The Center for Voting and Democracy

November 2013

WINNER-TAKE-ALL IN THE SOUTH:
THE GREAT SOUTHERN PARTISAN REVERSAL, 1991-2013

Spotlighted Facts:

- **Partisan Representation**
  - Percentage of the 133 U.S. House seats held by each party in 1991 in the South (defined as the 14 states south of and including Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Kentucky, West Virginia and Virginia): **67% Democratic (89 seats) to 33% Republican (44 seats)**
  - Percentage of the 152 House seats for each party in those states today: **28% Democratic (42 seats) to 72% (110 seat) Republican**

- **Partisan Representation of the South in state legislatures**
  - Balance of partisan control of state legislative chambers in the South in 1991: **28 Democratic to 0 Republican**
  - Balance of partisan control of state legislative chambers in the South today: **3 Democratic to 25 Republican** (Democrats today hold one chamber in Kentucky and two in West Virginia)

- **Race and Party**
  - Number of Democrats by race in the 133 U.S. House districts in the South in 1991: **81 white, 4 African American, 4 Latino**
  - Number of Democrats by race in the 152 U.S. House districts from the region today: **18 white, 18 African American, 6 Latino**

- **Influence of Southern Republicans in U.S. House**
  - Number of House Republicans from the South in 1991: **44 (26.3% of all House Republicans)**
  - In 2013: **110 (47.2% of all House Republicans)**

- **Electoral Competition in 2014 in the South and the rest of the United States**
  - Number of Southern districts with >53% Republican partisanship lean: **109 districts**
  - Number of Southern districts with >53 Democratic partisanship lean: **35 districts**
  - Number of Southern districts between 53% Democratic and 53% Republican): **8 districts**
  - Percentage of districts with a balanced partisanship:
    - In the South: **5.2%, 8 seats out of 152**
    - Outside the South**: 16.6%, 47 seats out of 283**
  - Percentage of districts with a lopsided partisanship of at least 58% for one party:
    - In the South**: 81.6%** vs. outside the South**: 65.3%**

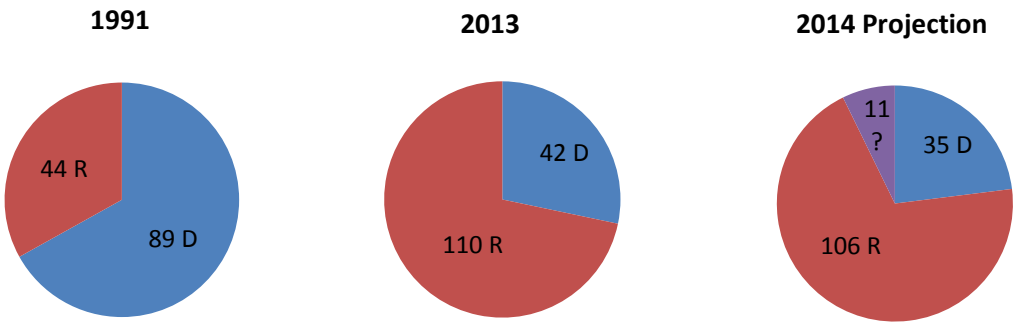
- **Democratic Monopoly in New England**
    - New England U.S. House seats held by Republicans in 1992: **6 out of 21**
    - New England U.S. House seats held by Republicans today: **0 out of 21**
    - New England districts with GOP partisanship greater than 50% in 1992: **9 of 21**
    - New England districts with GOP partisanship greater than 50% today: **1 of 21**

As one of the few multi-racial democracies in the world, the interplay of race, elections and representation is particularly important in the United States. Perhaps the most striking example of this interplay is the political transformation that has taken place in the South over the past 25 years, and the impact of that partisan shift on the integration of African American voters into American politics. Power in the South has shifted from what was effectively a white-black coalition in power in the 1990s in every Southern state legislature and most Southern congressional districts to monopoly control by a nearly all-white party.

