

SHIFTING PARTISAN ALIGNMENTS IN OKLAHOMA

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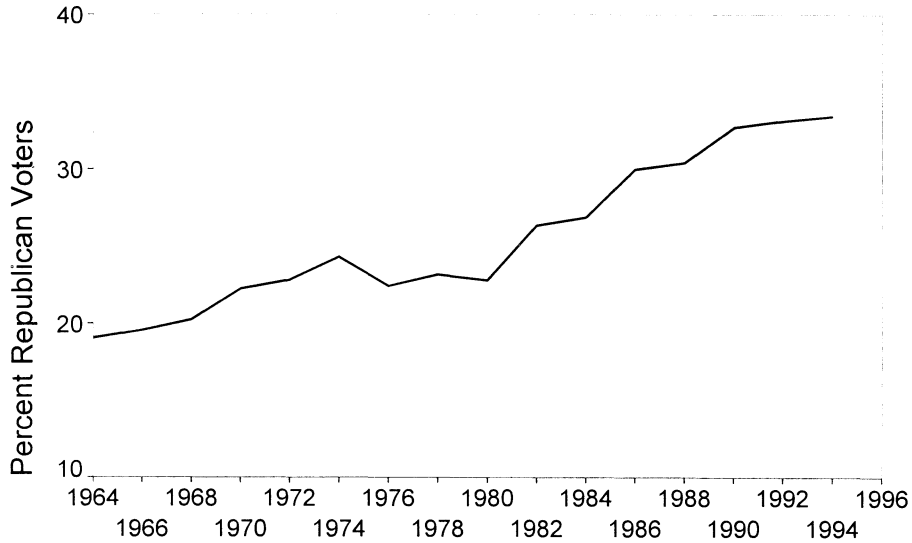
Oklahoma has often stood at the fringe of the South, both in the study of southern politics and in the mindset of Oklahoma. While Oklahoma was not a state at the time of the Civil War, many of the events and cultural factors that structure Oklahoma politics are distinctly southern. As in many southern states, the GOP has enjoyed a dramatic growth in adherents, and has sustained electoral success in contests for major offices.

What is so intriguing about the GOP growth in Oklahoma is the catalyst for change. In most southern states, studies have shown that Republican growth can be linked to race. Race is not such a divisive issue in Oklahoma. Only 6.7 percent of the state population is black (Morgan, *et al.*, 1991). Instead, religion, the growth of the Christian Right, appears to be a major catalyst in the GOP upswing (Bednar and Hertzke, 1995a, 1995b).

Shifting Voters

Below the level of major statewide offices, success by the GOP was at best fleeting. Like many southern states, Oklahoma was forced to reapportion the state legislature and congressional districts to accommodate the one-man, one-vote standards set in *Baker v. Carr* and *Westbury v. Sanders*. Rural interests had traditionally been overrepresented in the legislature due to guarantees of representation for each county. This malapportionment helped to perpetuate the Democratic domination of both chambers. After reapportionment, the Democrats continued to hold substantial majorities, especially in the rural areas, while Republicans are elected almost entirely from the populous metropolitan counties.

The most direct evidence of changing allegiances in the electorate is in the voter registration figures. Oklahoma uses a partisan registration system with a closed party primary, which allows us to examine the expressed preferences of voter allegiance. With the exception of a brief fall off of support from 1974 to 1978, the Republican proportion of registered voters has increased steadily from less than 20 percent of voters in 1964 to about 36 percent of voters in January 1996. Most of this growth occurred between 1980 and 1990, and the change in partisan balance appears to be related to the falloff in

FIGURE 1**Republican Registration, 1964-1994**

registered Democrats, as well as to gains in registered Republicans. Oklahoma has traditionally gained and lost populations with the cycles of sudden economic boom and long, drawn out decline. The most recent of these cycles did not distribute its impact evenly across parties. A general decline of registrants occurred at the depth of the oil bust, and lessened the number of Democratic registrants from 1,400,000 to just over 1,100,000 — a loss of 300,000 voters. Since the oil bust, the number of GOP registrants has hovered around 600,000. The net number of registrants gained by the Republicans since 1980 is roughly twice those gained by Democrats.

The Geography of Statewide Elections

As the urban centers of Oklahoma grew, the political geography of the state took on the tripartite shape now familiar to Oklahomans. If one draws a line from the northeastern corner of the state to the southwestern corner, it would pass through the urban centers of Tulsa, Oklahoma City, and Lawton. To the north and west of this line and outside of these cities is predominantly

Republican, and contains about 10 percent of the state population. To the south and east of the line is predominantly Democratic, the “Little Dixie” region that contains

about 20 percent of the state. The remaining 70 percent of Oklahomans live in the urban corridor that encompasses the major cities of the state (Morgan, England, and Humphreys, 1991).

