

THE SOUTHERNIZATION OF THE REPUBLICAN PARTY
AND THE SOUTH'S LONG REALIGNMENT:
EXAMINING CANDIDATES, CAMPAIGNS, AND VOTERS FROM 2008 TO 2024

by

DANIEL KANSO

(Under the Direction of Charles S. Bullock III)

ABSTRACT

At the heart of this dissertation, I evaluate how the answers to a series of questions have changed over time, asking: What is the relationship of the South to the Republican Party? And how has the region's broader realignment contributed to political polarization and to Donald Trump's hold on the GOP? To answer these questions, three areas of inquiry are presented:

- First, although the population characteristics of the South have changed tremendously, the region has remained central to the prospect of Republicans winning the presidency or majorities in either chamber of Congress for over two decades. The metamorphosis of the GOP into Trump's party between 2008 to 2024 serves as a throughline to illustrate how broader trends of political realignment in the South have reshaped national Republican constituencies, candidates, and elected officials.
- Second, issues related to race, gender, and immigration have only become more visible in American politics throughout the 21st century. This has occurred as the modern GOP coalition has shifted to include a greater proportion of working-class

voters and Democrats have moved to represent wealthier, more educated suburban areas. The effects of these dueling phenomena, interacting in an electoral environment with strong levels of racial polarization among both voters and elected officials, can be observed uniquely in the South.

- Finally, after a decades-long realignment in which the Republican Party's early gains in the South were built amidst widening racial divisions and scores of white former-Democrats switching parties, up and down the ballot, a new political generation of Republicans and Democrats has emerged. As the GOP has recently expanded its ranks to achieve supermajorities in Stagnant South states like Louisiana, two-party political competition has simultaneously been reignited in parts of the Growth South like Georgia, where population and economic expansions are accompanied by growing racial, ethnic, and ideological diversity.

In the following chapters, I draw from a rich composite of data from election returns, survey research, interviews, reporting and media accounts, and campaign materials focused on contests for president, U.S. Senate, U.S. House, governor, and control of state legislative chambers.

INDEX WORDS: Southern Politics, Republican Party, Political Parties, Electoral Change, Two-Party Political Competition, Georgia, South Carolina, Louisiana, South, GOP

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For my family, inspiration in a world of never-ending chaos

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

During the past two decades, the dynamics of American politics have been upended by three intersecting trends. First, the rise of Southern Republicans reshaped the base of the GOP between the 20th and 21st centuries to become more evangelical and populist as the party captured the support of white Southerners and grew to achieve huge margins across exurban and rural areas (Black & Black, 2002; Bullock et al., 2019; Hood & McKee, 2022). Second, the politics of the South evolved to assert out-sized influence nationally, as the core factors driving political competition in the region have positioned Southern electoral contests as important to either party's prospects of winning the presidency or a governing majority in Congress (Bullock et al., 2024). Finally, from 2015 to 2024, Donald Trump fundamentally reshaped the national GOP, stepping in as the party's leader at a decisive point when Republicans were close to the peak of political power across the South.¹

As Trump remade the GOP in his image, the majority of Southern Republicans holding top elected offices were replaced. Between Trump's first election in 2016 and his second inauguration in 2025, a new crop of Republicans were elected to Southern governorships (9/10), the U.S. House (69/99), the U.S. Senate (9/18), state House speakerships (10/10), and state Senate leadership posts (8/10)—making the states of the South well situated for case studies to evaluate political change

¹ In the tradition of V.O. Key (1949), the South is defined as the 11 former states of the Confederate States of America: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. The Deep South includes Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina. The Rim South includes Arkansas, Florida, North Carolina, Texas, Tennessee, and Virginia.

within the GOP.² Focused from 2008 to 2024, this study looks at how the answers to a series of research questions have changed over time, asking: What is the relationship of the South to the Republican Party? And how has the region's broader realignment contributed to political polarization and to Donald Trump's hold on the GOP?

This study draws a major focus on Trump to contextualize the ways that he has, both, exploited existing intraparty divides, and opened new rifts to redraw the political fault lines between the two major parties. Along these lines, Trump was, at first, a beneficiary of the South's decades-long political realignment and the Southernization of the GOP that preceded his political rise (Bullock et al., 2019). As used throughout this study, the term Southernization refers to the outsized share of GOP voters and members of Congress from the South, along with the importance of white evangelicals and populist audiences to the party's coalition. After he was elected president in 2016, Trump became a leading force in fueling the next phase of Southern political evolution. Further, as explained in Chapter Two and charted through three case studies, the South continues to maintain unique levels of racial polarization rooted in the fabric of the region's political history, which also helps to set the boundaries of racial polarization between voters and elected officials nationally. Trump's 2024 reelection cemented his central role in setting the tone and direction for an era of American politics that can best be understood through the gateway of the South.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK AND SIGNIFICANCE

In 1949, V.O. Key set the stage for a generation of scholarly research into the politics of the South, writing that: "Whatever phase of the Southern political process one seeks to understand,

² Among 10 Southern Republican governors, Greg Abbott of Texas (2015) is the only one serving as of the 2024 election who was elected prior to Trump. Virginia's House and Senate are led by Democrats. North Carolina's governorship has been controlled by Democrats since 2015. North Carolina and Texas elected the leaders of their state Senate chambers before Trump was elected in 2016. As of January 2025, 30 of 99 Southern Republican members of the U.S. House and nine of 18 U.S. Senators were sworn in prior to Trump's first inauguration in 2017.

sooner to later the trail of inquiry leads to” the defining issue of race (p. 5). Just as Key observed in the mid-twentieth century South, it is not necessarily the case that all—or most—white voters are chiefly concerned with issues of race when considering whether to support a candidate for public office. Rather, the backbone of Southern political identity and notions of racial polarization have long originated from the subset of states and counties where Black Americans comprise the most substantial portions of the population (Key, 1949). As such, this study draws its primary focus on three states of the Deep South: Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina.

Areas with the largest Black populations were met with the fiercest policies of racial suppression, setting the tone for the contours of modern political competition across the region. In fact, Key proposed the maxim that, “If the whites of the black belts give the South its dominant political tone, the character of the politics of individual states will vary roughly with the [Black] proportion of the population” (p. 5). In more recent years, although Key’s proposition on race remains a major consideration that is investigated further in the three case study states, a new phenomenon has emerged to redraw the boundaries of the South in contemporary American politics: the divide between areas burgeoning with growth and those stagnating or losing ground.

In, *The South and the Transformation of U.S. Politics* (2019), Bullock, MacManus, Mayer, and Rozell (Bullock et al., 2019) offer a foundational explanation of the central role of the South to seismic changes in U.S. politics that occurred between 1968 and 2016. Through a half century of political development, with an acute focus into how Southern political trends have helped shape the 21st century GOP and led up to the era of Donald Trump, Bullock et al. (2019) outline the process of transformation that saw the rise of Republican political domination in the South and the Southernization of the national GOP. The authors also demonstrate how demographic trends portend greater political action across Southern battlegrounds in the years ahead as issues central

to race, growth, and equity remain at the forefront of American politics. This study relies on the theoretical foundation established by these authors to explain how a broader American cultural and societal shift, rooted in the politics of the South, helps to explain the trajectory of the contemporary Republican Party and the contours of two-party competition.

Bullock et. al (2019) identify six states in the South as the Growth States, which gained greater representation in Congress between 1949 to 2018 by growing their populations at a faster rate than the national average. These states are Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia. Two of these states, Georgia, and South Carolina, are also considered part of the Deep South, characterized by larger Black populations and historically agrarian economies where the Democratic Party was formerly most dominant, whereas the other four states are part of the Rim South or Peripheral South. Led by stronger and more diverse economies, the Growth States are powered by a pattern of growth in population and prosperity that has brought with it a mix of people from across the nation and globe who do not fit into the traditional Black-white electoral dichotomy long-observed. Increasing diversity, made possible at least in part because of the globalized economies of the Growth States, has put new political coalitions into reach, contributing to greater political competition and sparking a renewed national focus on the importance of the South as a decisively important region in national American politics.

Five states constitute the Stagnant South: Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee. Generally, Republicans were slower to gain power in the Stagnant South states, first taking control of state governorships in the mid-2000s and then expanding legislative majorities secured by 2013 to obtain super majorities in four-out-of-five states (aside from Mississippi) by 2024. As in the Growth South states, party switching from former Democrats and the process of redistricting were critical components of early Republican gains across the Stagnant South.

Nationally, the prospects for Republican congressional majorities hinge on performing exceptionally well in the Stagnant South. Between the 2010 and 2024 cycles, GOP candidates claimed upwards of 80% of U.S. House seats in these five states (24+). Republicans held all 10 U.S. Senate seats in these states from 2015 to 2024, apart from the three-year period in which Alabama Democratic Senator Doug Jones (2018-2021) was elected to fill the un-expired term of Jeff Sessions. This compares to 60% to 70% of U.S. House representatives and more than two-thirds of U.S. Senate seats won by GOP candidates in the Growth South during the same period.

Hood et al. (2012) connect the enfranchisement of Black Americans in the mid-1960s to the rise of the Republican Party in the South. As these intertwined social and political changes have continued through to the present day, redistricting, party switching, and Democratic defeats have reshaped the composition of the Democratic Party across much of the region to revolve around majority-minority districts, with Black voters representing the core of the Democratic base. As patterns of growth in states like Georgia have made the electorate more diverse, successful Democratic candidates have also proven it is possible to offset weakness among white voters or in Black turnout levels by attracting strong support from Asian and Hispanic voters who are generally growing to comprise a larger share of the Southern electorate (Bullock & Rozell, 2022). Still, these victories are not commonplace, and—as in the case of Georgia in 2020, 2021, and 2022—have often been distinguished by Donald Trump’s involvement.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Although the population of the South has grown tremendously over the past half century, the region has consistently remained decisive to the prospect of Republicans winning the presidency or majorities in Congress (Black & Black, 2008; Bullock & Rozell, 2022; Steed & Moreland, 2006). After a decades-long realignment in which the Republican Party’s early gains in

the South were built amidst widening racial divisions and scores of white former-Democrats switching parties, a new political generation of Republicans has been elected up and down the ballot. As the GOP has recently expanded its ranks to achieve supermajorities in Stagnant South states like Louisiana, two-party political competition has simultaneously been reignited in parts of the Growth South like Georgia, where population and economic expansions have been accompanied by growing racial, ethnic, and ideological diversity.

This study's theory is constructed around the notion that Trump's movement was built at the height of GOP political power in the South, coinciding with the tail end of a decades-long process of realignment, during which racial polarization in the region grew to approach levels seen after Reconstruction. Simply put, the Republican Party has undergone a fundamental process of political transformation as the twin forces of Trump's influence and the Southernization of the GOP were linked between 2008 and 2024 (Bullock et al., 2019, 2024). The intertwined nature of these changes merits a closer look, with this study aiming to build on existing literature by offering a deep dive into the campaigns and political activity of Republican candidates and elected officials in the South over nine election cycles, paired with a contemporaneous analysis of recent trends in voter choice.

The following chapters present case studies from three Southern states—Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina—that all share a common history as part of the Deep South, but which have been influenced differently by the leading factors driving contemporary political competition. These areas of focus include patterns of growth and stagnation, the politics of race, demographic shifts and the diversification of the electorate, along with related social changes occurring in American politics and culture. Together, the case studies serve as the basis of comparison for the broader region of the South in Chapter Six.

Three key pillars are essential to the theory tested by this study. First, after Southern Republicans achieved the peak of their political power and strength in officeholding between 2008 and 2024, more establishment-minded leaders who were previously elected through a combination of redistricting, party switching, and breakthrough election cycles were replaced with Republicans more closely in line with Trump's wing of the GOP. This transition aided Trump in consolidating support within the Republican Party and portends a continued shift away from the brand of GOP conservatism that preceded him.

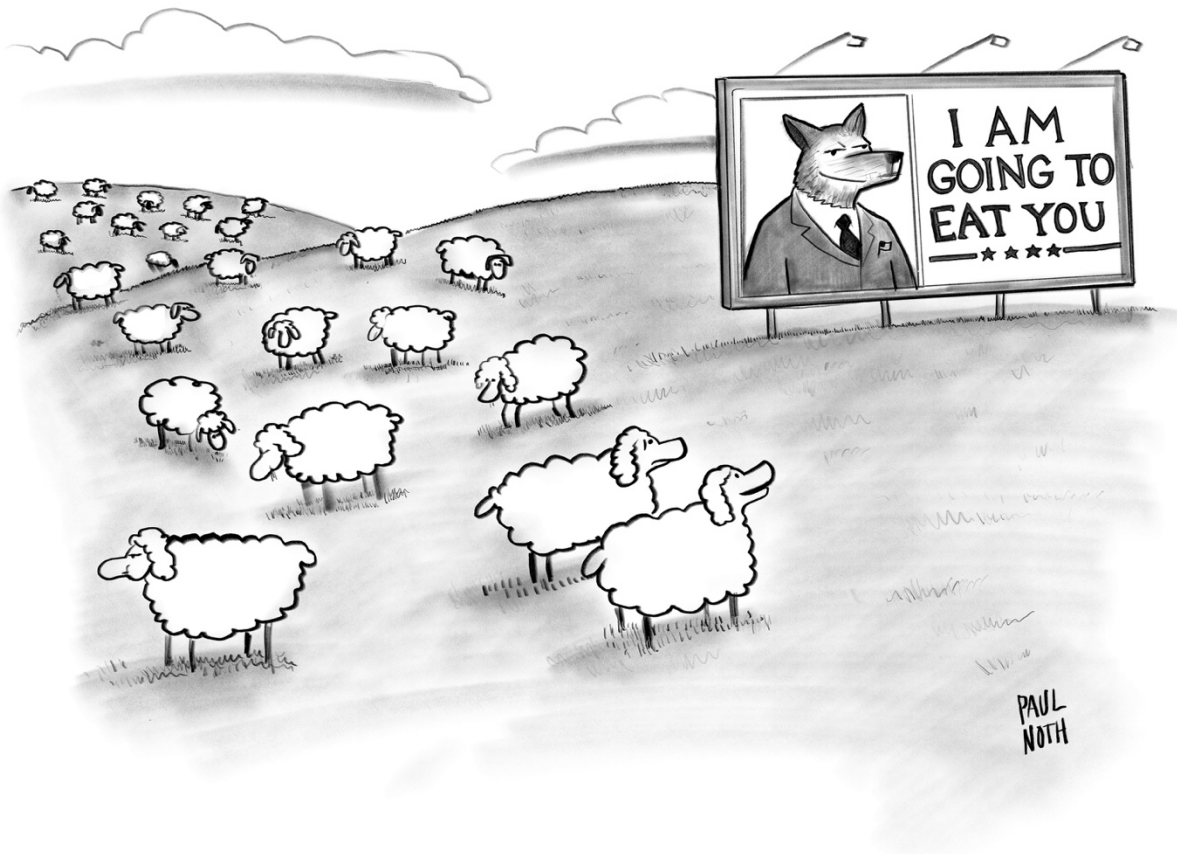
Beyond jettisoning long-standing planks of the party platform on issues like free trade and immigration, Trump created litmus tests for aspiring GOP political figures, centered around loyalty to the former president—including his claim that he was the rightful winner of the 2020 presidential election (Leibovich, 2022; Stevens, 2020). Trump also worked to change the GOP's coalition by cutting ties with the top Republican leaders who preceded him, at various intervals attacking George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, John McCain, Mitt Romney, John Boehner, Paul Ryan, Mitch McConnell, and even his first term vice president Mike Pence. In turn, most of these leaders were prompted to speak out against Trump and all have retired or stepped back from GOP politics (Martin, 2021; Quinn, 2024).

