

THE WILDER VOTE AND THE NEW SOUTH PHENOMENON: A MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS

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This study employed ordinary least-squares (OLS) regression to explore possible linkages between the election of L. Douglas Wilder to the governorship of the Commonwealth of Virginia and the New South phenomenon. Five selected aggregate level indicators reflective of the New South political terrain served as independent variables. The dependent variable of the analysis was the electoral support garnered by Wilder. Four of the independent variables were statistically significant (race, urbanization, income, and industrialization). However, the education variable did not achieve statistical significance. The model yielded an adjusted $R^2 = .41$. The results of our exploratory analysis suggest that the impact of the New South on the Wilder victory was limited, though crucial to his narrow victory. Thus, social and demographic change as suggested by the New South thesis, while important, do not necessarily portend African American statewide electoral success. Further systematic study of this historic contest at the individual level could shed light on political behavior among African American and white voters in the New South.

INTRODUCTION

Considering the South's legacy of slavery and *de jure* segregation, it is especially interesting that the first African American governor was propelled to office by a southern electorate. Our observation is reinforced by Smith (1993) who states, "the election of the first black governor in the nation's history is obviously of great symbolic significance; a significance heightened by the fact that Wilder was elected from the South."¹ In 1989, L. Douglas Wilder was elected to the highest political office in the Commonwealth of Virginia. This historic gubernatorial victory was an achievement that twice eluded Tom Bradley in the state of California.²

One explanation of this landmark election is linked to the massive demographic and political changes that have occurred across the south-

ern landscape in recent decades.³ While there is some consensus that Virginia has largely shed its old identity, the presence of a systematic relationship between the New South phenomenon and the Wilder victory remains unclear. This study explores possible linkages between the election of Wilder and the demography of the New South. The analysis utilizes a multivariate approach to assess the empirical relationship between salient New South trends and support for the nation's first elected African American governor. This research is significant in that it explores quantitatively the conventional wisdom that demographic and political changes have enhanced the electability of African American statewide candidates in the South.

TRANSFORMATION FROM THE OLD TO THE NEW SOUTH

Since the 1940s political scientists and other social analysts have examined the nature and implications of demographic change in the South.⁴ Students of southern politics and society have noted a major transformation of the southern region.⁵ Earl and Merle Black explain that, "Immense socioeconomic, demographic and political forces have reshaped the South in the twentieth century, sometimes shattering, sometimes simply modifying traditional institutions, practices, and beliefs."⁶ One impact of this metamorphosis has been the "abatement" of race. According to Lamis, racial abatement is "a diminishing of the intensity that had surrounded the race question."⁷ Needless to say, abatement constitutes a necessary imperative for African American political success in predominantly white jurisdictions in general, and specifically, in southern statewide political contests. A discussion of the developments that have combined to change the character of the southern political landscape is timely.

The passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act and the abolishment of *de jure* segregation have indisputably altered the dynamics of southern politics.⁸ Greater access to the voting booth for southern African American voters resulted in a significant increase in the level of political participation of this group.⁹ Another outcome that emerged from the mobilization of the African American electorate is the proliferation of black elected officials (BEOs) in the South.¹⁰ For instance, in 1964 there were only 104 black elected officials (BEOs) in the entire nation. By 1989 there were 4,021 BEOs in the southern region.¹¹ However, the great majority are elected by majority black constituencies. Moreover, principally from relatively small jurisdictions, southern African American officials tend to

be concentrated in positions at the local and state level. Policy payoffs (e.g., municipal services and jobs) for the African American community represent an additional outcome of the elimination of racially based voting restrictions.¹² Despite the limitations, we have witnessed the transformation of the black electorate from a nearly invisible entity to a force of formidable strength with the leverage to influence public policy.

Rising mean levels of education among southern residents is also an important development in the demography of the New South.¹³ The convergence of the pattern of educational attainment in the South with that of other geographic regions is indicative of a substantive qualitative change in the beliefs, attitudes and values of the population. This development reflects the substitution of agrarian culture (which dictated that education was for the elite) for an inclusive educational system that would cultivate human capital to aid the region's social advancement. Improvements in quality and the increasing pervasiveness of public education in the South have led to the homogenization of national attitudes and values.¹⁴

The benefits of educational achievement include enhanced critical thinking and exposure to and appreciation of diverse cultures, all of which foster a greater tendency toward racial tolerance. The positive association between educational attainment and white electoral support for African American candidates underscores the significance of this development.¹⁵ Education, therefore, is an important factor in judging the electability of these office seekers.