The growth of the suburban corridor has not altered the partisan differences that exist between the two major urban counties (Oklahoma and Tulsa) and the rest of the state. Kirkpatrick, Morgan, and Kielhorn (1977) observed that, in the 1960s, the major urban counties voted substantially more Republican than the rest of the state in major statewide elections. As indicated in Table 1, the average urban/rural difference in gubernatorial elections is 12.9 percentage points. The GOP has won a majority of the urban core counties' vote on six of nine occasions, but has not carried the rural vote since 1966. The urban vote constituted the margin of victory for the last three Republican governors, none of whom won an outright majority of the vote. The difference in the rural/urban vote was either around 14 points or 10 points for every election since 1966, although in 1994 the margin was substantially larger — almost 19 points — because of the very large urban GOP vote.

The urban/rural split in Oklahoma is less pronounced in presidential races. Republican presidential candidates have won Oklahoma's electoral votes in every election since 1968, and even in 1964 Goldwater ran six points ahead of his national showing. Republican presidential candidates run ahead of other Republicans in rural, traditionally Democratic counties. The persistence of Republican success at the top of the ballot in rural localities eventually leads to GOP success at the bottom of the ballot in those areas. Southern voters have usually found it far easier to first break with the Democratic Party at the national level, where the policy stands and personal values of the party candidates were often at odds with southern tradition and values. The breaking of the southern Democratic linkage at the state and local level requires greater effort, especially if the values of Democratic candidates comport to the beliefs and values of the Democratic electorate. Then those linkages are broken and the Democratic party is lost as an avenue of expression for conservatives, the opportunity for GOP growth is greatest (Heard, 1952).

The areas where the GOP expects its greatest opportunities are in the suburban and exurban counties outside Oklahoma City and Tulsa that have strong, conservative Democratic traditions. The most persistently Republican counties in the state are in the northern and western parts, above the urban corridor. The other areas of GOP competitiveness are in the metropolitan counties around Tulsa and Oklahoma City. The center-city counties are the most solidly Republican. The only Democratic stronghold appears to be the southeastern part of the state.

The last three gubernatorial elections illustrate the stability of the partisan vote patterns, and the role of campaigns in Oklahoma elections. The 1986, 1990, and 1994 elections exhibit a similar pattern, with Republicans running stronger to the northwest of the urban corridor and in the core urban counties of Tulsa and Oklahoma than in the rural, Democratic counties in Little Dixie. Still, even in Little Dixie, where some counties can count their registered Republicans on one hand, the GOP consistently pulls 30-35 percent of the vote.

TABLE 1

The Cities and Republican Success

Year	OKC/ State	Out Tulsa	State	Difference
Vote for Governor				
1962	55.2	61.2	52.5	+8.7
1966	55.7	65.3	51.0	+14.3
1970	48.1*	57.9	43.3	+14.6
1974	36.1	45.5	31.4	+14.1
1978	47.2	53.9	43.9	+10.0
1982	37.6	47.5	32.6	+14.9
1986	47.5*	54.5	44.0	+10.5
1990	36.2	43.0	32.9	+10.1
1994	46.9*	59.0	40.3	+18.7
Vote for President				
1964	44.3	51.3	40.7	+10.6
1968	47.7*	52.9	44.9	+8.0
1972	73.7	76.3	72.2	+4.1
1976	49.9*	58.8	45.1	+13.7
1980	60.5	66.1	57.5	+8.6
1984	68.6	72.3	66.6	+5.7
1988	58.4	64.0	54.6	+9.4
1992	42.6*	48.9	39.1	+9.8
1996	48.2*	54.1	45.1	+9.0

The net number of registrants gained by the Republicans since 1980 is roughly twice those gained by Democrats.

** GOP plurality win.*

Source: Oklahoma State Board of Elections.

The Legislature

Democrats dominate the Oklahoma state legislature. GOP gains in the legislature roughly correspond to the gains by the party among registered voters. The growth of Republicans in the Oklahoma legislature is indicated in Table 2. In 1962, the last election preceding the court-ordered reapportionment of state legislative seats to comply with

TABLE 2
Percent Growth in the Republican Party in the Oklahoma Legislature

Year	House	Senate
1965	17.2	18.5
1967	24.8	18.8
1969	22.8	18.8
1971	20.8	18.8
1973	25.7	20.8
1975	24.8	18.8
1977	24.8	18.8
1979	25.7	18.9
1981	27.7	22.9
1983	24.8	29.2
1985	29.7	35.4
1987	30.7	31.3
1989	31.7	22.9
1991	31.7	22.9
1993	32.7	22.9
1995	35.6	27.8
1997	35.6	31.3

Note: There were 101 House members and 48 Senate members as of 1997.

one-man, one-vote, the GOP held 24 of 129 House seats (18.5 percent) and five of 44 Senate seats (11.3 percent). The reapportionment of seats produced a loss of two seats in the House and a gain of five in the Senate. By 1991, the GOP House caucus had increased to 32 of 101 seats, with a pair of brief setbacks after Watergate and during the 1982 recession. The current GOP House caucus is 36 seats.

