

Grassroots Republicanism: Local Level Office Holding in North Carolina

H. Gibbs Knotts
Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science and Public Affairs
Western Carolina University
Stillwell 101
Phone: 828-227-3855
Fax: 828-227-7647
E-mail: gknotts@email.wcu.edu

Prepared for delivery at the annual meeting of the North Carolina Political Science Association, Elon University, March 21, 2003. Thanks to Bruce Carroll, Chris Cooper, Lynn Kaufman, Don Livingston, and Stacy Nix for helpful comments.

ABSTRACT

Theories of partisan realignment emphasize political and demographic changes in southern society, and focus largely on partisan identification and the electoral successes of Republican presidential, congressional, gubernatorial, and state legislative candidates. Unfortunately, few scholars have analyzed realignment theories in the context of local Republican office holding.

This study evaluates the effectiveness of realignment theories in explaining county level office holding in North Carolina between 1992 and 2000. This research compares Republican office holding across geographic regions and levels of urbanization in North Carolina, and highlights political, demographic, and structural explanations for Republican office holding and partisan change. The findings provide support for the trickle down realignment theory, and demonstrate increases in Republican office holding in counties with lower percentages of African-American residents.

INTRODUCTION

Once solidly Democratic, the South is now a competitive two-party region (Black and Black 1987; Lamis 1984), and based on recent election outcomes and survey results, increasingly Republican.¹ George W. Bush swept the southern states in the 2000 presidential election, and since 1994, Republicans have held a majority of the southern congressional seats (Black and Black 2002). Republicans have been increasingly successful in state-level contests as well, and following the 2002 elections, held 7 of 11 southern governorships. In addition, survey results from the National Election Studies indicate that beginning in the 1990s, almost half of southern whites identified with the Republican Party (Abramowitz, Allen, Knotts, and Saunders 2002).

Although the emergence of Republican electoral successes have been well documented at the presidential (Black and Black 1992), congressional (Black and Black 2002; Glaser 1996), gubernatorial (Bullock and Rozell 1998, Aistrup 1996), and state legislative levels (Aistrup 1996), there have been fewer studies that examine growth in local Republican office holding.² To address this gap in the literature, my study focuses on the emergence of Republican county commissioners in North Carolina between 1992 and 2000.

THEORY

Political scientists have long debated the causes of partisan realignments. Key (1955) characterized realignments as “critical elections,” resulting in “a sharp and durable

¹ I refer to the South as the eleven states of the old Confederacy: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.

² Bullock (1993) conducts an innovative study of Republican office holding at the local level in Georgia during the 1980s.

electoral realignment between the parties” (p. 16). Carmines and Stimson (1989) challenge Key’s critical elections theory, arguing instead for an issue-based realignment that takes “decades or multiples of decades to reach their final form” (p. 21).

Researchers have largely rejected the critical elections thesis in favor of an explanation emphasizing prolonged partisan transformation in the South. Paul Allen Beck (1977) labeled the southern realignment a “dealignment,” and more recently, scholars have characterized the southern realignment as “trickle down” (Bullock and Rozell 1998), “creeping” (Bullock 1988), and a “Republican top-down advancement” (Aistrup 1996).

The trickle down southern realignment is a politically based explanation that began at the presidential level with support for the Eisenhower and Goldwater candidacies. The Nixon campaign implemented the “southern strategy” to convince white conservatives to vote Republican (Bullock and Rozell 1998), and the successful Reagan presidency during the 1980s also pulled southern whites to the Republican Party (Black and Black 2002). According to the trickle down theory, southerners became comfortable voting for Republican presidential candidates and increasingly supported Republicans for lower level offices.

In addition to the trickle down thesis, explanations of southern partisan change have emphasized demographic factors, including the conservative nature of the southern electorate and changes in southern society. Scholars have considered the impact of racial issues (Carmines and Stimson 1989), attitudes about national defense and the welfare state (Abramowitz 1994), and the role of religion (Green, Kellstedt, Smidt, and Guth

1998). Explanations of southern partisan change have also focused on industrialization in the South and the growth of the southern middle class (Black and Black 1987).

Although many scholars have written about the shift from a solidly Democratic South to a competitive two-party region, few researchers focus on local level Republican growth. By examining county level office holding, this study considers the depth of Republican growth, and evaluates several explanations for partisan realignment at the local level.

DATA AND METHODS

This research examines Republican office holding on North Carolina County Commissions between 1992 and 2000. Although the study focuses on a single state, this is not a small N analysis. The study examines Republican office holding across 100 counties over an 8-year period. Although the selection of a single state means that some external validity will be sacrificed, focusing on one state has advantages (see Nicholson-Crotty and Meier 2002). First, the single-state research design allows for better control of cultural and structural contexts that may differ across southern states. In addition, this study measures Republican strength in counties, a level of measurement that would be difficult to obtain across a large number of states.