African Americans have always been heavily concentrated in Southern states, where slavery was the law of the land until after the Civil War. Today, most African Americans continue to live in states that were part of the Confederacy. This region has undergone a drastic change in its partisan representation since 1991, accompanied by a similarly dramatic change in the political power available to African Americans. Winner-take-all elections have contributed to a polarizing "us vs. them" form of representation, producing Southern House delegations filled with either liberal African American Democrats or conservative white Republicans. The "Dixiecrat" – the white, right-of-center Democrat – has been nearly wiped out of the U.S. House, as have most centrist Southern Republicans.

Our definition of the South for the purposes of this report includes the states of Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Kentucky, West Virginia and Virginia, along with all the states to their south: Tennessee, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina and North Carolina.[1] In these 14 states, 67% of U.S House seats were held by Democrats in 1991, and 72% of House seats are held by Republicans in 2013. That Republican seat share is projected to hold constant in the 2014 election. The following graphs summarize how the Southern states' representation in Congress by the major parties has evolved and present the partisan landscape for the upcoming election.

[1] Maryland is excluded because it has politically aligned with the Northeast, rather than following the political direction of the South. Missouri is not included because it is not generally considered to be in the geographic region of the South, although it was a slave state and follows many of the same political patterns of Southern states – it has two safely Democratic districts represented by African American Democrats and six safely Republican districts represented by white Republicans, for instance. If Maryland and Missouri were to be counted as Southern states, a majority of House Republicans would come from the South.



This partisan shift represents an enormous transfer of congressional seats between the major parties. In 1991, Democrats held 45 more seats in the South than Republicans, but today Southern Republicans outnumber Southern Democrats by 66 seats. Southern Republicans now make up 47% of all Republican seats in the House.

There are three major reasons for this dramatic partisan shift: a swing from Democrats to Republicans in the partisan voting patterns of many Southern voters; a decreasing portion of Southern voters who split their tickets between the parties in presidential and congressional elections; and winner-take-all elections that over-represent those in the majority. The rising number of congressional districts that are heavily African American has also been a contributing factor, as Democratic votes have become more concentrated in fewer districts. The importance of this last development has been often overstated by analysts, however. In fact, Republicans would be able to even more effectively gerrymander Southern district maps without a requirement of creating some majority-minority districts. FairVote has simulated gerrymanders in which Democrats could be completely wiped out of congressional representation in states like Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi and South Carolina if those states did not need to create opportunities for African Americans to elect preferred candidates.

The interplay between race and party is central to this narrative. As more African American voters were given opportunities to elect candidates of their choice in the South, the Democratic Party in the South became less successful at distinguishing itself from national Democrats. As Democratic presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama and new Republican congressional leaders from the South came to define their respective national parties, many Southern white voters completed their migration into the Republican Party. That migration began in 1964 when white Southerners voted in large numbers for Barry Goldwater, and continued steadily over the next four decades (with only temporary reversions to Democrats when they backed Jimmy Carter in 1976 and to a lesser extent Bill Clinton in 1992 and 1996).

One can quantify this shift by looking at the partisanship of states – a measure that reflects the partisan leanings of a state compared to the national average. In 1960, when John F. Kennedy was elected president, the 14 states in our analysis had a median statewide partisanship in favor of Democrats of 51.6%. In 1976, when Jimmy Carter was first elected, that median was 53.5%. But by 1984, the median partisanship had fallen to 47.5% Democratic, and in 2000, even with Southerner Al Gore leading the Democratic ticket, it was 43.6%. In 2012, the median partisanship was 40.0%, despite the fact that most

African Americans live in Southern states and African Americans voted for Barack Obama at a rate of over 90%.

The decline in ticket-splitting can be measured as well. In 1992, for example, Bill Clinton won nationally by six percentage points and was a relatively strong Southern candidate as the Governor of Arkansas. Nonetheless, he lost 33 Southern House districts that congressional Democrats were able to win that year. His presidency and the "Gingrich Revolution" of the 1994 election resulted in a large shift to Republicans in these districts, but even after the 2008 election there were 24 Southern districts in which Barack Obama lost but Democratic House candidates won. In the wake of another wave election for Republicans in 2010, however, the number of ticket-splitting Southern districts dropped to only 5 in 2012. There is no indication that ticket-splitting will return as a common phenomenon in the South, especially as long as Democrats hold the presidency.