Separating Trump-first Republicans from traditional Republicans is not necessarily a matter of ideology or conservatism. Trump's populist style of politics is generally characterized by a mix of appeals to white grievances, economic protectionism under the banner of "America First," foreign policy that oscillates wildly between isolationism and expansionism, and a governing approach that is less tethered to the status quo and norms upheld by the generations of conservatives serving in top political positions during decades past. Figure 1.1 shows a popular

New Yorker cartoon that satirizes how Trump’s rhetoric and policy positions often conflict and appear at odds with the interests of his voter base.

To better understand Trump’s hold on the Republican Party, this study aims to dig deeper into the consequences of mass turnover in Southern governorships, U.S. Senate seats, and U.S. House districts between 2016 and 2024. In instances of GOP succession, I check for a symbiotic relationship of endorsements between successful down ballot Republicans and Trump—whereby I hypothesize that the Republicans elected during this era are likely to support Trump themselves and to receive his backing. This hypothesis is detailed further below as part of H1, H1A, and H1B.

Figure 1.1 He Tells It Like It Is



“He tells it like it is.”

Source: Paul Noth, The New Yorker, August 2016.

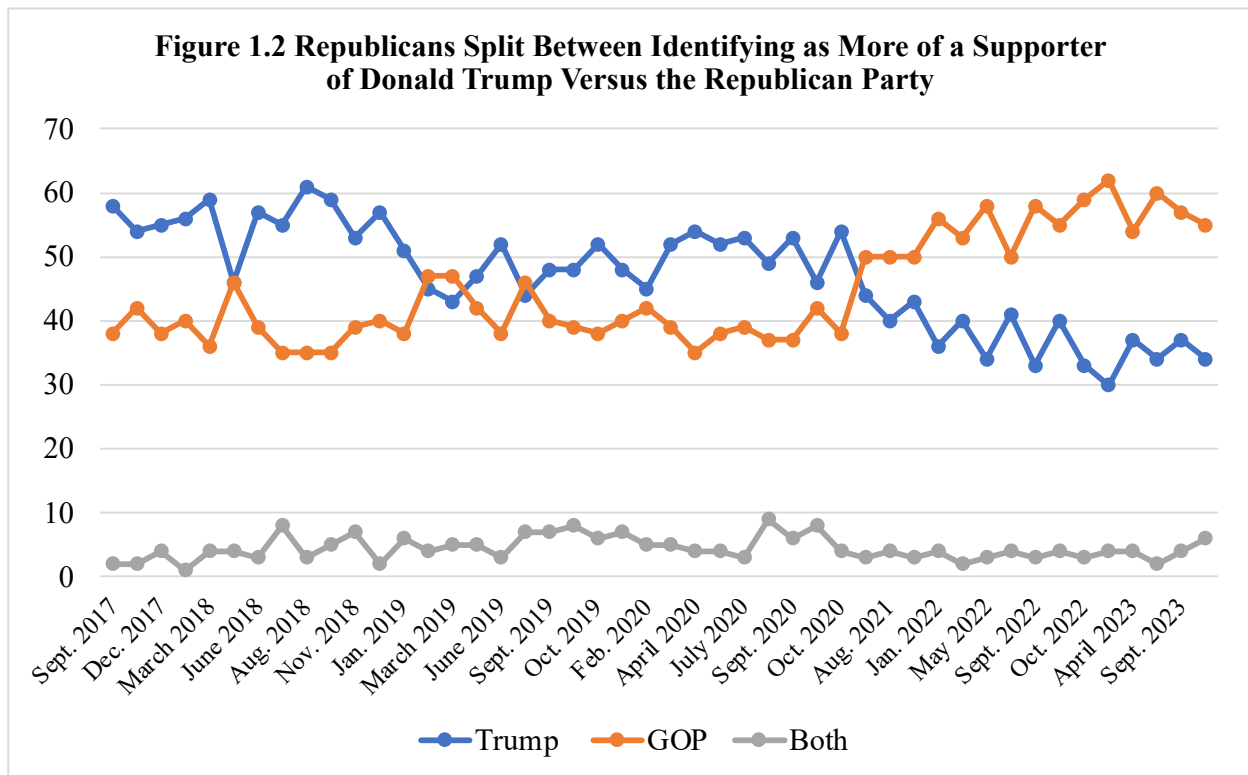
Second, the Deep South remains unique because of the large percentage of its population comprised by Black residents, who represent the foundation of the Democratic base nationally. This study tests the hypothesis that Democratic candidates can win in the Deep South by cobbling together a majority coalition with support from approximately 30% of white voters and turning out Black voters to comprise 30% of the electorate. As Trump has run three consecutive presidential campaigns centered around overt appeals to white grievances and the use of highly inflammatory racial stereotypes, Southern Democrats have seen the party's elected membership shift to include a greater proportion of Black public officials. This study is designed to evaluate these dueling trends, which have reenforced levels of racial polarization that extend from the ballot box to the makeup of state legislative chambers and the U.S. Congress, even as racial groups themselves became less polarized electorally between 2008 and 2024. Alongside race, this study also considers the role of gender polarization in the electorate and among elected officials to more comprehensively assess the demographic factors driving political and partisan change.

Third, when the effects of the first two components of this theory collide, the result is to add fuel to the Southernization of the Republican Party. Maintaining control of Southern congressional delegations and Electoral College votes in presidential elections remains highly important to GOP prospects for a national governing majority. However, by influencing Republican voters to favor his affiliated candidates in primaries and rebranding the GOP in his image, Trump has, in turn, helped to accelerate two-party competition in states like Georgia, as well as other areas across the Growth South. On the other hand, in Stagnant South states where Republicans are more firmly entrenched and two-party competition is out of reach, the effect of Trump's influence over the GOP has been to help elevate his favored candidates to claim safe seats and positions of leadership statewide.

With Donald Trump's victory in the 2024 presidential election, the former and future president strengthened his grip on the Republican Party and extended his status as the unquestioned leader of the GOP through at-least 2028. Following the certification of the 2024 results—with Trump elected to serve a second non-consecutive term as part of a GOP governing trifecta—Texas U.S. House Representative Troy Nehls, summed up the feeling on Capitol Hill after the president-elect spoke before the 220 member House majority conference elected to the 119th Congress. Wearing a pair of gold Trump branded sneakers and a tie with Trump's name on it, Nehls told reporters: "There's no question he's the leader of our party. So now he's got a mission statement of his...goals and objectives. Whatever that is, we need to embrace it. All of it. Every single word of it. If Donald Trump says jump three feet high and scratch your head, we all jump three feet high and scratch our heads and that's it" (Griffing, 2024).

From the standpoint of House leadership, Speaker Mike Johnson issued a similar endorsement of Trump's agenda, saying "We're going to raise an 'America First' banner above this place" (Mascaro, 2024). On the U.S. Senate side, Trump's allies echoed this pledge of loyalty. Alabama U.S. Senator Tommy Tuberville told *Fox Business*, "There was a mandate last week... that said, 'hey, we want President Trump to have his team, we want to take back our country'—Republicans if you're not on the team, get out of the way... I think [John Thune] will do a good job [as Senate Majority Leader] but, again, President Trump and JD Vance are gonna be running the Senate" (Rupar, 2024C). After Matt Gaetz dropped out of consideration for Attorney General, Thune led the Senate to confirm all of Trump's cabinet nominees in his second term, including several who were initially controversial among Republicans such as Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., as Health and Human Services Secretary (52 votes), Pete Hegseth as Secretary of Defense (50 votes), and Tulsi Gabbard as Director of National Intelligence (50 votes). Following the confirmations,

Thune remarked, “I think that the Senate Republicans have proven that we are united” (Steinhauser, 2025).



Source: NBC/Wall Street Journal, conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates/Public Opinion Strategies, September 2017 to September 2023, aggregated by author.

Trump’s unquestioned status atop the Republican Party did not always appear so certain. Public polling conducted by *NBC News* and *The Wall Street Journal* has regularly asked Republican voters: “Do you consider yourself to be more of a supporter of Donald Trump or more of a supporter of the Republican Party?” This question was asked 46 times between September of 2017 and November of 2023. Figure 1.2 demonstrates that at least 30% of Republican voters have identified more closely with Trump than the GOP at-large in every instance. However, Trump’s losses in 2018 and 2020—and the blame he shouldered for the GOP’s disappointing performance in the 2022 midterms—correlate with a dip in loyalty from voters. As shown in Figure 1.2, after steadily maintaining loyalty from a majority of GOP voters, in October of 2020, Trump’s share

dropped to a plurality of 46% and continued to trend downward before bottoming out at 30% in November 2020. From that point, the share of voters favoring Trump rebounded into the mid-to-upper 30s.

Although the question used for Figure 1.2 has not been asked since September 2023, in January 2025, *The Wall Street Journal* survey asked those who identified as Republicans: *Do you consider yourself a MAGA Republican?* A substantial majority—66% answered in the affirmative, in comparison to 30% who said no. Further, since the question was introduced in February of 2024, the share of Republicans identifying as MAGA Republicans increased from an initial 47%-to-42% split to 55%-to-37% in July 2024 to 58%-to-34% in October 2024 (*Wall Street Journal*, 2024-2025). This trend clearly demonstrates that Trump’s successful reelection campaign has been correlated with renewed popularity among Republicans.

To hear pollster Whit Ayres describe this phenomenon, the Republican Party can be divided into three groups, “the always Trump, the maybe Trump, and the never Trump—where the always Trump is about 35 or 40%, and the maybe Trump is another... maybe 50%, and then the never Trump is only about 10%. In terms of the Congress and the South, the Never Trumpers are gone. I mean, they may still call themselves Republicans, but they’ll have no role whatsoever in a Trump administration” (Ayres, 2024C). Digging deeper, Ayres—who has over 40-years of survey research experience in the region—described that, “The proportion of always Trump versus maybe Trump is higher in the South than any other region because the South is more conservative or at least more Trumpy... [Going forward,] he will have total and complete control of Congress, and it’s hard to imagine them bucking him on anything” (Ibid). As demonstrated in chapters three through six, Trump’s remaking of the GOP was made possible through a combination of electing

his hand-picked, primary endorsed candidates and by pushing Republicans elected prior to his rise or without his support to embrace him. Ayres summarizes, that

There is a coalition of MAGA Republicans and more traditional Republicans that support Trump. And the MAGA Republicans are the true believers, the red hat wearing, Trump rally going, Trump is my savior voters. And the more traditional Republicans are... suffering from Trump Resignation Syndrome. Not Trump Derangement Syndrome that the right accuses the left of [having], but Trump Resignation Syndrome. They know the guy. They don't particularly like the guy. They get the joke about his personality and temperament, but they feel like, if he's the nominee, he is the only option to prevent the country from continuing to lurch to the left. And so, they go 'you know if it takes Trump to stop taxpayer funding of sex change operations, or genetic boys playing in girls' sports, or the proliferation of pronouns on emails, then I'll support Trump.' And they did. (Ayres, 2024C).

At the national level, the governing consequences of this shift can be observed most clearly in the U.S. House. When Trump took the reins of the GOP, the party's rank-and-file had spent eight years drawing their policy priorities and messaging to revolve around opposition to the Obama-led Democratic Party. For example, this period saw an outsized amount of attention focused on Republican efforts to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act, in addition to a new effort to weaponize the nation's debt ceiling (or borrowing limit) and the threat of a government shut down as points of leverage in debates over federal spending.

Before Trump's ascent, Tea Party leaders and Southern Republicans—including Jim DeMint and Ted Cruz—had been at the leading edge of these efforts. Over the next eight years, Trump's influence helped to cement the congressional GOP's shift away from establishment-minded leaders further in favor of empowering the party's insurgent Southern wing in intra-party battles over fiscal policy. Between 2011 and 2025, on 11-out-of-13 measures that were enacted, Southern Representatives voted in opposition to measures raising the federal borrowing limit or funding the government at a higher rate than non-Southern Republicans.

Beyond policy matters, the strongest test of loyalty to Trump has centered around his efforts to deny the outcome of the 2020 election. In 2021, most House Republicans (67%) voted against the certification of the Electoral College votes cast in at least one battleground state (Yourish et al., 2021).³ The 139 House Republicans voting to object were disproportionately elected from the South, including 72 Southern Republicans (80% of 90 members serving at the time) and 67 non-Southern Republicans (56% of 119 non-Southern members). Among the eight U.S. senators (16% of 50 Republicans) who voted to object to at least one state’s certification, five of those represented Southern states (28% of the region’s 18 GOP members).