The trend towards industrialization is yet another noteworthy change in the landscape of the South.¹⁶ According to Shank "the modern city is characterized by increasing division of labor, specialization, transportation facilities, and communications networks."¹⁷ An industrialized economy, therefore, requires a skilled labor force and at least the semblance of interracial harmony to ensure political stability. It is dependent on the evolution of a system of education which can sustain industrialization over the long-term. Furthermore, the process of modernization (the general context within which industrialization occurs) weakens the traditional societal patterns undergirding the old regime. Consistent with this logic, Holloway found a positive relationship between modernization and empowerment in his study of southern African American political participation.¹⁸ Thus, the prerequisites of industrialization should produce an environment conducive to African American political development.

Population shifts from rural to urban areas, resulting in a more urbanized South, have long been in the making. The effects of urbanization

include the erosion of parochial attitudes and changes in values and institutions,¹⁹ increased social mobility,²⁰ a greater choice of political candidates,²¹ and the formation of indigenous-based organizations.²² These outcomes of southern urbanization diffuse the saliency of race. V.O. Key, Jr., observed several decades ago that "cities seem to be less dominated in their political behavior than rural areas by consideration of the race question."²³ Low levels of electoral support for militant segregationists in the large urban corridors of the South reinforce Key's observation.²⁴

The historical domination of southern politics by the Democratic party is well documented.²⁵ A major underpinning of the hegemony enjoyed by the Democratic party was the sociopolitical subordination of the African American population. In his classic work on two-party competition in the South, Lamis reasoned:

The Southern one-party system had many effects, but its overriding purpose, the preservation of white supremacy, ought never to be underemphasized. The argument was simple. If whites divided their votes between two parties, blacks would hold the balance of power and could bargain for concessions to end their second class status.²⁶

The first signs of Republican party penetration of the body politic of the South were the formation of the 1948 Dixiecrat party by southern Democrats²⁷ and Republican presidential success in the 1950s.²⁸ However, the establishment of the Republican party as a permanent feature of southern politics is generally connected with the 1964 presidential bid of Barry Goldwater.²⁹ The Republican party subsequently solidified its entree to the South with the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan.³⁰ The rise of the Republican party in the South and the activation of the African American electorate have increasingly compelled candidates to make biracial appeals to voters. These dynamics have helped to ameliorate racial demagoguery in southern political campaigns.³¹

The impact of two-party competition on the political fortunes of African American candidates seeking statewide office is another relevant consideration of the New South thesis. Bullock observed that "the presence of a Republican nominee may reinforce whatever tendencies white Republicans have to vote against a black Democrat."³² These patterns are frequently exhibited in political campaigns in which an African American is the Democratic nominee. In such contests, the presence of a strong

Republican party organization increases the likelihood of party defection by those members of the white Democratic electorate who are reluctant to support an African American candidate.³³

Wilder's successful bid for the office of lieutenant governor in 1985 provides an instructive example. Despite the consensus among a host of political observers that Wilder's Republican opponent John Chichester was a lackluster candidate who ran an inept, ineffective campaign, the election was, nonetheless, a politically competitive contest.³⁴ Wilder secured 51.8 percent of the vote compared to the 48.2 percent captured by Chichester. An important issue, therefore, is whether recent social changes necessarily have a positive effect on black politics. We now turn to a discussion of the New South developments in Virginia before proceeding with our exploratory analysis of the New South's influence.

NEW SOUTH TRENDS IN VIRGINIA

The historic character of Virginia, steeped in a tradition of genteel oligarchy, has long set the stage for contemporary politics in the state. According to Key, "Political power [in Virginia] has been closely held by a small group of leaders who by themselves and their predecessors, have subverted democratic institutions and deprived most Virginians of a voice in their government."³⁵ Underscoring this tradition is a legacy of segregation and racial inequality which continues to fuel race relations in the state. In the first half of the twentieth century Virginia, and its southern counterparts, exemplified characteristics divergent from national patterns.

Table 1 shows the convergence of selected demographic trends in Virginia with the rest of the nation for the period 1940 to 1980. The table shows that over the forty-year period, the Commonwealth of Virginia had become more like the rest of the nation in terms of urbanization, industrialization and educational attainment. The percentage of the population residing in urban areas increased significantly in Virginia (31 percent) during this period, nearly double the national urban growth rate (17 percent). By 1980 the discrepancy between the state and national urbanization rate was 8 percent, down from 22 percent in 1940.