Representation of Democrats in the South				
	1990		**2012**	
State	**Dem House Votes**	**Dem Seats**	**Dem House Votes**	**Dem Seats**
Alabama	67.9%	71.4%	36.0%	14.3%
Arkansas	55.5%	50.0%	32.3%	0.0%
Florida	51.0%	42.1%	47.0%	37.0%
Georgia	61.3%	90.0%	40.8%	35.7%
Kentucky	46.3%	57.1%	40.0%	16.7%
Louisiana	60.6%	50.0%	23.9%	16.7%
Mississippi	81.2%	100.0%	36.9%	25.0%
North Carolina	53.5%	72.7%	50.9%	30.8%
Oklahoma	60.6%	66.7%	32.4%	0.0%
South Carolina	57.2%	66.7%	43.0%	14.3%
Tennessee	51.5%	66.7%	36.8%	22.2%
Texas	53.8%	70.4%	40.0%	33.3%
Virginia	57.5%	50.0%	49.0%	27.3%
West Virginia	67.1%	100.0%	40.1%	33.3%
Total	59.0%	65.4%	40.7%	27.7%
Overall distortion (to Democrats)	**+6.4%**		**-13.0%**	

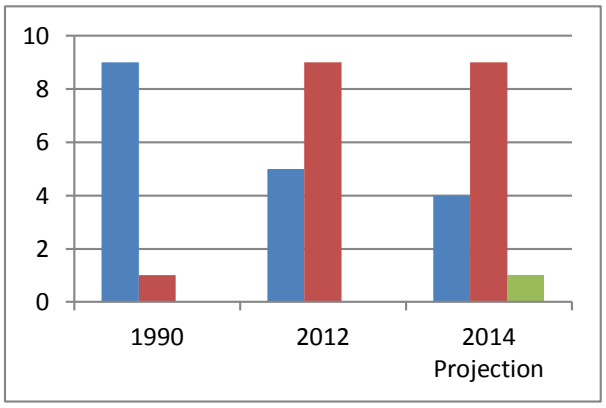
These trends have had an exceptionally large impact due to the use of winner-take-all elections, can exaggerate majorities and distort representation. Each Southern state is overrepresented by Republicans compared to its underlying partisanship. The table above shows the number of votes cast for Democratic congressional candidates and the proportion of U.S. Representatives that were Democrats after elections in Southern states in 1990 and 2012. Over this period, the share of votes in

U.S. House elections cast for Southern Democrats declined by 18.3%, from 59.0% to 40.7%, but this decline led to a 37.7% drop in the proportion of Southern House seats held by Democrats, from 65.4% to 27.7%.

The shift of many white Southern voters from backing conservative and moderate white Democrats to consistently voting for conservative Republicans, combined with winner-take-all voting patterns and the effects of redistricting in 2001 and 2011, has created a stagnant political environment in the region. Looking ahead to the 2014 midterm elections, FairVote considers only 5% of districts in the entire region to be balanced (within 3% of a 50% partisanship). In the rest of the country, 17% of congressional districts are balanced – still very low, but more than three times higher than in the South. The South also has a disproportionate number of completely uncompetitive districts, with 81.6% of districts that have a partisanship of at least 58% for one party, compared to 65.3% of districts nationally at that level of safety.

Two of the more dramatic examples of partisan change in Southern states between 1990 and 2012 are illustrated in the following graphs. The 2014 projections in these states indicate that Republican control in the South is likely to be an enduring pattern.