Although researchers should be cautious generalizing from this study, the selection of North Carolina increases external validity. In many ways, North Carolina is representative of the South. Like many southern states, North Carolina experienced tremendous recent growth, as the population increased by over 21 percent between 1990 and 2000 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000). In addition, North Carolina's economy

mirrors the economic makeup of the South with a mix of manufacturing, technology, and financial services. Although North Carolina has undergone considerable change, its large African-American population and small urban population make North Carolina more like the Deep South than the Peripheral South states (Black and Black 2002, p. 102).

According to Kazez (1998), North Carolina has “the traditional values of the Old South and the ‘entrepreneurial individualism’ of the New South” (p. 143).

This study focuses on partisan change between 1992 and 2000, a crucial time-period for the emergence of southern Republicans. The research design examines local Republican office holding during the controversial Clinton presidency as well as before and after the historic 1994 midterm elections. Since the impact of the Republican revolution has been documented at the national level, scholars should now begin investigating changes in local office holding during the 1990s.

An examination of counties provides an opportunity to analyze important units of government in North Carolina. In addition to the traditional roles of property tax collection, election administration, and law enforcement, counties have undertaken increasing responsibilities including health care, social services, and mass transit (Berman 1993). County office holding can also create name recognition and offer policymaking experiences that can be valuable assets for those with progressive political ambitions.

This research analyzes data from a variety of sources. First, county commission data were obtained from the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners (NCACC). NCACC provides information on election methods, partisanship, gender composition, and racial makeup of the 100 North Carolina county commissions. The size

of the 100 North Carolina county commissions ranged from 3 to 11 seats. In 2000, 61 counties had 5 commissioners and 26 counties had 7 commissioners. At the extremes were Cherokee, Clay, and Graham Counties with three commissioners and Guilford County with eleven commissioners.

County level voting data were acquired from the North Carolina State Board of Elections. This study analyzes 1992 voter registration data and county level election returns for president, senate, governor, lieutenant governor, and superior court judge.

Demographic data were obtained from the U.S. *Census of Population and Housing* (1990). Census variables include median income, percent college graduate, and percent black. Census data were also used to determine the level of urbanization. Data on county level church membership were acquired from *Churches and Church Membership in the United States* (1990).

The unit of analysis for this study is the county. The dependent variables are percent Republican on the county commission (measured in 1992, 1994, 1996, and 2000), and change in percent Republican on the county commission (the difference between percent Republican in 1992 and 2000). Crosstabs and bivariate relationships are analyzed.

FINDINGS

Profile of North Carolina County Commissions

Table 1 presents changes in the partisan composition of North Carolina county commissions between 1992 and 2000. In 1992, counties averaged 31 percent Republican, but in 1994, the year of the Republican revolution in Congress, counties

averaged 41 percent Republican. The percent Republican increased to almost 45 percent in 1996 and decreased slightly in 1998 and 2000. Overall, the percent Republican on the county commissions increased by over 11 percent between 1992 and 2000.

(Table 1 about here)

Table 1 also highlights the percentage female on North Carolina county commissions. Although the percent Republican on county commissions increased between 1992 and 2000, there was very little change in the gender makeup of North Carolina county commissions. The counties averaged between 12 and 15 percent female, increasing by just over 1 percent between 1992 and 2000. To put the gender composition in context, 19 percent of the 170 North Carolina state legislators were female in 2001 (National Conference of State Legislatures 2001).

The county average for percent African-American ranged from 14 to 16 percent. Like percent female, there was very little change in percent African-American between 1992 and 2000. Similar to the racial makeup of county commissions, 14 percent of North Carolina state legislators were African-American in 2000 (Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies 2000).

Regionalism and Local Republicanism

Students of North Carolina politics have emphasized the importance of geography in the Tar Heel state (Key 1949; Lamis 1984; Luebke 1998; Kazee 1998). For example, Kazee (1998) analyzed an index of Republican Party support scores for president, senate, governor, and council of state candidates. He found that the western Piedmont was the most Republican region in North Carolina, followed by the Mountains, the urban

Piedmont, and the Eastern counties. Similarly, Luebke (1998) reported that Republican strength in the North Carolina General Assembly has historically come from districts in the western Piedmont and Mountain counties.