The extent of urbanization and northernization in the combined areas of Northern Virginia, Richmond-Petersburg, and Hampton Roads has led to the use of the term "Urban Crescent," to reference the crescent-shaped portion of the state stretching from the Washington, D.C., metropolitan

TABLE 1
Selected Demographic Trends of the New South in the
Commonwealth Of Virginia, 1940–1980

Characteristic	Virginia	United States	(Difference*)
	(%)	(%)	(%)
Urbanization			
1940	35	57	(-22)
1950	47	64	(-17)
1960	56	70	(-14)
1970	63	74	(-11)
1980	66	74	(-08)
Industrialization			
1940	20	24	(-04)
1950	21	26	(-05)
1960	25	27	(-02)
1970	22	26	(-04)
1980	19	22	(-03)
African American Population			
1940	25	10	(+15)
1950	22	10	(+12)
1960	21	11	(+10)
1970	19	11	(+08)
1980	12	12	(0)
Education			
1940	4	5	(-01)
1950	7	6	(+01)
1960	8	8	(0)
1970	13	11	(+02)
1980	19	16	(+03)

Note: *Difference column indicates the magnitude and direction of the convergence of Virginia's characteristics with those of the nation.

Source: Data compiled from U.S. Bureau of the *Census, General Social and Economic Characteristics, 1940–1980*.

area, to Richmond-Petersburg, through the Peninsula and Southside regions of the state. This development can be explained, in part, by the concentration of military installations in strategic locations throughout the state. The economic engine of the “defense-driven sector has stimu-

lated northernization"³⁶ which is evident in the Hampton Roads and Northern Virginia regions.

The growth of industrialization as measured by the proportion of businesses engaged in manufacturing has not been as rapid as the state's urbanization process. Industrialization in Virginia peaked in the 1960s and began to collapse under the weight of a rapidly growing service sector in the early 1970s. The difference between the state and national rate of industrialization has been relatively consistent, ranging from 2 percent to 5 percent. (See Table 1.)

Since 1940 educational attainment in Virginia has kept pace with the nation and in fact exceeded it in three of the four decades reported. (See Table 1.) Virginia's nationally acclaimed system of higher education and the recent surge of a northern-based, in-state migration help account for the state's highly educated population.

The demographic changes in Virginia are paralleled by the emergence of a new set of political dynamics. The state has been prime political turf for the Republican party. Indeed, political outcomes in the state have often preceded successful Republican party initiatives in the South and the nation. The Virginia Republican party won three consecutive gubernatorial elections beginning in 1969. Moreover, the Republican presidential candidate has won the popular vote in every election since 1952.

Another important development in contemporary Virginia has been the activation of the African American electorate. During the period between 1940 and 1970, Virginia experienced rapid growth in African American voter registration. In 1940 about 15,000 blacks were registered to vote in Virginia. By 1964 (prior to the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act) this figure had jumped to 200,000. African American voter registration levels in Virginia reached 442,000 in 1986, reflecting an overall increase of roughly 42 percent over the twenty-two year span since 1964.³⁷

The foregoing discussion amply illustrates the convergence of demographic and political patterns in Virginia with those of the nation. High educational attainment, urbanization and industrialization are all forces that foster a racially tolerant political environment. The increase in the political participation rates of African Americans in Virginia complements the modernization process by incorporating groups formerly excluded from the social mainstream.

As our characterization of Virginia's sociopolitical climate is based on aggregate level social and demographic trends, it is evident that the experiences of the Commonwealth may not necessarily typify those in other

southern states. This research assumes that the pace and dynamics of the New South transformation vary from state to state due to the unique circumstances of history, culture and economic development. The following section describes our approach to exploring the relationship between selected New South trends and Wilder's election to the governorship.

METHODOLOGY

Five selected state level indicators that reflect the demographics of the New South serve as independent variables. These variables include an active African American electorate, education, industrialization, urbanization, and Republican partisanship. Although these aggregate variables are not exhaustive of the features commonly associated with the New South, they provide a point of departure for exploring the effect of political and demographic change on African American political development.

The perils of aggregate data and the ecological correlation have long been acknowledged by social scientists.³⁸ Suffice it to say, this research is principally concerned with the interaction of community-level variables. Thus, we scrupulously avoid the extrapolation of results to individual political behavior.³⁹

Data were compiled for each of the 136 political jurisdictions in Virginia (95 independent counties and 41 independent cities with non-overlapping geographical boundaries). The source of the data for the four independent variables was the *1988 County and City Data Book*. The *Official Election Results, 1989*, published by the Virginia State Board of Elections, provided data for the Republican partisanship variable.