Georgia

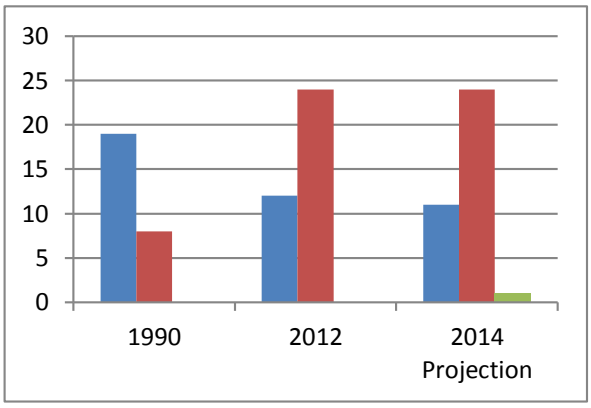


Blue: Democratic Seats

Red: Republican Seats

Green: Not projected

Texas



The following table reviews congressional representation in the South by state, party, and race in 1990 and 1992. It demonstrates the partisan reversal within each state and notes the number of non-white Members elected in each state. That number doubled between 1990 and 2012. Non-white Members now make up a significantly greater share of Southern Democratic Members, revealing the growing congruence between race and party in the South as Southern white Democrats disappear from Republican-leaning districts, leaving only majority-minority districts to elect Democrats.

	1990 Election Results	2012 Election Results	2014 District Projections
State	**Republican - Democrat (Total Non-White Members)**	**Republican - Democrat (Total Non-White Members)**	**Republican Lean –Democratic Lean – Balanced**
Georgia	1 R - 9 D (1)	9 R – 5 D (4)	9 R – 4 D – 1?
Texas	8 R - 19 D (5)	24 R – 12 D (4)	24 R – 11 D – 1?
Oklahoma	2 R - 4 D (0)	5 R – 0 D (0)	5 R – 0 D – 0?
Louisiana	4 R –4 D (0)	5 R – 1 D (1)	5 R – 1 D – 0?
Arkansas	1 R – 3 D (0)	4 R – 0 D (0)	4 R – 0 D – 0?
Mississippi	0 R – 5 D (1)	3 R -1 D (1)	3 R – 1 D – 0?
Alabama	2 R – 5 D (0)	6 R – 1 D (1)	6 R – 1 D – 0?
Tennessee	3 R – 6 D (1)	7 R – 2 D (0)	7 R – 2 D – 0?
Kentucky	3 R – 4 D (0)	5 R – 1 D (0)	4 R – 1 D – 1?
West Virginia	0 R – 4 D (0)	2 R - 1 D (0)	2 R – 0 D – 1?
Virginia	4 R – 6 D (0)	8 R – 3 D (1)	8 R – 3 D – 0?
North Carolina	4 R – 7 D (0)	9 R - 4 D (2)	9 R – 3 D – 1?
South Carolina	2 R – 4 D (0)	6 R – 1 D (1)	6 R – 1 D – 0?
Florida	10 R – 9 D (1)	17 R - 10 D (3)	14 R – 7 D – 6?
Total	**44 R - 89 D (9)**	**110 R – 42 D (18)**	**106 R – 35 D – 11**?

A Regional Comparison: New England

The South is the most dramatic recent example of a recent regional partisan shift, but it is not the only one. A comparison between the composition of U.S. House delegations from New England in 1995 and 18 years later in 2013 shows a similarly striking partisan reversal in favor of Democrats. This one, in fact, completely obliterated representation of the minority party. The disappearance of New England Republicans has had implications for the operations of Congress, as some of those Members, such as Chris Shays and Nancy Johnson of Connecticut and Charles Bass of New Hampshire, were moderates known for working across party lines.

There are currently no Republicans representing any of the 21 House districts from New England, meaning that an entire segment of Congress that used to help craft legislative compromises no longer exists. Republicans last won a House seat in Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island or Vermont in 1994. Outside of New Hampshire, the least Democratic district in the region has a Democratic partisanship of 52.6%.

	1994 Election Results	2014 District Projections
State	**Republican-Democrat-Independent**	**Republican-Democrat-No Projection (?)**
Maine	1 R – 1 D	0 R – 2 D – 0 ?
New Hampshire	2 R – 0 D	0 R – 0 D – 2 ?
Vermont	0 R – 0 D – 1 I	0 R – 1 D – 0 ?
Massachusetts	2 R – 8 D	0 R – 8 D – 1 ?
Rhode Island	0 R – 2 D	0 R – 2 D – 0 ?
Connecticut	3 R – 3 D	0 R – 4 D – 1 ?
Total	**8 R – 14 D – 1 I**	**0 R – 17 D – 4 ?**