Table 2 presents the level of local Republican office holding in the eastern, urban Piedmont, western Piedmont, and Mountain counties of North Carolina. Based on 2000 voter registration data, the 53 eastern North Carolina counties contained 34 percent of the state's registered voters. The second largest region was the six county urban Piedmont, with 31 percent of the state's registered voters. The 18 county western Piedmont held 21 percent of the state's registered voters and the 23 Mountain counties contained 14 percent of registered voters.³

The findings in Table 2 highlight the strength of local level Republican office holding in the western Piedmont. By 2000, western Piedmont counties averaged nearly 86 percent Republican. Local level Republican strength was also substantial in the Mountains, and since 1994, Mountain counties averaged over 60 percent Republican. The findings indicate far less Republican office holding in the urban Piedmont and Eastern counties. In 2000, urban Piedmont counties averaged 32 percent Republican and Eastern counties averaged only 21 percent Republican. The regions with the highest levels of local Republican office holding were the same Republican strongholds identified by Kazee (1998) and Luebke (1998).

(Table 2 about here)

³ I use the regions identified by Kazee (1998). According to his research using 1995 voter registration data, 53 counties are in the East (33 percent of registered voters), six counties are in the urban Piedmont (31 percent of registered voters), 18 counties are in the western Piedmont (22 percent of registered voters), and 23 counties are in the Mountains (14 percent of registered voters).

Not only did the western Piedmont and Mountain counties have the highest percentage of local Republican office holding, these regions also had the highest levels of growth. Between 1992 and 2000, local Republican office holding grew by over 15 percent in the Mountains and over 14 percent in the western Piedmont. Growth occurred in the urban Piedmont and the Eastern counties as well, although at slower rates. In the urban Piedmont, a surge in Republican office holding followed the 1994 elections, as the Republican average increased by over 18 percent in one election cycle. However, Republicans lost seats in the urban Piedmont in 1996 and 1998. The impact of the 1994 election was less dramatic in the Eastern counties. The average percent Republican increased by only 6 percent between 1992 and 1994 and remained stable in the remaining elections.

Urbanization and Local Republicanism

Urbanization may also impact Republican office holding by challenging traditionalistic political culture, providing a wider range of candidates, and increasing the use of modern political campaigning (Black and Black 1987, p. 45). In a study of North Carolina senate elections, Eamon and Elliott (1994) found that the level of urbanization had a substantial impact on support for Democratic senatorial candidates.

Table 3 presents the percentage of local Republican office holding by four levels of urbanization.⁴ Not surprisingly, a large percentage of the state's registered voters were located in urban areas. Based on 2000 voter registration data, the 5 metropolitan counties

⁴ Using 1990 Census data, I classified counties based on the levels of urbanization used by Eamon and Elliott (1994). I identified 5 metropolitan counties (cities over 100,000), 16 micropolitan counties (cities 20,000-99,999), 17 small town counties (cities 10,000-19,999) and 62 rural counties (cities and towns less than 10,000).

held 30 percent of the state's registered voters and the 16 micropolitan counties contained 27 percent of the states registered voters. However, a considerable percentage of the state's population remains in small town and rural counties. The 62 rural counties held 26 percent of the state's registered voters and the 17 small town counties contained 17 percent of registered voters.

As Table 3 indicates, both micropolitan counties and small town counties averaged 52 percent Republican on the county commission in 2000. Support for local Republicans was much less in rural and metropolitan counties. In 2000, both rural and metropolitan counties averaged 38 percent Republican.

(Table 3 about here)

Across the four levels of urbanization, local Republican office holding increased between 1992 and 2000. Micropolitan counties had the largest increase, from 35 percent in 1992 to 52 percent in 2000. During the same time period, the percent Republican increased by 11 percent in rural counties and 8 percent in small town counties. In metropolitan counties, the percent Republican increased from 30 percent in 1992 to 52 percent in 1994, a 22 percent increase in one election cycle. However, since 1994, the percent Republican in metropolitan counties fell in 1996 and 1998, before increasing in 2000.

Political Explanations for Local Republicanism

Based on the trickle down realignment theory, growth in local office holding should be greatest in areas that supported higher-level Republican candidates in 1988 and 1992. Evidence of a bottom up realignment would appear if growth of local Republican

office holding increased most in counties with higher percentages of registered Republicans in 1992. Higher percentages of registered Republicans represent a stronger commitment to the Republican Party, and may indicate more straight ticket voting.

Table 4 presents Pearson correlation coefficients between support for Republican candidates and levels of Republican office holding at the county level. The table considers the impact of Republican support for president, senate, governor, lieutenant governor, and superior court judge, and percent registered Republican.⁵

(Table 4 about here)

Between 1992 and 2000, the correlation coefficients for all political variables were positive and significant. Local Republican office holding was most highly correlated with support for the Republican superior court candidate and Republican partisan registration, although the differences across the political variables were small.