The absence of data on the political participation rate of African Americans in the state necessitated the use of a proxy, the percentage of blacks in each political jurisdiction. Students of southern politics commonly employ this measure of African American political participation.⁴⁰

Education is operationalized as the percentage of the population in each political unit with sixteen years or more of formal education. Urbanization is measured in terms of the percentage of the population residing in urban areas within each voting unit, while industrialization is represented by the percentage of businesses engaged in manufacturing. Based on our review of New South developments, we expect the aforementioned social and demographic factors to have a positive impact on the electoral support won by Wilder.

In the case of the final independent indicator, Republican partisanship, a dummy variable was constructed. This variable measures the strength of the Republican party at the district level. If all three Republican candidates for statewide offices (governor, lieutenant governor, and attorney general) carried the respective political district, then the variable was coded 1, and 0 otherwise. The condition of a Republican sweep of the top three state offices yields a dichotomous variable that indicates strong Republican partisanship tendencies at the district level. Our expectation of the directional impact of this variable, however, is contrary to that of the other independent variables. Consistent with the previous discussion of two-party competition, we expect Republican partisanship to have a negative effect on Wilder's electoral support.

Electoral support for Wilder, the dependent variable of study, is operationalized as the percentage of ballots garnered by the candidate in each political jurisdiction. Ordinary least-squares (OLS) regression was employed to assess the relationship between the selected independent variables and the votes cast for Wilder. The following model was formulated:

$$Y = A + B_1X_{aap} + B_2X_{educ} + B_3X_{ind} + B_4X_{urb} + B_5X_{repp} + E$$

where,

Y = percentage of votes cast for Wilder in each political jurisdiction;

A = constant;

X_{aap} = percentage of African Americans in each political unit;

X_{educ} = percentage of population with four or more years of college in each political district;

X_{ind} = percentage of businesses engaged in manufacturing in each political district;

X_{urb} = percentage of population residing in urban areas in each political district;

X_{repp} = Republican partisanship (1 = Republican sweep of top three statewide offices in each political district);

E = error term.

Inspection of the matrix of intercorrelations among the independent variables indicates that bias is sufficiently minimized in the reported levels of statistical significance and the standard errors, which increase when strong relationships exist among the indicators. The intercorrelations

among independent variables range from $-.55$ to $.45$, in line with the conventional requirement of being below $.80$.⁴¹ In the following section the results of our analysis are presented.

INFLUENCE OF THE NEW SOUTH PHENOMENON

The model, constructed to ascertain the influence of prominent dimensions of the New South phenomenon on the 1989 Virginia gubernatorial election, yielded an adjusted R^2 of $.41$. The calculated value for multiple R ($.637$) indicated a fair correlation between the combined independent variables and the dependent variable. (See Table 2.)

The results of OLS regression show that four of the independent variables under investigation were statistically significant ($p \leq .01$ or less). As expected, the percentage of African Americans ($p \leq .0001$), the proxy variable for the political participation of that group, had the greatest impact on the Wilder victory. (See Table 2.) The variable's relatively large standardized estimate ($.431$) suggests that Wilder ran extremely well in districts with high concentrations of African Americans. Indeed, he won 96 percent of the African American vote. Black voter turnout was extraordinarily high (73 percent), accounting for roughly 17 percent of the ballots cast and exceeding white voter turnout by seven percentage points.⁴² The strong, explanatory power of African American political participation is not particularly astonishing in light of the well-documented proclivity of black voters to support a Democratic nominee who is African American.

The industrialization variable ($p \leq .0001$) produced the second largest impact on the electoral fortunes of Wilder, yielding a coefficient of $-.297$. Surprisingly, however, the direction of the impact was inconsistent with the New South thesis. Specifically, the results reveal an inverse relationship, suggesting that Wilder's base of support was relatively weak in jurisdictions where manufacturing constituted a sizeable component of the economy. This contrary finding may be partially attributed to the fact that Virginia was less industrialized in the 1980s than in the 1960s. (See Table 2.) Competition between African Americans and whites for manufacturing jobs in an era where these positions are increasingly being supplanted by (1) low-wage, service sector jobs, and (2) service sector positions requiring college degrees and/or advanced technical training have strained the political climate. Such tensions are often aggravated by the perceived unfairness of affirmative action and other efforts to main-

TABLE 2
Regression Coefficients of Selected New South Trends on the
Electoral Support of Virginia Governor L. Douglas Wilder

New South Trends	Parameter Estimate	Standardized Estimate	Standard Error
Intercept	45.086		
African American Participation	.237***	.431	.038
Education	.132	.115	.108
Urbanization	.041*	.185	.018
Industrialization	-.233***	-.297	.063
Republican Partisanship	-8.783**	-.217	2.749
		$R^2 = .430$	
		Adjusted $R^2 = .407$	

Notes: * $p \leq .01$; ** $p < .001$; *** $p < .0001$.

tain an appropriate racial balance among employees. Wilder's efforts may have been undercut by these dynamics.