As Trump coalesced power in the Republican Party through a process of winning support from GOP voters, converting Trump-skeptical incumbent Republicans to his side, and working to elect his favored candidates—efforts that combined to pressure GOP holdouts to fall in line with Trump—the Democratic Party’s membership shifted to center around Black elected officials as the long-run effects of Southern realignment took hold. In 2011, then-Georgia House Republican whip Ed Lindsey described that a central part of the GOP’s redistricting strategy was to create “a greater number of majority-minority districts than we ever had in the history of our state,” which amounted to 60 majority-minority districts out of a total of 180 in the state House and 15 of 56 in the state Senate (Galloway, 2011; Dave’s Redistricting, 2020A, 2021A). Similarly, strategic redistricting efforts were also deployed in South Carolina, Louisiana, and across the South.

Congressman and former Louisiana state senator Cleo Fields, who chaired the state’s Legislative Black Caucus in 2000, remarked that he “always frowned on ‘packing’” or the practice

³ If no presidential candidate receives a majority of Electoral College votes (270), Article 2, Section 1, Clause 3, enables the U.S. House to vote on selecting the president, while the U.S. Senate is empowered to select the vice president. Under this construct, each state is given one vote regardless of the number of members in its delegation. At the start of the 117th Congress and at the time of the vote on January 6, 2021, Republicans had a majority in 27 state delegations, while Democrats controlled 20 delegations, and three were evenly split (Minnesota, Michigan, and Pennsylvania).

of drawing district lines in a way that makes it disproportionately Black or white, but that “my view is not necessarily the majority view” (Hasten, 2011). As Republicans were redrawing Georgia’s legislative maps in 2011, then-state House Minority leader Stacey Abrams said that the practice of packing violated the intent of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which “did not seek to shuffle minority voters into enclaves with their own legislators in isolated voting districts... And it surely did not imagine a white party and a black party” (Galloway, 2011). Likewise, during the 2011 redistricting process, South Carolina Democratic Party Chairman Dick Harpootlian complained that “the rationale for creating these huge majority-black districts is gone,” citing the election of Barack Obama and Tim Scott as proof that “there’s no reason to create these huge majority-black districts” (Smith, 2011).

After the 2024 general election, approximately half of all statewide elected Democrats in Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina (1/2) were Black, along with 100% of Democratic members of the U.S. House (8/8), 74% of Democratic state senators (34/46), and 76% of state House members (111/147). Current Georgia Legislative Black Caucus Chairwoman (2025-2026) and state senator Nikki Merrit explained the intersection between the Republican Party’s shift under Trump and the increasing share of Democratic Party officeholders who are Black:

Because we know the white population is shrinking, [Republicans] feel threatened... I think they are perceiving a threat on their way of life... It is the embedded racism that has always been here and never went away. So, because their population is shrinking, I think there is a lot of fear that “we need to hold on to what we got. We need to make sure that we’re holding on to power.” And two, I think there’s a sense [that,] “we don’t want this group to get power because they might treat us the same way we’ve treated them for years,” and honestly, Black people are not that way. I think we’re just looking for equity and social justice... But I do feel like white [conservative] Americans play this zero-sum game that there is not enough, and “I’m gonna hold on to my privilege, and I don’t care if you don’t get yours.” That is just something that has been embedded systemically for decades. But now this [status quo] is being threatened...

So, I think that’s why they’re attaching to Trump... He picked at a racial sore that has always been there, and he has been capitalizing on the fear on the other end. And it’s

working because there's a fear that [they're] losing [their] power... [their political] grip... [their] Christianity... And I do believe we were put here to learn from each other and to get along... [But] here in the South we still have not learned how to do it (Merritt, 2025).

HYPOTHESES TESTED

Fifteen hypotheses are operationalized to evaluate changes in the politics of the South between 2008 and 2024. These hypotheses are each tested in the context of findings taken from three case studies conducted in Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina. Chapter Six evaluates hypotheses H11, H12, and H13 through an analysis of the full 11-state South. To assess the implications of the Southernization of the Republican Party, Chapter Six also includes an analysis of the role of Southern Republicans in (1) influencing legislation to fund the federal government or increase the debt ceiling and (2) in contesting the results of the 2020 election using the power and influence of the U.S. Congress or state governments. The hypotheses tested include:

- H1: Since the beginning of the Trump era (2016-2024), Republican candidates and officeholders have divided into three groups: (1) Those who almost always support Trump, called MAGA (Make America Great Again) Republicans, (2) those who sometimes support Trump (Sometimes Trump Republicans), and (3) those who are anti-Trump or who have aligned with the Never Trump movement (Anti-Trump Republicans). This hypothesis is tested among (1) governors, (2) U.S. senators, and (3) members of Congress by evaluating three criteria.

First, as part of each case study's research process, statements and campaign materials issued by candidates and elected officials are reviewed and those who clearly affiliate themselves as MAGA Republicans who are running on a platform of loyalty to Trump are counted as such. Secondly, to distinguish between MAGA Republicans and those who sometimes support Trump, this study evaluates where Republicans stood on

Trump's claim that he was the rightful winner of the 2020 election. Those serving in Congress at the time will be categorized as MAGA Republicans if they (1) signed on to the December 2020 amicus brief led by Congressman Mike Johnson of Louisiana (for House members serving in the 116th Congress) or (2) if they voted to object to the certification of Biden's Electoral College victory (for members serving in the 117th Congress).⁴

For those who were not serving in Congress at the time of these activities, this study evaluates if candidates and officeholders responded favorably to Trump's claims of a stolen election to determine whether they are MAGA Republicans. This study also tracks whether Republicans were endorsed by Trump and whether they endorsed his re-election ahead of the 2024 primary in their state. Republicans who fit some, but not most of the four applicable criteria (self-identifying as a MAGA Republican, supporting claims of a stolen 2020 election, and endorsements for and from Trump), are categorized among those who sometimes support Trump.

Those who endorsed Biden or Harris are classified as part of the third group of Republicans who do not support Trump. Legislators who voted to impeach Trump are also included among this third group of Republicans. In instances where these actions conflict with the first set of criteria considered for MAGA Republicans or Sometimes Trump Republicans, endorsing Trump's Democratic opponent or voting to impeach are considered over-riding actions that lead those Republicans to be classified as Anti-Trump.

⁴ Johnson's amicus brief, signed on to by 125 fellow House Republicans serving in the 116th Congress, urged the Supreme Court to throw out presidential electors from four battleground states won by Biden (Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin) on the grounds that election rules were improperly changed ahead of the 2020 election (Johnson, 2021). The Supreme Court refused to take up the underlying case in *Texas v. Pennsylvania, et al.*, ruling that Texas did not have standing to challenge the way other states conducted their elections.

- H1A: In the post-2016 political environment, maintaining support for Trump is a requirement to survive politically for elected and office-seeking Republicans. As such, Republicans who do not publicly support Trump are likely to either exit public office or face defeat. This hypothesis is evaluated by assessing whether Republican officeholders and candidates supported Trump in primary and general elections in 2020 and 2024. Additionally, each case study looks for major instances in which Republicans publicly opposed Trump (such as supporting his impeachment or disputing his claim of a stolen election in 2020) and if they were subsequently defeated or otherwise exited public office.
- H1B: Republican officeholders who replace those elected prior to the Trump era are almost always elected with a primary or general election endorsement from Donald Trump. As a result, as of the beginning of Trump's second term in 2025, the number of Trump supporters in Congress and governorships vastly outnumbers those who are not aligned with Trump. In turn, this shift has put greater pressure on those who sometimes support Trump to fall in line with the GOP's Trump supporting majority as part of the process of obtaining or keeping Trump's support. This hypothesis is evaluated by assessing endorsements for Trump from governors, U.S. senators, and U.S. House members ahead of ballots being cast in state presidential primaries in 2024 and reciprocal endorsements from Trump for these candidates and officeholders between 2016 to 2024. Further, I evaluate any instances in which current or former Republican officeholders endorsed Trump's opponents in primary and general election campaigns, as well as differences in behavior between Republicans exiting office and those seeking re-election.
- H2: Democrats can win statewide elections in the Deep South for president, governor, and U.S. Senate by meeting the criteria of a 30-30 election, in which candidates win 30% of

support from white voters and turn out Black voters to comprise 30% of the electorate. These minima may vary slightly (plus or minus one to three percentage points), depending on the overall composition of the electorate and the share represented by Asian and Hispanic voters.

- H3: Black voters have become a larger share of those supporting Democratic candidates in the electorate (2008 to 2024). This hypothesis, along with H4, is tested in races for (1) president, (2) U.S. Senate, and (3) governorships.
- H4: Women have become a larger share of those supporting Democratic candidates in the electorate (2008 to 2024).
- H5: Black elected officials have become a larger share of all Democratic Party officeholders (2008 to 2024). Officeholders included in testing H5 and H6 include those (1) elected to statewide posts (constitutional offices and U.S. Senate), (2) U.S. House, (3) general assemblies (including state House and state Senate). State House and Senate chambers are tested individually and combined to assess for statistically significant changes in the composition of each state's General Assembly.
- H6: Women have become a larger share of Democratic Party officeholders (2008 to 2024).
- H7: Racial polarization has increased in the electorate (2008 to 2024). In testing H7, racial polarization is defined as the gap in the share of ballots cast for Republican candidates between white and Black voters in general elections for (1) president, (2) U.S. Senate, and (3) governor.
- H8: Gender polarization has increased in the electorate (2008 to 2024). In testing H8, gender polarization is defined as the gap in the vote share won by Republican candidates between men and women in general elections for (1) president, (2) U.S. Senate, and (3)

governor. This hypothesis is evaluated in the context of the overall electorate, in addition to among white and Black voters alone in Chapter Six.

- H9: Racial polarization has increased in the ranks of public officeholders (2008 to 2024). In testing H9, racial polarization is defined as the gap between the share of elected officials from the Republican and Democratic parties who are white and non-white, tested by evaluating representation in (1) statewide elected offices (U.S. Senate, governorships, and constitutional officers), (2) U.S. House, (3) general assemblies (including state House and state Senate).
- H10: Gender polarization has increased in the ranks of public officeholders (2008 to 2024). To evaluate H10, gender polarization is defined as the gap between the share of elected officials from the Republican and Democratic parties who are women, tested using the same three groupings of public offices considered as part of H9.
- H11: Since Donald Trump was elected president in 2016, two-party competition has increased in the Growth States. For hypotheses H11, H12, and H13, political competition is measured in terms of (1) percentage of marginal contests, defined by the winning and losing vote shares being within 10 percentage points and (2) the percentage of Republican victories in general elections. The offices considered as part of testing hypotheses H11, H12, and H13 are (1) U.S. House and (2) an average taken by combining statewide races for U.S. Senate, governorships, and other constitutional positions. Comparisons are made by office in Chapter Six at each election cycle interval between 2016 and 2024.
- H12: Between 2016 and 2024, two-party competition has decreased in the Stagnant South states, elevating intra-party GOP contests as the determinative elections for selecting top officeholders in these states.

- H13: As a result of the trends evaluated as part of H11 and H12, Trump's influence has helped his supporters obtain a greater share of leadership positions in the Stagnant South than in the Growth South. As part of testing this hypothesis, Trump supporting Republicans are categorized using the same criteria considered as part of H1, including their stance on the 2020 election and their support for and from Trump.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS AND METHODOLOGY OF CASE STUDIES

Examining case studies of the political and electoral events in individual Southern states offers the opportunity to observe a throughline in broader trends that developed in national Republican politics from 2008 to 2024. From chapters three through five, I present a series of three case studies taken over the same period of nine election cycles, from 2008 through 2024. These chapters serve to take stock and evaluate the state of Southern politics and the core factors driving voter choice in support and opposition to Republican candidates through the lens of three Southern states: Georgia, South Carolina, and Louisiana.

All the states selected for case studies are part of the Deep South and were once categorized together because of the significant share of their populations comprised of Black residents and the speed at which they transitioned from primarily electing Democrats to Republicans assuming similarly large majorities. Georgia and South Carolina are the only Deep South states that are also part of the Growth South. Although these states share common traits of economic and population expansions, they have exhibited significant differences in the behavior of their electorates in recent cycles, with Georgia becoming increasingly competitive but South Carolina Republicans achieving record state legislative supermajorities in 2024. These differences, along with the significant portion of their respective electorates comprised by Black voters, make Georgia and

South Carolina a strong fit for parallel case studies to tease out variation in the trajectory of Republicans across the South based on each state's demographic and population trends.

Of the three remaining Deep South states, although all are part of the Stagnant South, Louisiana was selected for a third case study because of the racial demographic similarities it shares with Georgia and South Carolina, in addition to parallels in its partisan trajectory. While Alabama and Mississippi both last supported a Democratic presidential nominee with Jimmy Carter in 1976, Louisiana cast its nine electoral votes for Bill Clinton in 1996 and elected Mary Landrieu to the U.S. Senate and John Bel Edwards as governor during the period of this study. These factors better position Louisiana for comparison with Georgia and South Carolina to analyze how the characteristics of the Deep South distinctly overlap with the patterns of growth and stagnation experienced in these states.

Nearly half (48%) of America's Black population resides in the South—a figure that remained consistent between 2010 to 2020—with approximately 22 of 47 million Black Americans living across these 11-states. As a percentage of the statewide population, the concentration of Black residents in Southern states ranges from 38% in Mississippi to 14% in Texas. The three states selected for case studies rank among the top 10 nationally in the percentage of their total population that is Black or African American as of 2022, including Louisiana and Georgia registering the 2nd and 3rd highest populations, both at 33 percent, and South Carolina in 6th with 27 percent (U.S. Census).