Republican success in the state Senate has been more fleeting. Oklahoma state senators serve four-year terms, and those terms are staggered so that only half of the chamber comes up for reelection every two years. From 1964 to 1980, the GOP senate caucus cycled between 9 and 11 senators out of 48. GOP representation peaked at 17 senators in the 1986 elections, but then fell off to 11 seats following the 1990 election. After the 1996 elections, the GOP caucus in the Senate stood at 15 senators. Despite the use of staggered terms, the state senate is more vulnerable to the recent state and national political tides than the house. The peak of GOP senate representation came in the wake of Reagan's successful reelection and the return of Republican Henry Bellmon to the governor's mansion. The subsequent loss of four seats in the 1990 election came in the disastrous 26-point defeat of Republican gubernatorial candidate Bill Price.

Despite the limited level of GOP representation, Republican gains have made an impact on lawmaking in Oklahoma. In the past, Republican governors found themselves largely at the mercy of the Democratic leadership in the legislature. When unified, Democrats had more than sufficient votes to override Republican gubernatorial vetoes. Frank Keating's election as governor in 1994 was accompanied by the first contemporary GOP caucus to exceed one-third of the membership in a chamber. Republicans can now sustain any gubernatorial veto, which enhances the limited powers of the governor.

Oklahoma Democratic legislators are primarily from rural districts, and the rural areas are still dominated by Democrats in state legislative elections. After the 1994 election, all fourteen Senate districts that lie completely outside the five Oklahoma Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas (SMSA) were represented by Democrats. All thirteen GOP senators were elected from the two principal SMSAs of Oklahoma City and Tulsa. Democrats still hold 21 of 34 metropolitan senate seats.

The Democratic domination of rural districts is not so complete in the state House. About 45 percent of representatives are elected from outside SMSAs, but 58.4 percent of the Democratic caucus is elected from rural districts. By comparison, Republicans were elected from 11 of the 23 districts in the Tulsa SMSA and 17 of 27 districts in the Oklahoma City SMSA.

The modern GOP caucus bears scant resemblance to that elected in the early 1960s. Before judicial challenges to Oklahoma's county-based apportionment plan led to a dramatic increase in urban districts, the GOP caucus in the state House had a far more rural character. Of twenty-five Republicans elected to the 120-member House in 1962, over half (thirteen) were from rural counties in the northern and western parts of the state; eleven were elected from Garfield (Enid SMSA), Oklahoma (Oklahoma City), and Tulsa (Tulsa) counties. Those Republicans constituted 57.1 percent of all urban legislators, a proportion approximately in line with the current GOP share of seats in SMSAs.

The Christian Voter As A Factor

Republican success in inducing Democrats to switch over and vote Republican is in part dependent on the religious identification of the voter. Self-identified born-again Christians constituted 30 percent of all registered Democratic voters, and those Democrats split evenly between the Republican and Democratic candidates. Bill Clinton carried 65 percent of the vote among Democrats who did not consider themselves born-again, but only 45 percent of the vote among born-again Democrats. Almost identical evidence of the born-again/secular split in the Democratic party is found in the poll results for the 4th District. The instances of born-again voters are similar across both districts: about 29 percent of all voters were born again, more than half of those were Democrats, and born-again Democrats constituted approximately 27 percent of all registered Democratic voters. The born-again secular split in the Democratic party was again evident. Clinton carried over 60 percent of the vote among secular Democrats, but failed to gain even a majority of born-again Democrats. Overall, born-

again votes only cast about one in three ballots for Clinton. Born-again Democrats were generally more distrustful of Bill Clinton. Their defection on grounds of character reinforces the notion of responsible behavior advanced by Key (1966). It should be noted that Democratic defectors could also be projecting a negative evaluation to justify their defection.

Conclusions

Oklahoma is a state in the midst of a political evolution that lags somewhat behind the rest of the South. Partisan identifiers are still solidly Democratic. Democrats still remain in overwhelming control of the state legislature and in control of local governments. Republican success has been largely confined to high-profile statewide and congressional elections where money and mass media can best be used to separate traditional Democrats away from their party (Gaddie and Buchanan, 1997).

At the local and state legislative levels, where over 70 percent of all officeholders are Democrats, the linkages of voters to Democratic politicians are still highly personalized. According to one prominent Democratic Senate leader, voters still *know* these people on a personal level; a campaign that ties them to the national Democratic Party does not work in localized constituencies precisely because local Democrats are not tied to the national party, and at a local level Democrats are capable of successfully running away from the party. Campaigns conducted in larger constituencies are necessarily less personal and therefore more reliant on mass media and money to communicate candidate images. For Democrats in Oklahoma, this has meant being tied to the unpopularity of the Clinton administration and the social agenda of the national Democratic party.

The successful application of Christian activist strategy to campaigns in Oklahoma has separated about half of born-again Democrats from their party's nominees for federal offices. The most recent increase in GOP registrants is related to the presence of evangelicals in communities. Oklahoma is far from "realigned" to the GOP at all levels. When compared to her immediate southern neighbors, the partisan changes in Oklahoma are more advanced than in Louisiana and Arkansas, but lag behind Texas below the state level.

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