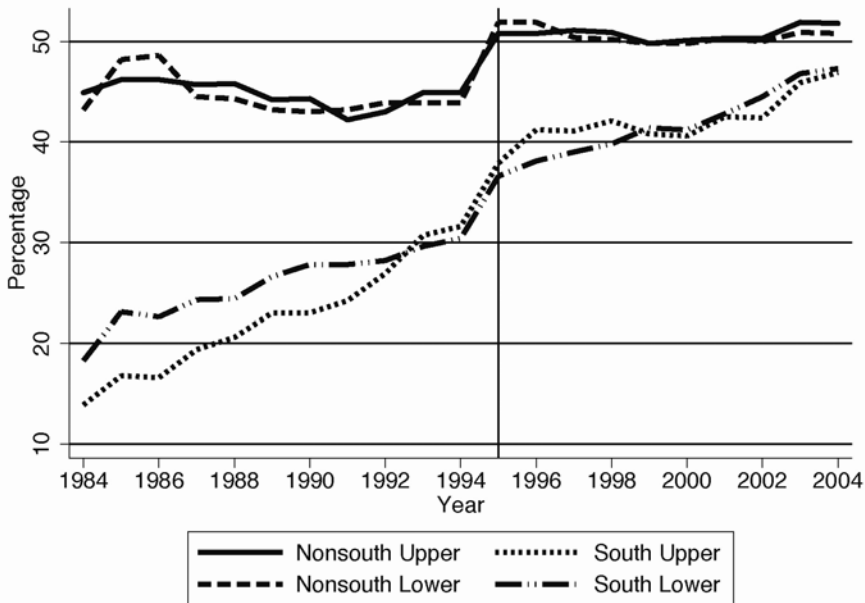


compared to change later in the period. It looks like something happened in Southern statehouses in 1994, but it was not the radical, instantaneous change evident in the rest of the country and in Washington.

In fact, what happened in 1994 was simply that long-standing increases in Republican membership in Southern state legislatures had finally led to majority status for the GOP. This is clear in figure 22.5, which displays the mean Republican percentage in upper and lower houses in the non-South and South. What is remarkable in these figures is the relatively smooth, unbroken trend upward in the South. In contrast to almost all of the previous figures, one would be hard-pressed to identify any particular point as a clear jump indicative of revolutionary change. Republicans were making steady progress in Southern statehouses long before 1994 and have continued to do so at mostly the same rate.⁶ What happened in 1994 was simply that some of these increases started to create GOP majorities in some Southern states. As the GOP presence continued to increase in the South, more and more chambers fell into Republican hands, as figure 22.4 shows.

These patterns are the clearest evidence of evolutionary change. Southern state legislatures were simply not part of the Republican revolution. Iron-

Figure 22.5 Mean Republican Percentage in State Upper and Lower Houses, by Region



ically, though the Republican pickups in the South in 1994 are often presented as part of the evidence for a sweeping, critical realignment in 1994, the timing of the gains is purely accidental. They coincide with the other clear jumps in partisan control in 1994 not because they all share some common source but simply because that happened to be the year the secular realignment in the South yielded some GOP majorities.

One thing is relatively clear: both the sharp and gradual gains together have nationalized American politics. At the beginning of the time frame considered here, the South was clearly less Republican than the rest of the country. By the end of the period, the South was much less distinctive and in many instances had become even more Republican than the non-South. In the states, both Republican control and mean percentage in the Southern state legislatures had approached convergence with the non-South (figures 22.4 and 22.5). While the South has become as distinctly Republican as it was Democratic in the earlier era, this actually indicates the South and the non-South are both responding to similar forces. The South is becoming more Republican because the South is, generally speaking, more conservative than most of the rest of the country. Nationalization has led not to partisan homogeneity across regions but to similarity in how party control reflects the underlying ideological and demographic profile of each region's population. In the South, that means the Republicans have a natural edge.

Conclusion

On one hand, some previous analyses of the 1994 elections suggested the Republican gains were a function of specific conditions that were present in that election. The Republican revolution, according to this model, was a spectacular event that would probably not be replicated. On the other hand, some argued the 1994 gains were part of a larger process of political change in the United States and thus were more evolutionary, rather than revolutionary, in nature. Of course, it was difficult to determine which of these viewpoints was correct without the benefit of perspective.