Bullock et al. (2024) illustrate the challenges Democrats have faced in meeting the 30-30 rule of thumb, where winning a majority in the Deep South is thought to require support from 30% of white voters and for Black voters to comprise 30% of the electorate. This threshold of white support is higher in Rim South states, at 35% in North Carolina and Virginia, where Black voters

comprise closer to 20% of the electorate (Bullock et al., 2024, 35). In this context, the three states selected for case studies share a common demographic profile. During the period covered by this study (2008 to 2024), non-white voters—comprised largely of Black residents—have exceeded 30% of those casting ballots in all three states at various points. Across the case studies and in Chapter Six, I analyze the instances in which two-party competition has approached these demographic thresholds, while also investigating how the diversification of the electorate affects winning demographic combinations in contests for governor, U.S. Senate, and the presidency.

As part of testing hypotheses H2, H3, H4, H7, and H8, all the case studies presented rely on data from the agencies administering state elections (2008 to 2024), analyzed in comparison to data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (2008 to 2024). These data are paired with exit poll figures from the National Election Pool (2008 to 2024) and elections analysis from *Fox News* (2018 to 2024). For election cycles where exit polls are not available, studies rely on data from Survey USA or leading state pollsters that offer the best available survey research.

To determine whether the results of this study are statistically significant, hypotheses H5 and H6 are tested for differences of proportions between the first and last cycle recorded. Across the three case studies and in Chapter Six, a one-tailed difference of proportions test is applied for each category of officeholders when a sufficient sample is available to check for significance at a 95% confidence interval (0.05). Generally, this means having at least 10 observations for each category.

Hypotheses H9 and H10 on racial and gender polarization among officeholders are evaluated using chi square tests of independence, administered in the three case studies and in Chapter Six after each election cycle for members of state general assemblies. These statistical analyses are presented at a 95% confidence interval to evaluate whether racial polarization has

increased by determining if the partisan affiliation of officeholders is associated with race or gender, and how the probabilities of electing Democrats and Republicans of different backgrounds have changed over the 16-year period of this study.

Finally, hypotheses H1, H1A, H1B, H11, H12, and H13 are tested through a historical and comparative approach that aims to present demographic trends in the electorate, commonalities that help to categorize where Republican officeholders stand politically, and observations that help to show how two-party political competition has developed over the period of this study. As appropriate, this presentation will cover political events that occurred prior to 2008 as part of testing hypotheses related to the orientation of Republican officeholders. For the nine election cycles included, I conduct an extensive review of state media publications, including *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *The State*, *The Post and Courier*, *The Advocate*, *The Times-Picayune*, and *The Associated Press*, alongside other coverage of candidates, elections, and government including an assortment of books, blogs, podcasts, and other publications.

Each case study is also informed by personal interviews, conducted by the author with elected officials, candidates, senior staffers, political operatives, and journalists. In total, over 100 interviews were conducted for this study between 2014 to 2025, with participants selected for their proximity to key political events and interviewed in the style of an oral history to capture their experiences and reflections. A listing of on-the-record interviews is included as Appendix A at the conclusion of this study. These personal interviews are utilized to capture the opinions of close political observers, while also offering unique insights that serve among the contributions of this study.

In recognition of the ways that political communications have changed, this study also is informed by an archive of more than 5,000 tweets that were issued by journalists, political

operatives, public figures, and elected officials. These communications, which were all publicly accessible at the time of their publication, were collected through an extended process of data gathering to help inform the narrative of each case study covering major electoral contests between 2008 to 2024. Political accounts on X (previously called Twitter) and Truth Social were also searched to verify political endorsements. I also make use of a composite of data compiled from other sources, including the Federal Election Commission, the U.S. Census Bureau, the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, public and private polling conducted between 2006-2024, the MIT Election Data and Science Lab (U.S. House), the American National Election Studies (ANES), the Cooperative Election Study (CES), *Ballotpedia*, *OpenSecrets*, *CNN*, *Pew Research Center*, and *Gallup*.

In the next chapter of this dissertation, I offer an extended literature review, which integrates established scholarship with contemporary publications to chart the development of two-party competition in the South, the development of the Southern Strategy from 1968 forward, the Southernization of the Republican Party, and the rise of Donald Trump in the context of contemporary electoral trends.⁵ For a more comprehensive view that builds on the three case studies, Chapter Six offers a broader analysis of the South and its role in national politics. There, I expound on this study's finding that Trump's power over the Republican Party was built on his ability to exploit fault lines created in the process of the Southernization of the national GOP. I conclude by reflecting on what the results of this study signal about the role of the South in the future of U.S. politics, governance, and democracy.

⁵ Laying the foundation central to GOP political fortunes for a half century, the Southern Strategy was pioneered in 1968 on behalf of Richard Nixon and evolved from the top-down to elect a generation of Republican presidents and down-ballot candidates by winning over disaffected white voters across the once-Democratic stronghold of the 11-state American South. Also see Maxwell and Shields (2019).

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

Over the past half century, the evolving political dynamics of voter choice in the South have helped to shape the racially polarized fault lines upon which contemporary two-party political competition is built nationally. In one sense, the South has long set the tone for the political identity of white, conservative voters that is now reflected more broadly nationwide (Abramowitz, 2018; Black & Black, 2002; Bullock et al., 2019; Bullock et al., 2024; Hood et al., 2012; Steed & Moreland, 2006). Alternatively, the identity of the South can equally be understood through the long-fought struggle for the promise of racial equity by Black Americans (Bullock et al., 2024; Bullock & Gaddie, 2016; Katznelson, 2005; Hood et al., 2012). In the contemporary context, Southern political identity has taken on another dimension of increasing diversity, as burgeoning metropolitan areas—and sprawling suburbs that extend into exurbs—have expanded in states across the Growth South (Bullock et al., 2019). This wave of development has occurred as the states of the Growth South became hubs of global economic activity. These economic and population trends have fueled considerable growth in the political participation of residents from more diverse backgrounds outside of the traditional Black-white dichotomy, led by Asian and Hispanic voters.

This literature review introduces the politics of the South and a roadmap of recent electoral trends. To set the stage for an extended exploration into the relationship of the Southern electorate to the Republican Party, the review presents an overview of the creation and development of the Southern Strategy that was pioneered by Richard Nixon and refined over subsequent generations

of political campaigns. Then, Donald Trump's rise as the leader of the Republican Party is charted through the lens of the South and an exploration of recent major political and social changes influencing voter choice. Finally, the review evaluates a trio of related forces shaping contemporary political trends: (1) race and diversification of the electorate, (2) the Southernization of the Republican Party, and (3) changes in how political polarization is reflected in American society.

The South played a key role in Donald Trump's political rise. His near sweep of the South—winning 10-of-11 primary contests and only losing Texas to Ted Cruz—helped to cement his status as the presumptive GOP nominee by mid-March of 2016. The Queens native also claimed his largest regional share of electoral votes (47%, 56%, and 48%) from the South in 2016, 2020, and 2024. In 2016, Trump won the Republican nomination by securing support from “the most racially resentful white voters in the primaries” (Bullock et al., 2019, 140). This finding is not surprising, given Trump's explicit appeals to racial resentment and his role in promoting “birther” conspiracy theories that cast doubt on whether Barack Obama was born in the United States. For several years, Trump's engagement in political affairs was largely limited to his leading role in contesting Obama's citizenship. These efforts prompted the 44th President to release his long-form birth certificate in 2011, before memorably mocking Trump's fixation on the issue at that year's White House Correspondent's Dinner (Holland & Stephenson, 2016).

In explaining the appeal of Trump's brand of politics, Bullock et al. (2019) suggest that “Perhaps racial resentment as a way of motivating white voting, which explained so well Wallace's surge in the South in 1968, is now a nationwide phenomenon whose Southern identity is barely remembered, like key lime pie or Waffle Houses” (p. 20). The notion of the disappearing political South—long characterized by the unique role of race—has been afoot since modern two-party

competition emerged in the region. As early as 1990, Steed, Moreland, and Baker submitted, that: “Even the foundation of Southern political identity, the race issue, is no longer as much a regional peculiarity as it once was,” citing “resigned acceptance” to school desegregation and the effects of the Voting Rights Act. However, as Bullock et al. (2019) write, “It is impossible to comprehend the fundamental changes in U.S. politics and government without examining their Southern roots” (20). This study’s hypotheses are strongly influenced by the scholarship put forward by Bullock et al. (2019, 2024) and challenge the notion of a disappearing Southern identity. Rather, I make the case that the Republican Party has undergone a process of Southernization, where the South’s influence on partisan politics has spread nationally, but uniquely emanates from what remains the nation’s most racially polarized region.

In *Movers and Stayers*, Irwin Morris argues that population changes driven by in-migration have eroded the traditional fabric of Southern politics, writing that “we must seriously reconsider whether or not ‘the South’ even exists” (2021, 185-186). Although this study’s hypotheses are presented in contrast to that notion, several aspects of the *Movers and Stayers* theory are important to the underlying hypotheses tested. At the foundation of Morris’ theory is the idea that population growth produces more progressive political environments, while population decline produces the opposite—particularly among white voters and in primarily white areas. Morris also argues that white voters who remain in “declining communities become more Republican and more conservative,” whereas white voters in “fast-growing communities become more progressive” (2021, 179).

Crucially, Morris captures the effects of in-migration and out-migration, providing an explanation for improving Democratic prospects among white voters in areas experiencing economic and population expansions. Those moving tend to be “younger, better educated, more

liberal... more likely to attach to the Democratic Party... [and] are more racially and ethnically diverse than non-movers” (Morris 2021, 179). These points provide a critical scholarly foundation for several hypotheses tested by this study—namely H11, H12, and H13, which hypothesize that Trump’s influence has helped his supporters gain the strongest foothold in the Stagnant South, while contributing to an increase in two-party political competition in the Growth South. Notwithstanding these points of alignment that support this study’s hypotheses, Morris’ conclusion that the unique legacy of race in the South is no longer a major factor in influencing regional and national politics does not comport with the observations recorded by this study. Rather, the Southernization of the Republican Party and the South’s role in contributing outsized influence on racial polarization at the national level, cannot be ignored.

Abramowitz argues that the causes of polarization are found in “dramatic changes in American society and culture that have divided the public into opposing camps,” and that “This growing division within the public expresses itself in many parallel rifts—racial and ethnic, religious, cultural, [and] geographic... [producing] an electorate that is increasingly mistrustful of anyone in the other camp” (Abramowitz, 2018, 2). Pointing to a close connection between economic and racial attitudes, Abramowitz finds that racial and ethnic resentment was the best predictor of support for Donald Trump in 2016, while pointing to a parallel phenomenon among Democrats, in which “the Democratic Party’s growing dependence on nonwhite voters has contributed to the flight of racially and economically conservative white voters to the GOP, further widening the racial divide between the party coalitions” (Ibid, 9). This finding is in alignment with Bullock et al. (2019) and Morris (2021) and provides support for this study’s objective of digging more deeply into the ways in which the unique—and changing—demographic composition of the South’s racially polarized electorate has influenced partisan outcomes in the contemporary era.

Evaluations of how different demographic groups vote is supported by data from exit polls and ecological inference (King et al., 2004).

In line with the theories put forward by these scholars, three overarching trends have occurred during the 16-year period evaluated by this study (2008 to 2024) that help to explain the connection between the contemporary South and national politics. This phenomenon is referred to herein as the “Southernization” of the Republican Party. The intersecting consequences of these three trends demonstrate why the field of Southern politics is more relevant than ever in the context of Trump’s remaking of the GOP and America’s arc of polarization in the contemporary era.

First, Republicans have built their national political coalition on outsized support from the South to win the presidency or secure majorities in Congress. As observed by Bullock et al. (2019), Morris (2021), and Hood and McKee (2022), Republican political power in officeholding peaked in most Southern states between 2010 and 2024. Second, Southern Democrats went from maintaining an overwhelmingly white (65% white, 26% Black), mostly male (88%) set of officials elected at the federal level in 2008 to seeing Black leaders grow to represent the plurality of Southern Democratic U.S. senators and members of Congress elected in 2024 (49% Black, 34% white,) while the share of women increased from 12% to 38%. Finally, as this transition was occurring within the Democratic Party’s ranks, a new generation of pro-Trump Republicans were elected to the region’s governorships, congressional seats, and state legislative posts. The combination of these shifts in the demographic and political identities of each state’s elected leaders further characterized Southern states as being uniquely reflective of the base of both parties, with race, gender, and education among the most polarizing factors—and representation frequently echoing trends in voter choice.

The first set of hypotheses tested (H1, H1A, and H1B) posit that, since 2016, the GOP has been reordered into factions that revolve around the degree of closeness that down ballot elected officials share with Donald Trump. Hypotheses H2 through H6 are designed to evaluate the extent to which racial and gender identities explain partisan coalitions, voter choice, and the composition of Congress and state legislative chambers. In line with the arguments put forward by Abramowitz (2018, 2019), hypotheses H7 through H10 evaluate whether racial and gender polarization has increased, both, in the electorate and among public officeholders. Finally, H11, H12, and H13 evaluate whether differences in two-party political competition have emerged between the states of the Growth South and Stagnant South since Trump took hold of the GOP.

TRACKING PARTISAN REALIGNMENT IN THE SOUTH AND THE SOUTHERN STRATEGY

Theories of partisan realignment can be traced back to a pair of articles authored by V.O. Key Jr., in the *Journal of Politics*, in which Key studied ballot patterns in New England and the Midwest (Key, 1955, 1959). In the decades since, scholars have studied survey data and election returns, while also conducting interviews and qualitative research, to provide assessments of partisan realignment using a variety of theories. These methods inform the qualitative research approach used to structure this study. Key presented two types of realignment, critical and secular, that are applied in the context of the South (Ibid). Critical realignments are caused by events that quickly redefine partisan lines and rearrange voter coalitions. Secular realignments occur slowly and develop over multiple election cycles.