Correlations between the political variables and growth in local level office holding suggest support for the trickle down realignment theory. The percentages for Republican presidential, gubernatorial, senatorial, and attorney general candidates were significantly correlated with growth in local level Republican office holding. Counties that supported higher-level Republican candidates had the largest increases in local Republican office holding. Although highly correlated with local Republican office holding, the coefficients for superior court judge and Republican registration were not significantly correlated with Republican growth. It is likely that these counties underwent a partisan transformation during an earlier time period.

⁵ The variables include support for president (Bush 1988 and Bush 1992), senate (Faircloth 1992), governor (Gardner 1992), lieutenant governor (Pope 1992), superior court judge (Michael 1992), and percent registered Republican (GOP Reg. 1992).

Alternate Explanations for Local Republicanism

In addition to political factors, this study considers several alternate explanations for local Republicanism and partisan change. Based on existing research, counties with higher median incomes, higher percentages of owner occupants, higher percentages of college graduates, and higher percentages of Baptists should be more likely to support Republican county commission candidates. These counties may also experience higher levels of growth in Republican office holding. Because African-Americans vote for Republican candidates at very low rates, counties with higher percentages of blacks should have fewer local Republican office holders and less growth in Republican office holding.

This study also considers the impact of electoral structure on Republican office holding. Scholars have concluded that multimember city council districts produce more female representatives (Welch and Karnig 1979) and fewer African-American representatives (Engstrom and McDonald 1981). Although researchers found that multimember districts had little impact on partisanship in state legislatures (Niemi, Hill, and Grofman 1985), Bullock (1993) suggests that single member district elections in counties may concentrate minority candidates in one or two districts making the remaining districts more Republican. Despite this expectation, Bullock (1993) finds no relationship between percent single member district and percent Republican in his analysis of local office holding in Georgia.

Finally, this study evaluates the impact of region and urbanization on local Republicanism. Based on results above, this analysis includes dummy variables for

Mountain counties, western Piedmont counties, micropolitan counties, and small town counties.

Table 5 presents the correlations between the demographic/structural variables and Republican office holding. As expected, the coefficients for median income and owner occupied housing were positive and significant for each time period, indicating higher Republican office holding in more affluent counties. However, the correlation between percent college and local Republican office holding was weak and insignificant.

(Table 5 about here)

As predicted, percent Baptist was positive and significant for each time period. Previous studies have shown Protestant support for Republican presidential and congressional candidates (Green, Kellstedt, Smidt, and Guth 1998), and these findings indicate a relationship between the percent Baptist in a county and support for local Republican candidates.

As expected, the correlation coefficients for percent black were negative and significant across the time periods. Republican presidential candidates have had little success winning African-American votes, and these findings demonstrate that counties with a higher percentage of African-Americans were less likely to have Republican county commissioners.

Perhaps most surprising, the coefficients for percent single-member district were negative and significant for each of the time periods. Local Republicans had more success in counties with higher percentages of at-large districts and fewer single-member districts.

Finally, the coefficients for the regional variables (western Piedmont and Mountain) were positive and significant across the time periods. As expected, the western Piedmont variable was highly correlated with local Republican office holding. The correlations for the micropolitan variable and the small town variable were positive but did not achieve statistical significance.

Demographic and structural explanations for growth in local office holding proved more difficult. The only variable that was significantly related to GOP growth was percent black in the county, indicating that counties with higher percentages of African-American residents had less growth in local Republican office holding. The percentage of candidates elected from single-member districts was also negatively related to Republican growth, but the coefficient did not achieve statistical significance.

CONCLUSIONS

Like most southern states, North Carolina experienced considerable Republican growth during the 1990s. At the local level, the average percent Republican on county commissions increased from 29 percent in 1992 to over 40 percent in 2000.

However, the strength of local Republican office holding, and the magnitude of Republican growth, varied across North Carolina. Counties in the western Piedmont and Mountains had the highest percentages of Republican commissioners and the most Republican growth. Local Republicanism also varied by level of urbanization, as micropolitan and small town counties had the highest percentages of Republican commissioners.

In North Carolina, several political factors were related to local Republican office holding. Republican voter registration and support for a Republican superior court judge candidate were the most highly correlated with local Republican office holding. Support for Republican presidential, senatorial, and gubernatorial candidates was also significantly correlated with local Republican office holding.