The loss of Southern Democrats and New England Republicans has been an overall win for Republicans in terms of total House seats, given that the South has 152 seats compared to New England's 21 seats. But as the Republican Party becomes more defined by the views of conservative Southerners, the Republican losses in New England may expand further into New York, New Jersey and eastern Pennsylvania. In 1992, Republicans held 13 of 34 House seats in New York. In 1996, however, Bill Clinton carried all of New York's congressional districts, and after a 2009 special election, New York's delegation was comprised of 27 Democrats and just two Republicans. Following a comeback in 2010, New York Republicans now hold six House seats, but Mitt Romney lost in three of them and won two of the remaining three by slim margins. This report only definitively projects one New York seat to be won by a Republican in 2014.

Conclusion

Within the straitjacket of winner-take-all elections, regional partisan imbalances can turn into exaggerated dominance or even monopoly control by one party. In the South, winner-take-all has granted Republicans a stranglehold on state power and congressional delegations. Some optimistic analysts on the left have argued that demographic changes will soon bring an end to Republican dominance in the region, but they underestimate the extent of the recent partisan shift.

Two decades ago, all 28 legislative chambers in the 14 Southern states were run by Democrats. Today, only three remain Democratic, all of them in border states: both chambers in West Virginia, and the House in Kentucky. It is far more likely that those chambers will become Republican than any additional chambers will become Democratic in the coming decade. Eleven of the 14 states currently have Republican governors, with Democrats serving as governor only in the border states of Arkansas, Kentucky, and West Virginia. At the congressional level, the lack of competitive districts and the declining ability of center-right Democrats to win in Republican-leaning districts make any significant shift in congressional representation unlikely.

The partisan shift does not mean that Democrats cannot win elections in white-majority electorates in the South. Barack Obama narrowly carried the presidential vote in three of these states in 2008 – Indiana, Florida, and Virginia – and won again in Florida and Virginia in 2012. Democrats hold four of six U.S. Senate seats in those three states and also have U.S. Senators in Arkansas, Louisiana, Missouri, and

West Virginia. Conservative Democrats may pull off wins in occasional gubernatorial elections, especially when the economy is weak. But state legislatures and congressional delegations are likely to remain heavily Republican, as winner-take-all locks in a lopsided advantage that poorly represents the region's spectrum of opinions and racial differences.

Republicans face a similar challenge in regaining representation in New England. The same shift toward courting socially conservative white voters that brought such success to Republicans in the South has made it increasingly difficult for them to appeal to New England's more progressive electorate. As a result, Democrats have become as entrenched in that region as Republicans have become in the South – albeit with less impact on Congress due to the relative populations of the two regions.

The Road to Regional Reconciliation

FairVote's independent redistricting plans using fair representation systems demonstrate the impact that moving away from winner-take-all voting rules would have on representation in these regions. Using fair representation voting methods in larger districts that elect between three and five seats, each district's political left, right and center would be represented. Every voter would be represented by at least one representative from each major party.

If our fair voting plans were in place in these Southern 14 states, we project that the number of representatives elected as preferred candidates of people of color would likely rise from 30 to 39. The overall partisan balance would be a far fairer reflection of the region's voters: 56 Republicans to 36 Democrats (plus nine seats that would swing between the parties and would be won by a candidate reaching out to voters of both major parties). The major party representatives would also reflect a more continuous spectrum from right to left than the cluster of representatives around two partisan poles that exists today.

This fair reflection of voters is particularly important in the South given the role of race in the region. We remain only a half century removed from the era of Jim Crow, and its legacy persists in the sharp racial polarization of Southern politics. Under FairVote's proposals, every African-American voter and every white voter would be likely to help elect a candidate they support in the Southern states running from North Carolina through South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. The region's political center would have a far stronger presence, better reflecting the nuances of Southern voters than today's simplistic and polarizing division between largely liberal African American Democrats and conservative white Republicans. As many grapple with what a new Voting Rights Act might look like, there is no better place to start than replacing winner-take-all voting rules with systems designed to provide fair representation.