When V.O. Key produced his seminal volume, *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (1949), the federal Republican elected officials representing the South numbered in the low single digits, while the Southern congressional delegation comprised a huge and somewhat ideologically

diverse cross section of the Democratic Party.⁶ As of January 2025, 99 out of 142 members of the House (70%) and 18 of 22 members (82%) of the Senate representing the South are Republicans. These margins were critical to the GOP's prospects of winning a majority in either chamber in 2024, as Republicans won just 41% of House seats (121 of 293) and 45% of Senate seats (35 of 78) outside of the 11-state South.

After beginning in presidential elections, realignment toward the Republican Party gradually spread down ballot (Black & Black, 2002; Bullock & Rozell, 2022). Understanding the background of Southern political realignment is critical to informing the hypotheses evaluated by this study, as well as the theory underpinning its broader research framework. Trends of realignment coincided with vast changes in the scope and role of the federal government that helped shape the platforms of both political parties in the subsequent decades. Ultimately, GOP gains peaked in most states across the South between the mid-2000s and early 2020s (Bullock & Rozell, 2022)—before setting the stage for a renewed era of two-party political competition in the Growth South.

Behind this sea change in representation is a broader trend of political realignment in which Republicans started by making inroads in presidential elections, with the first breakthrough coming when five-out-of-11 states opted to back Herbert Hoover over Al Smith in 1928 (Black & Black, 1992). By the late-1960's—in the aftermath of the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965—the South had shifted solidly outside the hold of the national Democratic Party. In the 1968 presidential election, Texas was the lone Southern state delivering a victory for Democratic presidential standard-bearer Hubert Humphrey, while five states awarded

⁶ In 1949, only two Republicans held seats in Congress representing the South, both from Tennessee: Dayton Phillips of the 1st District and John Jennings of the 2nd District; all 22 U.S. senators and 103 members of the U.S. House of Representatives were Democrats.

45 electoral votes to George Wallace (plus a single electoral vote from North Carolina) and another five cast 57 electoral votes to elect Richard Nixon as the 37th President of the United States.

Of the Republican Party's Southern Strategy, which has been operative in evolving forms since at-least 1964, Aistrup (1996) writes that it has been executed through a plan of "Republican top-down advancement." Under this model, "Once the party has built a successful presidential coalition in a state, it concentrates its resources to build winning coalitions at the lower levels of competition—contests for U.S. Senate, state gubernatorial offices, congressional seats, and, lastly, state legislature posts" (1996, 3). During the 1970s and 1980s, competitive down ballot victories secured by Democrats were often won due to an at-times fraught white-Black coalition of voters. Aistrup cites Bullock and Lamis (1981) in surmising, that "the trick for Democratic candidates in the 1970s and 1980s was to be conservative enough to obtain a sufficient percentage of white votes to add to their solid black support to achieve an electoral majority" (1996, 10). However, this balancing act became increasingly difficult as Democrats bled support from white voters in larger margins and with Black Democrats commanding a larger share of leadership posts in the party.

Lee Atwater, the South Carolina-born GOP political operative who carried forward the second generation of the Southern Strategy for the benefit of the Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush campaigns, was rewarded for his success with the chairmanship of the Republican National Committee (1989-91). Atwater was quoted explaining how the Southern strategy's tactics evolved in a 1981 interview with Alexander Lamis, which was initially published anonymously and later attributed to him after his death. He described that:

You start out in 1954 by saying "Nigger, nigger, nigger." By 1968 you can't say "nigger" – that hurts you, backfires. So you say stuff like, uh, forced busing, states' rights, and all that stuff, and you're getting so abstract. Now, you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is, blacks get hurt worse than whites... 'We want to cut this' is much more abstract than even the busing thing, uh, and a hell of a lot more abstract than "Nigger, nigger."

(Perlstein, 2012).

The 1964 predecessor to the Southern Strategy was referred to as “Operation Dixie” and featured South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond as Barry Goldwater’s Southern ambassador to capitalize on white racial anxiety (Maxwell & Shields, 2019). At a 1964 rally that drew a capacity crowd of 3,500 in Columbia, South Carolina, with Thurmond at his side, Goldwater delivered an outline of his civil rights platform. He described his values to the crowd, declaring “that compulsory integration was as bad as compulsory segregation, that freedom of association also meant the freedom not to associate, and that school children should not be transferred to schools outside their neighborhoods to correct racial imbalance in classrooms” (Middendorf, 2006, 212). Although this speech sent a clear message across the South, by 1968, a majority of non-Southern white adults had joined Southerners in opposing federally mandated integration of schools and jobs (Black & Black, 1987).

Four years later, Thurmond reportedly met with then-candidate Richard Nixon at an Atlanta motel and brokered a deal for his support in exchange for “benign neglect” from Nixon’s presidential administration on enforcing civil rights laws (Murphy & Gulliver, 1971). Thurmond’s support helped Nixon to buck a late challenge from Ronald Reagan, featuring overtures to white Southerners who had recently joined the Republican Party’s ranks as South Carolina’s senior senator did four years earlier. Scholars cite Nixon’s planks for “law and order” and the “war on drugs” as examples of racially coded appeals that helped deliver Southern white, suburban professionals to the Republican’s column (Maxwell & Shields, 2019).

At the time of Nixon’s victory, the South remained widely segregated through housing practices such as redlining that excluded Black residents from purchasing homes in certain neighborhoods—a phenomenon that was also reflected in school districts (Brown, 2021;

Katznelson, 2005). Over the next five decades, states across the South reckoned with issues related to their racially polarized history at varying paces and in different ways. For example, it was not until 2020 that Mississippi became the last state to phase out the use of the Confederate battle flag as its official state emblem, following South Carolina's removal of the Confederate flag from its Capitol grounds in 2015.

Securing down ballot control in Southern states required sustained efforts on behalf of the Republican Party's national apparatus to help seed state and local GOP efforts. In 1976, only 30% of Southern conservatives identified as Republicans and Jimmy Carter engineered a near electoral sweep of the South (Kalman, 2010). In 1984, as Ronald Reagan won the full 11-state South at the presidential level, Senate Democrats were reelected in Alabama, Georgia, and Louisiana (Black & Black, 1992). In 1994, Republicans won control of the U.S. House for the first time in 52-years, in part by winning a majority of seats in the South for the first time since Reconstruction, while also obtaining a majority of Senate seats and governor's offices.

The 1994 mid-term election also marked the first time that Republicans won a majority of congressional seats in both the North and the South since 1872 (Black & Black, 2002). In the years ahead, as its prospects worsened in the Northeast, the GOP's reliance on Southern electoral hegemony increased. After the 1994 elections, Georgia Democratic Representative Roy Rowland commented, "Moderate-conservative Democrats in the South are a dying breed, but I never thought the Republicans would become the majority party this fast" (Applebome, 1994). Twisting the knife, Rowland added: "My history pulls me to the Democrats, but I know if I were running as a young man now, I'd be running as a Republican, too" (Ibid). By 1996, under the leadership of Mississippi Senator Trent Lott, Republicans had won 70% of Senate seats from the South (Lamis, 1999).

Just before the turn of the twenty-first century, America entered a new political era, in which it is not only possible for both Democrats and Republicans to imagine leading the federal government with a trifecta (control of both legislative chambers and the executive branch), but one-party rule had become imperative to enacting anything resembling either party's governing agenda. During each president's first term in office, six consecutive American chief executives—from Bill Clinton (1992) to Donald Trump (2024)—have each governed, at least briefly, with majorities in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. This trend, which began with the 1992 presidential election, broke an 18-year drought of divided control over the federal government and denotes George W. Bush and Donald J. Trump as the only Republican presidents since Eisenhower to govern under one-party rule.

Under Trump's leadership, changes in the types of Republican candidates likely to win the GOP nomination in major contests have produced two distinct patterns of political competition that vary between the Stagnant States and the Growth States, but which together have a unique influence on the party at-large. This notion is tested as part of hypotheses H11, H12, and H13. In Growth States like Georgia, Democrats can win statewide by combining high turnout among Black voters with making in-roads among white women, voters living in suburban areas, Asian and Hispanic Americans, and those who are college educated. In Deep South states, this generally follows the model of a 30-30 coalition, in which Democrats obtain support from 30% of white voters and Black voters comprise 30% of the electorate. These figures may vary slightly among either white voters or Black voters, depending on the overall composition of the electorate. Hypothesis H2 explores this proposition further.

In Stagnant South states, more extreme crops of GOP candidates have claimed the reins of legislative majorities, governorships, and congressional posts. However, as in the Growth South,

it is possible for primary voters in Stagnant States to nominate statewide candidates who are unelectable in general elections, as Roy Moore of Alabama proved in 2017. Overall, the relative uniformity of the ideological profile of Republicans elected to represent the South in recent cycles—and particularly across the Stagnant States—has decidedly pushed the national GOP in the direction of the populist right and towards Trump, reflecting the preferences of the party’s Southern base.

The case studies presented in chapters three through five for the states of Georgia, South Carolina, and Louisiana, offer a more in-depth, narrative view of the intra-party changes experienced by Republicans during this period, in addition to exploring the resulting implications for two-party competition and governance at both the state and federal levels. The consequences of these shifts have significant implications for politics and governance nationally, as GOP electoral prospects remain dependent on registering strong margins across the South.

BLACK POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND CHANGES IN SOUTHERN DEMOCRATIC COALITIONS

The implementation of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA) vastly increased Black political participation and helped to democratize the South. For decades, the number of Black officeholders did not seriously rival white overrepresentation, with Black and Black writing “As in the past, the relevant political question is not whether whites or blacks will occupy most of the vital decision-making arenas in state government, but *which* whites will rule” (1987, p. 151). However, once the GOP achieved greater representation in state legislative chambers in the 1990s, Republicans and Black Democrats entered a “Faustian agreement” to create additional majority-minority legislative districts (Bullock, 1995). This redistricting process also “lessened the need of GOP candidates to moderate their conservative policy positions because the votes of white liberals

and moderates became increasingly marginalized as the percentage of blacks in the district declined” (Aistrup 1996, 11). As this process played out and racial polarization increased, Southern Democrats saw the party’s pool of elected officials at the state and federal levels become predominately Black.

In 2000, Alabama had the highest proportion of Black officeholders to the black portion of its Voting Age Population (VAP), at just over 70%, with the next closest state being Mississippi at 53% (Bullock & Gaddie, 2016). As of 2010, representation had improved significantly, particularly across state legislative seats, with an 11-state region-wide median level of 82% in state Houses and 71% in Senate seats (Ibid, 69). Bullock and Gaddie (2016) find that, by 2012, “The initial objective of the Voting Rights Act, to remove the barriers to African American participation, [had] unquestionably been achieved” (p.73). In fact, by 2024, the 76-member Georgia Legislative Black Caucus grew to comprise 74% of the 103 Democrats and 32% of the 236 members serving in the General Assembly, reflecting 98% of the state’s 33% Black VAP.

Despite these achievements, Republicans used the VRA to institutionalize racial differences by party across the states of the South through redistricting (Bullock, 2021). This process occurred alongside changes in the legal system prompted by Supreme Court rulings, such as in *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013), which struck down the preclearance requirement imposed on nine of 11 Southern states. The trends observed in this section lay the foundation for the series of hypotheses tested by H2, H3, H5, H7, and H9, which together assess the evolving effects of racial polarization on voter choice and among officeholders.

The implementation of the VRA and the growth in Southern Republicanism follow a similar trendline, which have intersected through the process of redistricting and the creation of majority Black districts that also serve to dilute Democratic electoral prospects (Bullock, 2021).

Hood et al. argue, “that the engines of Southern Republican growth over the last sixty years were (1) the waning usefulness of the Democratic Party for the procurement of political and economic resources and the expression of white racial conservatism, and (2) the increasing electoral viability of GOP candidates in the South” (2012, 65). As Republicans positioned themselves as the party of white Southerners, an increasing share of voters and down ballot elected officials grew to perceive Democrats as the party of Black voters, increasing racial polarization even further (Bullock et al., 2024; Hood, 2012). However, despite these headwinds, “Mobilized black voters combined with a sufficient minority of white voters can prevail in Southern elections, even in support of black candidates” (Bullock & Gaddie, 2016, 93). Georgia Senator Raphael Warnock’s successful 2021 and 2022 campaigns demonstrate how this coalition can operate in practice, in which winning support from 29% of white voters in both cycles, with Black voters comprising between 27% to 30% of the electorate, produced an electoral majority (National Election Pool, 2021, 2022B; Georgia Secretary of State, 2021, 2022).