The impact of urbanization on the electoral fortunes of Wilder was consistent with our expectation. Table 2 shows that the standardized coefficient of this variable was positive (.185) and statistically significant ($p < .01$). However, the explanatory power of urbanization is relatively weak compared to the other statistically significant independent variables. Nonetheless, this finding comports with the research of Sabato who reported that "Wilder's victory was built on a massive majority (68.5 percent) in the central cities, which contributed a phenomenal 22.5 percent of the statewide total."⁴³

As expected, the presence of Republican partisanship ($p \leq .001$) adversely impacted Wilder's political fortunes. The standardized estimate (-.217) indicates that Marshall Coleman, the Republican party alternative, siphoned votes from the Democratic nominee. Support for Wilder declined by almost nine percentage points in jurisdictions where Republicans swept the top three statewide offices. CBS/New York Times and

Mason-Dixon exit polls respectively revealed that the percentage of voters who cast a straight Democratic ticket declined from 47 percent in 1985 to about 42 percent in 1989.⁴⁴ One plausible explanation of this result is that a portion of the white Democratic partisans was reluctant to vote for an African American chief executive and instead, opted to give their support to the Republican candidate.⁴⁵ Indeed, Wilder won a mere 44 of the 136 voting units in the state. Even with the disadvantage of low statewide name recognition and the lack of political apprenticeship, Donald Beyers, the Democratic candidate for lieutenant governor, still won more localities (73) and captured a slightly larger plurality of the vote (52.9 percent) than Wilder (51.2 percent). Key's contextual hypothesis suggests, however, that the relatively low concentration of African Americans may have precluded the opposition of white voters being raised to a level which would have resulted in the rejection of the Wilder candidacy.⁴⁶

Contrary to our expectations, education was the only New South variable not statistically related to the dependent variable. One explanation may be that at the individual level educational achievement is associated not only with increased racial and political tolerance, but is also highly correlated with income, and thus Republican voting. The manifestation of these dynamics at the aggregate level may have contributed to the inability of the education variable to achieve statistical significance. Mason-Dixon exit poll results indicate, for example, that 54 percent of voters with incomes between \$35,000 and \$49,999 cast their ballot for Wilder. However, only 48 percent of those earning in excess of \$50,000 supported Wilder's bid for the governorship.⁴⁷ These data suggest that the likelihood a political jurisdiction would be carried by Wilder diminished with the rise in voter incomes.

CONCLUSION

It is indisputable that the election of L. Douglas Wilder as the first African American governor in the South was an event of historic proportions which for much of the nation signaled how far black Americans have come in their struggle for political inclusion. This exploratory study provides an empirical account of the relationship between selected New South trends and the electoral support garnered by L. Douglas Wilder in the 1989 Virginia gubernatorial election. While the study is not an exhaustive treatment of the demographic and social influence of the New

South, sufficient prominent features are included to draw meaningful conclusions. Our findings suggest that the impact of the New South on the Wilder election was mixed, at best.

The results of OLS regression show that only two of the New South trends were positively related to Wilder's election. The impact of African American political participation and urbanization were consistent with the New South thesis. However, the unanticipated negative impact of industrialization, and the inverse relationship between Republican partisanship and the electoral fortunes of Wilder suggest the presence of forces that may serve as impediments to African American electoral success.

Although there has been some abatement of race in the political arena of the New South, the convergence of southern and national demographic trends, while important, does not necessarily produce an environment that results in African American statewide political success. Furthermore, it stands to reason that if the expectations of the New South thesis did not fully materialize in Virginia, a peripheral South state, the possibility of a significant increase in the number of African Americans who hold high profile, statewide political office in the region remains remote in the foreseeable future.

Nonetheless, we do recognize that the Wilder election reflects racial progress in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Undeniably, the political reality of an African American governor in a state once at the forefront of the massive resistance movement is beyond the wildest dreams of many southerners. What remains to be seen, however, is the extent to which this historic election enhances African American political empowerment.

NOTES

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