COUNTER REALIGNMENT

In *Counter Realignment*, Howard L. Reiter and Jeffrey M. Stonecash analyze data from the early 1900s to the early 2000s to explain how the Republican Party lost the northeastern United States as a region of electoral support. Although the story of how the “Solid South” shifted from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party has received extensive consideration from political scientists, far less attention has been given to the erosion of support for Republicans in the Northeast. Reiter and Stonecash examine how the Republican Party lost as it repositioned itself, resulting in the shift of power in the Northeast from heavily Republican in 1900 to heavily Democratic in the 2000s.

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To

Laura Reiter

Kathryn Edwards Stonecash
Counter Realignment

Political Change in the Northeastern United States

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Preface

In recent decades, political science has made great strides in understanding the process by which parties and their leaders strategize to build new majority coalitions. Alongside traditional emphases on social and demographic changes and their partisan consequences – what we might call structural causes of political change – there is a new focus on deliberate strategies by party elites, an emphasis on agency. This academic trend was inspired in part by the remarkable renewal of the Republican Party in the past half-century, and especially its extreme growth in the South.

Whereas much has been learned about such strategies, some aspects of these developments have not received adequate attention. Just as the perspective of the victors of wars tends to dominate the history books, ascendant parties enjoy special attention from parties’ scholars. We have many books about the Republican surge in the South, but less research on where the party lost strength. This distortion has entailed underemphasis on certain parts of the country.

Our analysis is an attempt to correct these imbalances by examining the very important changes in the Northeast, the region where the Republicans have suffered the most over that same half-century. Almost in reverse correlation with Republican advances

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in the South have come Republican losses in the Northeast, which for much of the party’s history was its strongest base. These developments can be attributed in part to demographic and social changes, often similar to those of the South but often distinctly northeastern, but also to the effects of deliberate strategies by party elites. Such prominent figures as Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Barry Goldwater, Richard M. Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and Newt Gingrich have helped cause titanic political changes in the Northeast, whereas their political adversaries have helped shape the outcome by their responses to these leaders’ actions.

In this study, we take a historical approach to understand and explain these monumental changes. Many of the events and phenomena we discuss should be familiar to every student of American political history in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – the New Deal, civil rights, the conservative reaction against the welfare state, and the response of social conservatives to the social upheaval that reached a crescendo in the 1960s. We will show that all of these developments helped drive the Northeast away from the Republican Party and toward its current Democratic status. More broadly, we hope to promote a better understanding of the dynamics of political change in America.

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Acknowledgments

This book was first conceived at the State of the Parties Conference in 2005 at the University of Akron, and the authors are grateful to John Green, Director of the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics, for hosting the conference and inviting us to participate. Earlier versions of portions of this book were presented to the 2007 annual meeting of the Social Science History Association, the 2008 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, and the 2010 meeting of the New England Political Science Association. Useful feedback was provided at those meetings by John Berg, William Crotty, Kathleen Frankovic, Nolan McCarty, Nicole Mellow, Jerome Mileur, Arthur Paulson, Kent Redding, Peter Tammeveski, and Timothy Thurber.
The years 2000 to 2008 witnessed a clear trend in the Northeast toward the Democratic Party. The elections of 2010 provided an indication of whether that trend could survive a national move to the Republicans. Republicans made some gains in the Northeast, but those elections also served to increase the region’s difference from the rest of the nation because Republicans made much greater gains outside the Northeast. Although the rest of the nation moved decisively Republican in 2010, the Northeast remained heavily Democratic – despite the effect of Tea Party candidates who focused on the economic and budget issues that had been more popular in the Northeast than the social issues that Republicans often promoted.

The situation over the course of the decade is seen in the accompanying table. When the decade began, the Northeast was more supportive of Democrats. Democratic presidential candidates won a higher percentage of the vote in the Northeast, and Democrats won a higher percentage of Senate and House seats. By 2008, Democrats were doing better within the region for all offices. The 2010 national political conditions were very negative for Democrats. A strong majority saw the country as headed in the wrong direction, there was little national job growth, and the recently passed health care legislation was vehemently opposed by conservatives, who thought that the national government was becoming too big.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>President vote % Northeast</th>
<th>Senate seats Northeast</th>
<th>President vote % Remainder</th>
<th>Senate seats Remainder</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>57.6</td>
<td>47.5</td>
<td>46.3</td>
<td>45.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>57.1</td>
<td>47.3</td>
<td>45.0</td>
<td>44.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>57.0</td>
<td>47.0</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>43.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>60.7</td>
<td>52.0</td>
<td>75.0</td>
<td>81.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>75.0</td>
<td>75.0</td>
<td>47.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The conditions were ripe for substantial Republican gains, and nationally they gained more than 60 seats in the House and 6 seats in the Senate.¹ Their gains in the Northeast, however, were more modest. In the House, outside the Northeast, Republicans gained 54 seats, moving from a 162–189 seat disadvantage to a 216–135 seat advantage. Their percentage of seats outside the Northeast increased from 46.2 to 61.5. In the Northeast they picked up 11 seats, moving from 19.1 percent of seats to 32.1. In the Senate, outside the Northeast, Republicans won 19 of 27 seats, while in the Northeast they won only two of the seven seats up for election.

The 2010 elections left the Northeast congressional delegation even more distinct in its partisanship from the rest of the nation. In 2000, the Northeast Senate delegation was more Democratic by 13.7 percentage points (60.0–46.3). After 2010 the difference was 27.5 percentage points (75.0–47.5). The House delegation also was more distinctly Democratic relative to the remainder of the nation. In 2000, the region was more Democratic by 13.9 percentage points, and by 2010 the region’s delegation was more Democratic by 29.4 percentage points. The Northeast congressional delegations had become more Democratic across the decade and their difference in partisanship was greater than 10 years prior. The 2010 elections provided little indication that the region’s drift away from Republicans was likely to slow.

¹ All results were as of November 8, 2010, based on CNN results and projections. Some results may have changed with recounts.