Then-Georgia House minority leader, Stacey Abrams, called the practice of strategically creating more majority-minority districts “suppression by inclusion” and warned that the GOP was systematically “purging the state of Georgia of white Democrats” on their way to claiming the first Republican legislative supermajority in 2014 (Sheinin, 2011). Indeed, by 2024, 76 out of 103 Democratic members elected to Georgia’s General Assembly were Black (74%), up from 53 of 97 Democrats in 2008 (55%). At the federal level, Democrats moved from electing 66 out of 153 members of the U.S. House and Senate (43%) representing the 11-state South in 2008—with 17 Black members (26%) from the region—to electing 47 out of 164 members (29%) in 2024, with 23 members (49%) serving as part of the Congressional Black Caucus. On the other hand, in 2024, just 16 Southern Democrats (34%) elected to the House (13) or Senate (three) were non-Hispanic

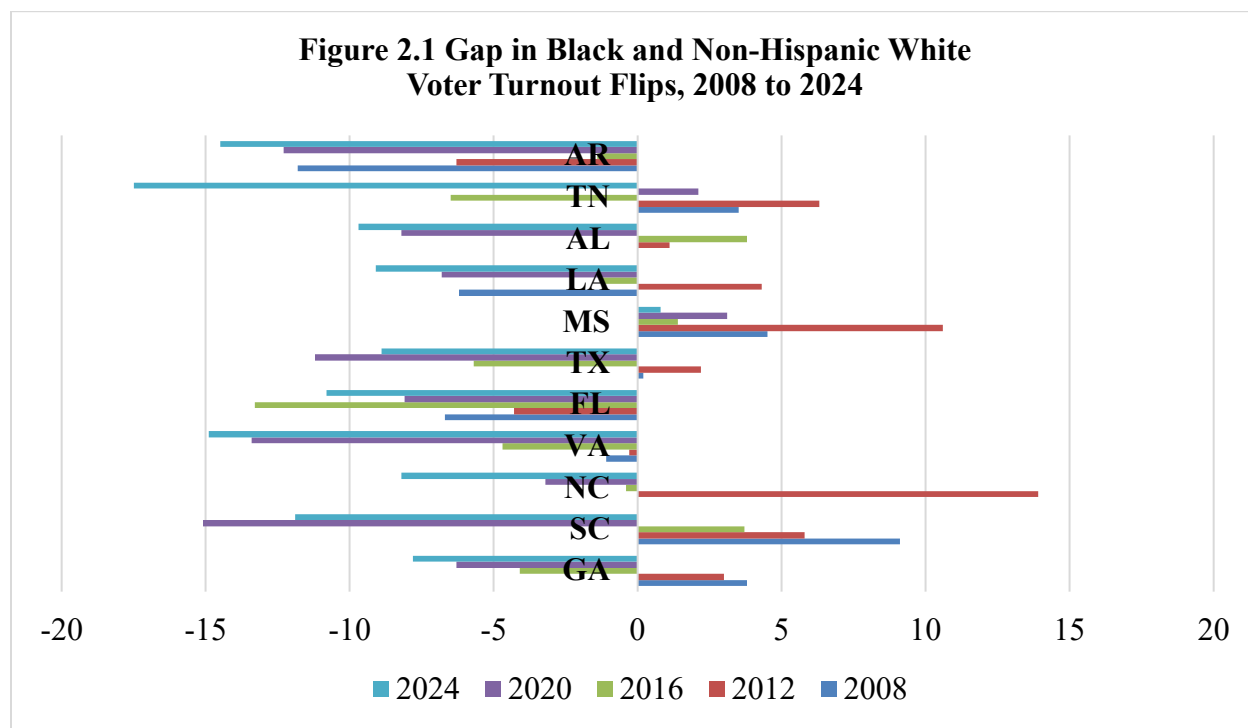
white, down from 43 (65%) non-Hispanic white Southern Democrats elected to serve in the House (38) and Senate (five) after the 2008 elections.

At the state legislative level—in the three states selected for case studies (Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina)—Democrats elected 246 of 548 members (45%) in 2008, with 119 Black Democratic legislators (48%). By 2024, the party was down to 193 seats (35%), with 145 (75%) Black Democrats serving. Democratic women also moved from holding 60 House and Senate seats (24%) in these three states after the 2008 election to 83 seats (43%) in 2024. During the same period, movement toward gender parity for Republicans was more muted, going from 29 women (10%) elected to general assemblies to 54 (15%).

Between 2008 to 2024, the South experienced a significant shift as white voter turnout surged and Black turnout decreased from Obama era levels. Figure 2.1 charts how turnout among white and Black voters has compared in recent presidential election cycles. In 2008, white voters cast ballots at higher rates in five out of 11 states. Although turnout among Black voters exceeded non-Hispanic white turnout in all but three Southern states in 2012, the 2016 presidential election cycle saw reported Black turnout drop in 10 out of 11 states, with Arkansas being the only exception (U.S. Census).

By 2020, turnout among white voters exceeded that of Black voters in nine out of 11 states. In South Carolina, Black voters went from holding a 3.7 percentage-point advantage in turnout rates in 2016 to a deficit of 15.1 percentage points in 2020, as the gap with non-Hispanic White voters also reached double-digits in Virginia and Texas. Even as turnout among Black voters increased in states like Georgia, going from 60% to 64%, this change was dwarfed by a larger six percentage point increase in turnout among white voters from 64% to 70%. By 2024, Mississippi

was the only Southern state where turnout among Black voters (71%) exceeded that of non-Hispanic white voters (70%) (U.S. Census).



Source: Graphic modeled from Bullock and Gaddie (2016); data compiled from U.S. Census Bureau post-election surveys of registration and turnout, 2008 to 2024. A positive value indicates turnout among Black voters exceeds that of white registered voters.

Nevertheless, between 2010 and 2024, all states in the South have seen the percentage of the population that identifies as white alone (non-Hispanic or Latino) drop by between two to seven percentage points, while most states have seen their percentage of Black residents remain relatively flat or increase. According to national exit polls, from 2008 to 2024 white voters have generally supported GOP presidential candidates by a margin of +12 to +20, while reliably voting in favor of Republican House candidates by margins of between plus-eight and +22 (National Election Pool, 2008A, 2024). Alternatively, during the same time frame, Black voters supported Democratic presidential candidates by overwhelming margins between +72 to +91, while similarly backing House candidates with huge majorities in recent years.

Nationally, as white voters decreased as a share of the electorate for presidential races, dropping from 74% in 2008 to 66% in 2020, exit polls have also reported a slight uptick in support for Republicans among Black voters, with margins over the same period for Democratic House candidates dropping from +88 to +75-percentage points (Ibid). In 2024, the share of white voters increased by five percentage points from 2020 to comprise 71% of the national electorate, while Kamala Harris won Black voters by a margin of 73-percentage points. The combination of increased turnout among white voters and a reduced Democratic margin among non-white voters helped to create the conditions necessary for Trump's 2024 comeback victory.

Bullock et al. (2024) chart political change in the South from the enfranchisement of the Black electorate to the current status of Black voters as “the essential element in the Democratic coalition” (23). The authors trace back theories of how various combinations of Black and white support could achieve a successful electoral coalition to Earl and Merle Black's *Politics and Society in the South* (1987). At that time, with the South's transition at an earlier stage, Black and Black concluded that if Black voters represented 20% of the electorate, Democrats would need to attract 40.1% of support from white voters to achieve a majority (1987, 141). In 1996 and 1998, Democrats Roy Barnes and Max Cleland were elected to Georgia's governorship and U.S. Senate seat with 37% of support from white voters, as Black voters made up between 21% to 23% of ballots cast in those elections. By 2008, once Black voters crossed the threshold of comprising 30% of the electorate in Georgia for the first time, “the rule of thumb was that a Democrat needed more than 35% of the White vote along with strong Black support” (Bullock et al., 2024, 32).

More recently, Bullock et al. have put forward that the marker for victory “in states like Georgia in which Blacks constitute a quarter or more of the population is that to win a Democrat needs a 30-30 election,” where the candidate obtains approximately 30% of support from white

voters and Black voters cast about 30% of overall ballots (2024, 32). This study follows the standard and methods used by Bullock et al. (2024, 32-33)—relying primarily on exit polls and data from state election offices—in assessing the partisan outcomes of elections between 2008 to 2024. By incorporating further analysis in elections for president, U.S. Senate, and governorships, across the three states selected for case studies (Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina), which could all viably meet the conditions for a 30-30 election during the period assessed based on each state’s demographics, this study expands on the examples offered by these authors.

Hypothesis H2 applies this framework to each general election cycle evaluated by this study between 2008 to 2024 to test whether Democratic candidates can meet the minima of a 30-30 election, and if such a coalition is sufficient for victory. Importantly, although the 30-30 standard is applied in testing H2, this study also considers the possibility that strong turnout and support for Democrats among Asian and Hispanic voters could lower the 30-30 threshold slightly. Bullock (2022) identifies this possibility in Georgia, writing that “as the state’s electorate becomes more diverse, 29-29 suffices.” The examples cited by Bullock (2022) in Georgia indicate that high turnout from Asian and Hispanic voters—particularly when these groups cumulatively reach or exceed five percent of the electorate—can support a path to a Democratic majority in cases when either white support or Black turnout drop below 30%.

Notwithstanding the continued importance of the traditional Black-white dichotomy of Southern politics, the Growth States of the South constitute a new, more complex battleground where Hispanics, Asian Americans, people of mixed ethnic backgrounds, and newer immigrants have registered steady gains to claim a larger share of the electorate. It is in these states, and through the decisions made by this more diverse electorate, that national political questions are likely to be decided in future election cycles (Bullock et al., 2019; Bullock et al., 2024; Bullock &

Hood, 2006; Bullock & Hood, 2021). As the number of newly eligible voters increases across the Growth South, Republicans face challenges from two groups of voters that stand in the way of maintaining the South solidly in the GOP column: suburban white voters and non-white Southerners—significant swaths of the electorate which have been regularly alienated by extreme GOP positions on divisive issues in recent years (Hood & McKee, 2022). This proposition is more thoroughly evaluated in the context of the Growth South and Stagnant South as part of testing hypotheses H11, H12, and H13 in Chapter Six.

THE CHANGING POLITICS OF RACE AND IDENTITY

American society is undergirded by historical racial divides that are essential to understanding the divergent strategies employed by the nation's dominant political parties to achieve electoral majorities (Brown, 2021; Katznelson, 2005). Just as Key observed decades ago, the roots of America's racial divide emanate from the South—where about half of America's Black population now resides. In recent cycles, the Trump-led GOP has motivated lower propensity white voters by tapping into issues of racial anxiety and cultural resentment (Abramowitz, 2018; Sides et al., 2017). This strategic approach gradually gained an edge to overtake messaging more palatable to the business community and a class of fiscally minded Republicans who saw their influence peak from the 1980s through the mid-2000s (Alberta, 2019, 2023).

Crucially, Trump captured support from Republicans in these disparate factions during his general election victories in 2016 and 2024 by both catering to racial anxiety and carrying the banner for traditional GOP principles on issues such as tax cuts and the economy (Fabian et al., 2020; Pelley, 2024). The synopsis offered in the following paragraphs informs hypotheses H1, H1A, and H1B on distinctions between the partisan identity among elected Republicans and lays a foundation for an exploration into racial and gender divisions within the contemporary

Democratic coalition (H2, H3, H4, H5, and H6). This section also establishes a framework for this study's hypotheses that test whether racial polarization has grown in the electorate (H7) and among officeholders (H9), which is presented relative to changes in gender polarization (H8 and H10).

Nationwide, during the 16-year period of this study, the share of white non-Hispanic voters supporting Democratic candidates for president dipped slightly from a peak of 45% in 2008 to 42% in 2024 (National Election Pool, 2008A, 2024). In 2012, Mitt Romney registered the best performance of any presidential candidate in the contemporary era when he won 59% of white voters nationally. At the congressional level, the recent high mark for Republicans is 60% from white voters, which was reached in 2010, 2014, and 2016.

In recent cycles, *Fox News* has conducted exit surveys in all 50 states. Although the data were first published in 2018, limiting the possibility of evaluating earlier cycles, this data set serves as a useful measure to compare how support for Trump has varied between white and non-white voters by state. To provide a comprehensive assessment between 2008 and 2024, each case study also evaluates a broader array of data sources to capture cycles over the full 16-year period.

Table 2.1 South Leads Racial Polarization Nationally, 2020-2024								
State	Share of White Support (GOP Candidate 2024)	Rank (of 50 States)	Share of White Support (GOP candidate (2020)	Rank (of 50 States)	Gap b/w white and non-white voters (2024)	Rank (of 50 States)	Gap b/w white and non-white voters (2020)	Rank (of 50 states)
Alabama	80%	#2	78%	#2	55	#3	63	#2
Arkansas	70%	#8	71%	#4	38	#10	51	#6
Florida	64%	#15	61%	#17	22	#23	29	#22
Georgia	70%	#8	69%	#7	49	#5	55	#4
Louisiana	79%	#3	77%	#3	56	#2	59	#3
Mississippi	82%	#1	81%	#1	61	#1	73	#1
North Carolina	63%	#19	61%	#17	43	#7	43	#8
South Carolina	73%	#4	69%	#7	52	#4	54	#5
Tennessee	72%	#6	69%	#7	48	#6	51	#6
Texas	65%	#14	67%	#11	23	#22	36	#11
Virginia	54%	#33	52%	#32	31	#14	31	#19
National Avg.	56%	#29	55%	#25	24	#21	30	#21
<i>Source: Fox News Voter Analysis, 2020-2024, compiled by author.</i>								

Table 2.1 demonstrates that, through the 2020 and 2024 presidential elections, racial polarization was observed most strongly in the South. In both 2020 and 2024, eight of the 10 most racially polarized states were in the South. In 2020, Florida was the only Southern state with a slightly narrower gap than the national average of 30-percentage points between white and non-white voters in votes cast for Trump. In 2024, Florida and Texas were the only Southern states with narrower gaps than the national average of 24-percentage points.

In 2020, a majority of white voters cast ballots for Trump in 33 states, as compared to 37 states in 2024. All 11-states of the South were among this group in both cycles. However, the level

of support for Trump among Southern white voters is uniquely high, as shown in Table 2.1, which ranks each state in comparison to all 50 states.

In both 2020 and 2024, seven out of 11 Southern states ranked among the top 10 nationally in the share of ballots cast by white voters that went for Trump. As shown in Table 2.1, all five states of the Deep South ranked as the top five most racially polarized states in both the 2020 and 2024 presidential election, and all these states also ranked in the top 10 states nationally for the percentage of white residents casting ballots for Trump. A clear distinction also emerges when comparing the non-Southern states that are also among the top 10. In 2024, this group included North Dakota, West Virginia, and Wyoming, which all had electorates where white voters comprised at least 94% of those casting ballots. This contrasts with the 11 Southern states, which all had considerably more diverse electorates. In both 2020 and 2024, all three states selected for case studies ranked among the top 10 nationally in terms of the percentage of white voters casting ballots for Trump and among the top five states with the highest levels of racial polarization between white and non-white voters.

This discussion is also offered in response to claims from Morris (2021) that the relationship “between black context and white political behavior... is no longer a central aspect of Southern politics” (p. 185). This notion is in direct opposition to the central theory put forward by this dissertation—both in terms of explaining the continued growth in the political standing of Republicans in states like Louisiana and South Carolina, and with respect to the distinct role that race continues to maintain in the politics of the South at-large. On the issue of race, this research is informed by Bullock et al. (2019, 2024), who demonstrate that a reverse phenomenon has occurred, whereby the Southernization of the national Republican party has made the politics of

race appear more commonplace outside of the South, as the national GOP has increasingly embraced the ideology of its Southern conservative base.