In addition, several demographic variables were related to Republican county commission strength. Percent black was the most highly correlated, as counties with higher percentages of African-Americans were less likely to have Republican county commissioners. In addition, measures of socioeconomic status, such as median income and percent owner occupied housing, were positively related to local Republican office holding. Local Republican successes appeared to have a religious component as well, as counties with higher percentages of Baptists had more Republican county commissioners.

Aside from demographic explanations, electoral structure was also related to local Republican office holding. In North Carolina, local Republicans did better in counties with fewer single member districts.

This study also provided empirical support for the trickle down realignment theory of partisan realignment. In North Carolina, local Republicans office holding increased in counties with high levels of support for Republican presidential, senatorial, and gubernatorial candidates. Conversely, the findings provided no evidence of a bottom-up realignment in North Carolina. Counties with higher percentages of registered Republicans did not have higher levels of growth in local Republican office holding.

Findings also highlight the importance of race in understanding southern partisan change. Growth in local Republican office holding was significantly related to the

percent African-American in a county. Counties with lower percentages of African-American residents had the higher increases in local Republican office holding.

Students of southern politics should not neglect local political dynamics. Future researchers should examine the partisan characteristics of local office holding in additional southern states, and when possible, over longer historical periods. Seasoned local candidates can gain valuable policymaking experiences and become attractive candidates for higher-level offices. Thus by understanding politics at the local level, scholars will be in a better position to evaluate and anticipate political changes in the American South.

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Table 1. Characteristics of North Carolina County Commissions (1992-2000)

	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	Growth 1992-2000
Percent Republican	31.3	41.6	44.5	41.2	42.4	11.1
Percent Female	13.2	11.9	12.9	14.5	14.4	1.2
Percent African-American	14.5	14.6	15.0	15.6	14.2	-0.3

SOURCE: North Carolina Association of County Commissioners (1992, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000)

Table 2. Region and Percent Republican on the County Commission (1992-2000)

	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	GOP Growth 1992-2000
East	12.5	18.6	20.6	19.8	21.3	8.8
Urban Piedmont	25.1	43.4	37.9	25.6	31.6	6.5
Western Piedmont	71.3	77.0	86.0	81.4	85.6	14.3
Mountains	44.9	66.7	69.0	62.6	60.3	15.4

SOURCE: North Carolina Association of County Commissioners (1992, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000)

Table 3. Level of Urbanization and Percent Republican on the County Commission (1992-2000)

	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	GOP Growth 1992-2000
Metropolitan	30.1	52.1	45.5	30.7	38.0	7.9
Micropolitan	35.2	44.8	51.6	49.8	52.3	17.1
Small town	45.9	46.7	47.7	49.6	51.9	6.0
Rural	26.4	38.6	41.7	37.3	37.6	11.2

SOURCE: North Carolina Association of County Commissioners (1992, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000) and the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1990).

Table 4. Correlations Between Support for GOP Candidates and Republican County Office Holding (1992-2000)

	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	GOP Growth 1992-2000
Bush 1988	.70**	.70**	.77**	.78**	.81**	.25*
Bush 1992	.71**	.71**	.77**	.79**	.83**	.26*
Faircloth 1992	.72**	.72**	.78**	.79**	.82**	.24*
Gardner 1992	.71**	.72**	.77**	.78**	.80**	.23*
Pope 1992	.72**	.75**	.79**	.79**	.82**	.22*
Michael 1992	.77**	.79**	.83**	.82**	.84**	.19
GOP Reg. 1992	.80**	.80**	.81**	.81**	.80**	.09

SOURCE: North Carolina Association of County Commissioners (1992, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000) and North Carolina State Board of Elections (1988, 1992)

*p<.05, **p<.01

Table 5. Correlations Between Demographic/Structural Variables and Republican County Office Holding (1992-2000)

	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	GOP Growth 1992-2000
Median Income	.35**	.32**	.33**	.28**	.34**	.02
Owner Occupied	.28**	.30**	.27**	.32**	.28**	.02
Percent College	.01	.07	.06	-.01	.01	-.01
Percent Baptist	.23*	.35**	.33**	.27**	.20*	-.03
Percent Black	-.54**	-.65**	-.70**	-.66**	-.64**	-.22*
Percent SMD	-.32**	-.36**	-.37**	-.38**	-.37**	-.12
Mountain	.21*	.37*	.35*	.31*	.26*	.09
Western Piedmont	.53**	.45**	.50**	.50**	.53**	.06
Micropolitan	.05	.04	.08	.10	.11	.11
Small Town	.19	.06	.04	.10	.11	-.09

SOURCE: North Carolina Association of County Commissioners (1992, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000), Bradley et al. (1990), and U.S. Bureau of the Census (1990)

*p<.05, **p<.01