When looking at the Republican surge ten years later, it becomes clear that these changes were in many ways truly revolutionary. In the U.S. House and Senate, almost all of the gains made by Republicans came in the 1994 elections, despite the fact that mass partisanship was gradually becoming more Republican in the period preceding those elections. The same is true at the state level. Changes in Republican control of the executive branch and state legislatures almost all occur in the 1994 election. There is little evidence of evolutionary change at the aggregate level. Clearly, something happened in the electorate in 1994. In the search for understanding what is going

on in contemporary electoral politics, discovering exactly what happened in that election cycle is critical.

However, it is also true that the South had gradually tilted more Republican during this time period, and there is evidence to suggest that the changes in the South were happening much more gradually than in the rest of the country. Republican gains in non-Southern states—in congressional delegations, in governorships, and in state legislatures—were almost entirely confined to the 1994 election. Southern congressional delegations, in contrast, were becoming more Republican throughout the 1990s. This evolutionary process is even more clearly evident in Southern state legislatures, particularly when looking at the percentage of Republicans in these chambers. In these legislatures, Republican representation increased smoothly across the twenty-one years with little evidence of a surge at all.

So it seems clear that the 1994 Republican revolution was a remarkable confluence of events. A gradual process of evolutionary change in the South was reaching its culmination at the same time a number of conditions favoring the Republicans occurred. The Republicans were in an excellent position to capitalize on these two factors—and capitalize they did, making tremendous gains. However, while these gains have not evaporated, they also have not continued. There is a new equilibrium in congressional politics, much to the Democrats' disadvantage.

As a result of the 1994 elections, it appears that politics became more nationalized. In state legislatures, Southern Republican gains have brought that region to levels similar to those in the rest of the country, and their growth continues. If trends remain the same, in just a few years the typical Southern statehouse will be virtually indistinguishable from its Northern counterpart. A few years later, these legislatures are likely to be even more Republican than the non-South. At the national level, GOP gains in Southern congressional delegations have already made them look even more Republican than the rest of the country.

The shift of the South from solidly Democratic to staunchly Republican must surely be seen as a realignment of some sort, though it appears to have happened—and is still happening—in waves. The shift occurred in presidential elections earliest. The Republican “L” has been a staple of the electoral map for decades. Then, state legislatures started moving in a Republican direction. This change is still under way, but signs point toward Republican dominance in Southern statehouses soon. The element of these partisan shifts that most resembles the classic critical realignment was the change in Congress, which occurred primarily in 1994 but also extended over surrounding elections in the South. The Republican gains in the 1994 surge have persisted, giving the GOP a durable majority in Congress.

Many people, of course, have described the Republican surge in 1994 as a realignment. With a ten-year perspective on these events, it is now possible

to better understand the complexity of this realignment process. In thinking about realignments, we normally look for nationwide change driven by intense, polarizing issues that is the result of interplay among party elites and party factions, leading to mass voter changes and enduring changes in election results. Some of this describes the elections of 1994. However, the changes unfolded with a unique regional dimension unlike any major realignment in the past. In addition, rather than mass partisanship realigning with newly defined parties, the changes in party identification seem to have preceded the shifts in partisan control. Furthermore, while the New Deal coalition may have faded, New Deal issues are still important and continue to define the major divisions between the parties. Of course, these issues have been joined by other issues of a more contemporary nature, but these issues are rarely cross-cutting.

If 1994 represented a realignment, it is not clear what the realigning issue was. This complexity only confirms what many students of realignment theory have believed for years: there is no *typical* realignment. Perhaps we should drop the term altogether and simply discuss *partisan change*. Either way, the 1994 election was part of a major transformation in American politics with lasting consequences for the two major political parties.

Notes

1. Of course, one must question the extent to which the Contract drove voting behavior in the states, given that exit polls showed few voters knew about the Contract at the national level, let alone the state level. However, Little (1998) argues the importance of these state contracts is that they gave Republicans issues to hang their hats on—issues that resonated with the voters.

2. Information on state delegations to Congress came from the official Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress (<http://bioguide.congress.gov>) and was confirmed by the Clerk of the House (<http://clerk.house.gov>) and official Senate (<http://www.senate.gov>) websites.

3. Nebraska was excluded from our analysis as its state legislature is unicameral and nonpartisan.

4. For the congressional data, the early period is 1984–1993 and the later period is 1994–2004. For the state data, the early period is 1984–1994 and the later period is 1995–2004.

5. More specifically, it is the number of Republicans from each region divided by the total number of House seats in that region (not the average of each state's delegation).

6. The slopes are largely unchanged: for upper houses, 1.7 in the early period and 0.7 in the later period; for lower houses, 1.0 before 1995 and 1.2 after. These numbers do suggest the upward trend flattens a bit for upper houses.