Sides et al. (2018, p.172) identify a pattern, in which “whites’ attitudes about race, ethnicity, and religion came to play a larger role in 2016 than other recent elections,” echoing similar findings from Grossman and Thaler (2018). Mutz (2018) finds alignment with Trump’s views on trade and China to be a more powerful driver of the candidate’s 2016 support than pocketbook economic issues. In this vein, the 2016 election represents “an effort by members of already dominant groups to assure their continued dominance,” coming in response to “Both growing domestic racial diversity and globalization [which] contributed to a sense that white Americans are under siege by these engines of change” (Mutz 2018,10). Criticizing Trump during the 2016 primary, GOP strategist Patrick Ruffini channeled the frustrations of more traditional Republicans, tweeting “All of Trump’s actions are straight from the radicalization playbook. I don’t think it’s a stretch to compare his tactics to jihadists” (Ruffini, 2016).

After Trump became the nation’s de facto leader for speaking to the cause of white racial anxiety, the May 2020 murder of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis ushered in a cultural shift that brought forward an acute focus on issues of race in America’s national debate. Floyd’s death, in addition to a series of high-profile killings of Black Americans such as Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia, inspired a series of mass protests across the nation and prompted a range of progressive leaders to rally behind the Black Lives Matter movement. After his defeat in 2020, part of Trump’s successful strategy in 2024 was to capitalize on complacency among white voters and people of color alike who perceived the Democratic Party as drifting too far to the left. Many of these voters also perceived the increased focus on race as ineffective in bringing about positive social change (Horowitz et al., 2023).

Trump’s expression of nostalgia for Southern racism and use of incendiary language to tap into white racial resentment and anxiety over changes in American culture has been extensively documented (Baker & Glasser, 2022; Haberman, 2022). In one such instance demonstrating his penchant for wielding the cultural issue du jour, Trump took on the movement championed by former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick, which encouraged players to kneel during the national anthem in protest of racial injustice. Standing on stage at an Alabama rally in support of Senator Luther Strange—who later lost the GOP nomination to Roy Moore—the 45th President paraphrased his trademark tagline from *The Apprentice*, gradually raising his voice until he was yelling: “Wouldn’t you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, ‘Get that son of a bitch off the field right now. Out! He’s fired. He’s fired!’” (Graham, 2017).

The pro-Trump senator from Alabama, former Auburn University football coach Tommy Tuberville, attracted controversy in 2023 when he claimed: “the thing about being a white nationalist is [it’s] just a cover word for the Democrats now where they can use it to try to make people mad across the country—identity politics... my opinion of a white nationalist—if somebody wants to call them a white nationalist—to me is an American” (Collins, 2023). After his remarks were roundly condemned by his colleagues, the senior Alabama senator relented that white nationalists are in fact racists (Wagner, 2023). Tuberville’s remarks were reminiscent of even more inflammatory comments made by former Iowa Rep. Steve King—who later lost a 2020 GOP primary to thwart his bid for a 10th term in Congress—when he posed the question, “White nationalist, white supremacist, Western civilization – how did that language become offensive?” (Gabriel, 2019).

In 2002, Judis and Teixeira released *The Emerging Democratic Majority*, which argued that the nation's changing economy, demographic make-up, and ideological leanings favored Democrats in future elections. The authors posited that, at the national level, "all else being equal, Democrats can be assured of beginning an election campaign at a distinct victory" (Judis & Teixeira, 2002, 71). Although the book helped to popularize the notion that "demographics are destiny" for the vastly more diverse Democratic Party to eventually relegate the Republican Party to the status of a permanent electoral minority, Teixeira later reflected that, "one thing we didn't really emphasize enough – it was in the book, but people totally ignored it – was the idea that you've got to have a very strong level of white working-class support... If there was a sort of underpinning, it was that the Democrats had to retain the loyalties of a very significant segment of the white working-class voters" (Niskanen Center, 2023).

To emphasize that point and reckon with the challenges faced by Democrats in holding their multiracial coalition together, Judis and Teixeira followed their first volume up two decades later with, *Where Have All the Democrats Gone?* Turning their focus to answering why Democrats fell short of their forecast, the authors summarize that, "In recent years, elections have increasingly been decided by which party can make the other party's radical extremes or the politicians who represent those extremes the main issue" (2023, p. 9). In this vein, Judis and Teixeira point out that, "over the last decades, Democrats have steadily lost the allegiance of 'everyday Americans'—the working and middle-class voters that were at the core of the New Deal Coalition. Initially, most of these voters were white, but in the last elections, Democrats have begun to lose support among Latino and Asian working-class voters as well" (Ibid, p. 5). Although the underlying issues are numerous and reflect overall perceptions of the party, the authors describe how Democrats lost support from working-class voters on issues of international trade, immigration, climate change,

use of the courts and regulations to enforce the party's moral and cultural agenda, and support for movements that leveraged protests of American traditions, such as the national anthem, to call out injustices. Indeed, many of these clashes arose due to what the authors refer to as the "Great Divide" in American politics, in which educational and geographic polarization saw huge swaths of the nation alienated from the Democratic Party.

In the post-Obama era, from 2016 forward, mainstream Democrats shifted to make the party's most explicit appeals on racial equity and social issues since the Civil Rights Movement, meeting a new coalition of voters where the party's former stalwarts were previously unwilling to engage (Abrams, 2019, 2020; Martin & Burns, 2022). After the 2020 killing of George Floyd and a wave of national protests in response to police brutality, calls for racial equity increased substantially among Democrats. On some occasions, these proposals, such as those to "defund" police departments, became a fixture of Republican political campaigns to capitalize on racial anxiety among white voters (Nichols & Swan, 2021). Just as the response among Republicans and the right-leaning political ecosystem to the election and presidency of Barack Obama helped create an ideal environment to foster his successful campaign for the GOP nomination and the presidency in 2016, Trump only further stoked the wave of racial anxiety unleashed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In June of 2020, as demonstrations were held across the nation, a record 67% of Americans expressed support for the Black Lives Matter movement, including 60% of white adults, 86% of Black adults, 77% of Hispanic Americans, and 75% of Asian Americans (Parker et al., 2020). Further, as part of the same *Pew Research* survey, 48% of Americans responded that Trump had made race relations worse, including 42% of white adults, 68% of Black adults, 62% of Asian Americans, and 55% of Hispanic Americans. By 2023, *Pew* found that a slim majority of just 51%

of Americans expressed support for Black Lives Matter, including 42% of white adults, 81% of Black adults, 63% of Asian Americans, and 61% of Hispanic Americans. Moreover, 59% of those who identified as Republicans and 40% of white adults overall saw the movement as “dangerous and divisive” (Horowitz et al., 2023). Even more concerning for its proponents, 61% of respondents viewed the movement as being ineffective in improving race relations, while 57% saw it as ineffective in improving the lives of Black people (Ibid). Although these data offer just a snapshot of changing public attitudes on race, developments between 2020 and 2024 help to explain how public opinion shifted between the end of Trump’s first term in 2020 and his successful reelection in 2024.

In the aftermath of Donald Trump’s 2020 and 2024 campaigns, in which Republicans made significant gains with Hispanic and Asian Americans, while notching more modest improvements with Black voters, it has become a popular line of commentary to theorize that voters are less polarized by race and, therefore, issues of race are of decreasing importance to Trump’s appeal and in American politics at large (Leonhardt, 2024; Stephanopoulos, 2024). On the contrary, Sides and Tesler (2024) note that this assumption fails to distinguish between racial polarization and polarization on racial issues. These scholars argue that “While American politics may now be less polarized *by* race, it is more polarized *about* race” (Ibid).

Relying on descriptive claims to demonstrate that people of color with conservative attitudes on race have shifted away from the Democratic Party—Sides and Tesler (2024) offer evidence that even as “the electorate became less polarized in terms of race, it became *more* polarized in terms of racial attitudes.” As the correlation between racial attitudes and political ideology has become stronger among both white voters and people of color, issues of race have become more politically salient (Ibid). This research provides important context that informs

hypotheses H7, H8, H9, and H10, which contend that racial and gender polarization have increased in the electorate and among the ranks of public officeholders.

Moreover, in assessing post-election surveys in the aftermath of the 2024 general election and characterizations of a racial realignment and a broader diversification of the GOP, Sides (2024) finds that shifts among Black and Latino voters follow similar trends that have already occurred among white voters as part of an ideological and identity-based sorting of the electorate. Further, Sides (2024) makes the case that “the parties are simultaneously changing and staying the same,” meaning that these changes are not in line with traditional notions of realignment as defined by V.O. Key, in which the identity of parties or their long-term electoral prospects undergo significant shifts. Rather, the changes attributed to race are better explained by ideological sorting and changing perceptions of social and political identities in the contemporary era. Although the developments observed between 2016 and 2024 may portend a marginal shift in the demographic composition of party coalitions—which is tested as part of H2, H3, H4, H5, and H6 in this study—Sides (2024) argues that these changes “will create neither long-term control for either party nor much of a shift in policy.”

Overall, as measured annually by *Gallup*, the ideological gap between Democrats and Republicans reached a record high in 2024. Between 2008 and 2024, the percentage of Americans identifying as very conservative/conservative remained static at 37%, while the percentage identifying as very liberal/liberal increased from 22% to 25%, and the percentage identifying as moderate dipped slightly from 37% to 34% (Brenan, 2025). During this period, the Democratic Party has noticeably shifted to the left, as the share of Democrats identifying as very liberal/liberal increased from 38% in 2008 to 55% in 2024 (Ibid). On the other side of the aisle, a similar—albeit

less dramatic—shift has occurred among Republicans as the share identifying as very conservative/conservative has increased from 70% to 77% over the same period (Ibid).

Beyond notions of realignment between the parties, a clear ideological divide has grown between white Democrats and people of color, dating back to 1994 when there was relative ideological parity between white, Black, and Hispanic Democrats. In 1994, among those who identified as Democrats, 26% of white adults described their political views as very liberal or liberal, in comparison to 22% of Black adults, and 23% of Hispanic adults (Saad, 2023). By 2022, 63% of white Democrats described their political beliefs as very liberal or liberal, in comparison to 39% of Black Democrats, and 41% of Hispanic Democrats (Ibid).

Survey data suggest that, in recent years, white progressives have become increasingly likely to express viewpoints at odds with a significant share of Black and Hispanic Americans. A recent *Pew Research* analysis of Democratic political coalitions divided Democrats into four groups to distinguish cleavages between liberal typologies: the Progressive Left, Establishment Liberals, Democratic Mainstays, and the Outsider Left (2021). The most liberal group, the Progressive Left, represents about 12% of Democrats and those who lean toward Democrats. This is also the group with the largest concentration of white non-Hispanic Americans, at 68%, in contrast to “the three other Democratic-oriented groups” which are all “no more than about half White non-Hispanic” (Ibid).

On the other hand, about 40% of Black Democrats 28% of Hispanic Democrats identified most closely with Democratic Mainstays, who were “considerably more likely than other groups to call themselves politically moderate” (Ibid). These Democratic Mainstays make up the largest share of the Democratic coalition, at 28% overall. About 75% of the Progressive Left expressed strong support for the Black Lives Matter movement, in contrast to about 44% of Democratic

Mainstays (Ibid). Further, 71% of the Progressive Left expressed support for the view that most U.S. laws and major institutions need to be rebuilt to overcome biases against racial and ethnic groups, in contrast to just 38% of Democratic Mainstays and 29% of Establishment Liberals. Just seven percent of the Progressive Left identified illegal immigration as a very big problem, while 33% of Democratic Mainstays saw it as such (Ibid). These data echo findings from Judis and Teixeira (2023) on the Democratic Party's slide in popularity with working-class voters.

SOUTHERN STYLE POPULISM

Writing on how Trump has transformed the GOP at large, Howell and Moe describe that,

To the discomfort of traditional Republican elites, [the party] has become the political home for racists and authoritarians; and with the rise of Donald Trump and populism—which thrives on racism and authoritarianism—even its more orthodox officeholders are profoundly influenced by, and beholden to, its populist base. The Republican Party is now *the* organized means by which populism in America finds expression and exercises power (2020, p. 16).

This study relies on the definition of populism put forward by Howell and Moe, in which “The essence of populism is a rhetorical framing of democratic politics as an apocalyptic battle of ‘the people’ against ‘the system’” (2020, p. 8) Under this construct, “‘the people’ – which consists of not everyone, but of an angry segment of the population anointed by its populist leader as the embodiment of the nation’s heritage and identity (e.g, white Christians) – is upheld as the sole legitimate source of political authority, with the leader channeling and innately knowing its interests and demands” (Ibid, p. 9). On the other side of the equation, “‘The system is essentially the entire status quo: its democratic institutions, the elected representatives and bureaucrats and experts in charge, the established political parties, and the mainstream media – all of which are castigated as corrupt, unresponsive, morally reprehensible, and democratically illegitimate” (Ibid).

As part of a broader argument for recrafting the presidency, Howell and Moe submit that, “ineffective government has allowed anger and anxiety to grow, fueling political support for

populist appeals” (Ibid, p. 17). Looking ahead, the authors posit that, “The socioeconomic forces driving populism cannot be stopped, and will continue long after Trump has left the scene” (Ibid). These scholars provide a theoretical grounding for hypotheses H1, H1A, and H1B, which are operationalized, in part, to facilitate an exploration into how contemporary American populism has manifested in the GOP with Trump as its leading conduit.

The case studies offered in chapters three through five seek to illuminate the ways the intra-GOP divide has appeared in primary and general election campaigns between 2008 and 2024. Each case study tracks the evolution of the GOP from the party of George W. Bush, John McCain, and Mitt Romney to the rise of the Tea Party through the party’s turn towards Trump in 2016 and the solidification of his standing as the unquestioned leader of the GOP by 2024. Within this framework, this study seeks to offer a roadmap for how changes in Republican politics developed through the heart of the South, as well as the resulting political implications for the nation at large.

Maxwell and Shields (2019) write that “‘Southern White Privilege’ became the new lost cause for which many were willing to go down fighting,” symbolic of an era in which “Jobs, promotions, loans—all were easier for Southern whites to get, free of competition from an entire oppressed portion of the population who had been denied equal access to education, indeed to everything” (p. 11). Such was the genesis for a genre of messaging about the role of government, built on notions about the dependence of certain groups on public benefits and their deservingness. These narratives took center stage in the Newt Gingrich-led Contract with America platform and contributed to bipartisan agreement over welfare reform in the 1990s, which set the tone for decades of state and federal safety net policies and introduced the modern concept of “work requirements” as a condition for receiving public benefits (Zelizer, 2020). Work requirements have

since remained a core tenant of conservative social policy proposals for everything from food assistance (SNAP) to Medicaid.

Simultaneously, from the Reagan era forward, the Republican Party set forward on a course of championing both enhanced defense spending and sweeping tax cuts, which contributed to increased deficits and heightened pressure to reduce spending (Iwan, 2009). In the years since, media reports have noted that Republicans are “trying to convince their members, and the American public, that you can take in less money (taxes), spend more on defense – and somehow reduce deficits without touching the programs that cost the most” (VandeHei & Allen, 2025). South Carolina Senator Tim Scott encapsulated the inherent incongruence of the GOP’s pledge to both cut taxes and reduce the nation’s debt in a 2023 pitch to GOP primary voters, saying “What we know is the Laffer Curve still works. The lower the tax, the higher the revenue” (Michel, 2023). This claim prompted even the conservative-leaning Cato Institute to publish an article referencing Scott’s “confusion” and refreshing the think tank’s qualified support for the hypothesis from economist Art Laffer, who argued that in certain scenarios revenue could increase even as tax rates fall.

Analyzing the base of the contemporary Republican Party, Grossman and Hopkins (2016) highlight the increasing importance of conservative self-identity as a driving force in GOP politics, pointing to the rise of the Tea Party in 2009 as “an electorally potent mobilization of populist sentiment on the American right” that took aim at both national Democrats and incumbent Republicans deemed insufficiently loyal to the base (3). While Democrats are more likely to view politics through the lens of coalitions and to rally around the benefits of compromise to achieve shared interests, “Republican voters commonly identify as conservatives, conceptualize political choices in ideological terms, view the parties as divided by broad principles, voice support for

politicians who reject compromise in order to remain true to their beliefs, and demand a broad shift in the ideological direction of public policy” (Grossman & Hopkins, 2016, 18). In this vein, then-GOP presidential nominee Mitt Romney was roundly mocked after declaring himself “severely conservative” in February of 2012 as evidence of his fitness to serve as leader of the Tea Party influenced Republican Party (Farenthold, 2012).

Using a 2020 survey of preferences among rural and urban white Southerners, Hood and McKee (2022) demonstrate that the Republican Party’s focus on culture wars caters most to the preferences of rural whites, “who are significantly more in favor of banning abortion no matter the context, building a wall to keep out interlopers at America’s Southern border, believe that the Confederate flag is symbolic of Southern pride (not racial conflict), and are much more adamant in their embrace and defense of the Second Amendment” (p. 218). Further, 2019 ANES thermometer ratings on the standing of the 44th and 45th Presidents, coupled with 2020 survey data, show that “a goodly portion of [Small Town South] whites view Obama as the Antichrist and Trump as the Second Coming” (Hood & McKee, 2022, 261).

Maxwell and Shields (2019) also point out that in the contemporary political environment “whiteness itself relies on such political cues for meaning,” which is “most often and easily accomplished by contrasting whiteness to what it is not—by promoting the gap between white and other” (p. 68). In this respect, non-white Republican candidates have tended to perform similarly to white Republicans among non-white voters, while sometimes picking up increased support from white voters (Bullock et al., 2024; Maxwell & Shields, 2019). More broadly, this point also demonstrates the importance of representation and assessing the demographic makeup of Democrats relative to Republicans as part of testing hypotheses H5 and H9.

In describing Trump’s overwhelming victory in the 2024 GOP primary, his co-campaign manager, Chris LaCivita, cited two major events. First came Trump’s visit to East Palestine, Ohio, in February of 2023 during the aftermath of a toxic train derailment, where the former president described the scene as being “met with indifference and betrayal” as he appeared with his future running mate, JD Vance (Colvin & Seewer, 2023). LaCivita described that, “it was after that visit that we saw our first substantial separation in our primary numbers... literally, we saw our numbers just pop after that because it sort of reminded people what it was about Trump that they liked” (Axelrod, 2024). The second flashpoint came shortly thereafter, in March of 2023, when Trump was indicted in New York on 34 felony counts of falsifying business records related to hush money payments distributed to adult film actress Stormy Daniels ahead of the 2016 election. LaCivita compared the indictment to “rocket fuel,” saying “our numbers went through the roof” and that the charges “helped a lot” to rally the party in support of Trump (Ibid).

Even after his 2020 loss, Trump’s connection to the white working class received considerable attention as part of internal strategic deliberations within the House GOP Conference. Then-chairman of the Republican Study Committee, Jim Banks—who later won election to represent Indiana in the U.S. Senate with Trump’s endorsement—authored a 2021 memo, titled “Cementing GOP as the Working-Class Party” (Swan, 2021). In it, Banks argued that “The vast majority of the Republican conference doesn’t want a return to a GOP-era that neglects working class voters,” despite “an embittered and loud minority in the GOP that finds our new coalition distasteful” (Ibid). After making the case for a policy agenda derived largely from Trump’s campaign planks on immigration, trade, “anti-wokeness,” “main street versus wall street,” and anti-big tech policies, Banks shared his view on the political battle ahead for populist-minded Republicans:

The Democrat Party today is more vulnerable than it's been in modern history. Democrats' agenda is now shaped entirely by corporate interests and radical, elite cultural mores, but they still rely on many blue-collar voters. Democrats rely on labor votes but support open-border policies that undercut American workers. They rely on Christian Hispanic voters but want to repeal the Hyde Amendment. After their push to "Defund the Police" the murder rate jumped more in a single year than it has in U.S. history, and urban, poor, blue areas were hardest hit. The Republican Party's electorate grew over the past five years, because President Trump drew working-class voters in, and Democrat elitism drove them away (Swan, 2021).

One of the clearest demonstrations of the GOP's shift toward populism over longstanding policy preferences can be seen by comparing the party's 2016 platform to 2024. Moreover, where the platform rewritten by Trump for 2024 illuminates his imprint on the GOP, the decision by Republican leaders to not write a platform for 2020 was just as reveling. As described by Whit Ayres, Trump has single-handedly redefined the way Republicans express their political ideology to the point that, now:

Very conservative means you're Trumpy. That's all. It doesn't have any policy connotations to it at all. How do we know that? Because the 2020 Republican [National] Convention refused to adopt a platform with any policy preferences because they might in some way disagree with whatever Donald Trump believes at the moment.

So, there is no policy component to that ideological distribution of the Republican Party. Right now, it's are you mainly a supporter of Donald Trump? Or are you mainly a supporter of the Republican Party? And if you're mainly a supporter of Donald Trump, you're very conservative and if you're mainly a supporter of the Republican Party, you're somewhat conservative. And those are the two factions. (Ayres, 2024A).

Four years later, in 2024, Trump cemented the GOP's new platform in writing, and with it, formalized the party's turn toward populism with a promise to "MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!" and a dedication "To the Forgotten Men and Women of America" (Sentner, 2024). Whereas the 2016 Republican platform included 35 references to "abortion," the 2024 platform named it just once. Replacing the 2016 promise for a federal ban on abortion at 20 weeks was a promise to "oppose Late Term Abortion, while supporting mothers and policies that advance Prenatal Care, access to Birth Control, and IVF (fertility treatments)" (Ibid). Absent from the 2024

platform was a single reference to the national debt. Instead, the GOP promised an “America First Economic Agenda” with five pillars: “Slashing Regulations, cutting taxes, securing Fair Trade Deals, ensuring Reliable and Abundant Low Cost Energy, and championing Innovation” (Ibid). After the 2016 platform defined marriage as “between one man and one woman,” the 2024 platform removed this reference and was led by a pledge to “End Left-wing Gender Insanity” and to “keep men out of women’s sports” (Ibid). On immigration, the party’s earlier pledge to build a wall was supercharged, now promising to “Begin [the] Largest Deportation Program in American History” (Ibid).

The first days of Trump’s second term marked a sharp contrast from his first term, led by a flurry of executive actions that fit squarely within the definition of populism offered by Howell and Moe (2020) and that further clarified the governing philosophy of the contemporary GOP. These actions can be categorized in three primary areas that parallel areas, in which down ballot Republicans have drawn their rhetorical and policy focus to align with Trump: (1) immigration, (2) race and identity politics, and (3) managing the fallout from the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol. As part of testing H1, H1A, and H1B—to assess how the larger Republican Party has been recast in Trump’s image—this study draws a particular focus on how related issues have manifested in primary and general election campaigns in the states selected for case studies and South-wide between 2020 and 2024.

When Trump launched his first presidential bid in June of 2015, the statement from his opening speech that attracted the most attention was a populist appeal for new restrictions on immigration. After descending an escalator at Trump Tower, he declared: “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending the best... They’re bringing drugs, they’re bringing crime. They’re rapists, and some, I assume, are good people” (Gamboa, 2015). Trump’s first executive actions in

2025 included: declaring a national emergency at the Mexico border, designating cartels as terrorist organizations and announcing that he would target them under the Alien Enemies Act of 1798, suspending resettlements under the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, reinstating the “Remain in Mexico” policy to prevent asylum seekers from entering the U.S. while their cases were being processed, authorizing officials to “repeal, repatriate, or remove any alien engaged in the invasion” of the nation’s southern border, and attempting to end birthright citizenship for children born to “unlawfully present” or temporary resident parents (Lotz, 2025).

Trump’s relatively simplistic messaging on immigration, from his calls to “build the wall” to his advocacy for the largest deportation operation in American history, were offered in contrast to a less clear position from Democrats. Reporter Benjy Sarlin reflected that during the Obama era, immigration debates were largely focused on “what to do with people who came from Mexico to work years earlier,” with “the longtime bipartisan idea [being] more border security plus an earned path to citizenship” (Sarlin, 2025). However, as the issue morphed to encompass “a new wave of asylum seekers from outside Mexico,” the immigration debate became dominated by “a totally different issue that existing immigration reform ideas did not really address” (Ibid). In contrast to Trump’s calls for mass deportations, which most Republicans embraced, “Democrats never figured out what a similar framework should be for that issue and they still haven’t. Saying you want people to come legally or you want more border security does not address what you do about them” (Ibid).

Furthermore, when Joe Biden said that “undocumented immigrants need to ‘get in line’” he was met with “widespread criticism from immigrant rights activists, some of whom said... [he was] echoing ‘Republican talking points’ on how migrants are admitted to the United States” (Caputo & Korecki, 2019). Former Obama staffer and host of the popular political podcast, *Pod*

Save America, Jon Favreau reflected that, “Democrats had a very popular message and policy on immigration. But thanks to a small group of activists who never represented most Latinos or immigrants,” Biden was met with intra-party pushback that contributed to unpopular policy changes under his administration (Favreau, 2025). In December of 2024, *The New York Times* reported that, “Total net migration during the Biden administration is likely to exceed eight million people,” with “About 60% of immigrants who have entered the country since 2021 [doing so] without legal authorization” (Leonhardt & Sun, 2024). Although several causes contributed to the surge of illegal immigration, the authors concluded that “the Biden administration’s policy appears to have been the biggest factor,” evidenced by the fact that “the number of people crossing the border plummeted” after Biden rolled back earlier changes made by this administration (Ibid).

Prior to his swearing in, Trump’s incoming Deputy Chief of Policy Stephen Miller warned, “Everything in the world is gonna change on January 20th because the president of the United States is going to use every single legal, diplomatic, and financial tool to halt the entry of all illegal aliens into this country. There will be no benefits, there will be no entry, there will be no asylum, there will be no admission. You may be prosecuted, you will certainly be arrested, and you will absolutely be deported” (Rupar, 2024D). Trump’s decision to deliver on Miller’s promises to fellow immigration hardliner and *Fox News* host Laura Ingram only represented part of the sea change ushered after his 2024 victory.

The first bill passed by Congress and signed by Trump in January of 2025 was the Laken Riley Act. The legislation, sponsored by Georgia Congressman Mike Collins, was named after the 22-year-old University Georgia student who was murdered by an undocumented immigrant in February of 2024. On the same day as Trump’s inauguration, 12 U.S. Senate Democrats (26%), including three-of-four Democrats representing Southern states (Ossoff, Warnock, and Warner)

voted in favor of the Laken Riley Act to enforce harsher punishments for undocumented immigrants charged with criminal offenses (McIntire, 2025). In the House, 46 Democrats (21%) joined all 217 Republicans in supporting the bill, including 10 Southern Democrats (23%).

Another set of Trump's initial second term executive actions sought to formalize his campaign rhetoric on race and gender identity. Trump declared that "it is the policy of the United States to recognize two sexes, male and female" and rescinded a Biden order allowing transgender Americans to serve in the military (Lotz, 2025). Further, Trump ordered all "government diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives" to be dismantled within 60 days and signed another order requiring all executive departments and agencies to end preferential hiring practices, including revoking President Lyndon Johnson's Equal Employment Opportunity Order of 1965 (Ibid). White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt described that these orders "should come as no surprise," and cast them as an effort to "return America to a merit based society" and as "another win for Americans of all races, religions, and creeds" (Alcindor, 2025).

Perhaps the most controversial day-one executive action taken by Trump was to issue sweeping pardons for almost all the 1,500+ people charged and convicted in connection with the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol. While 14 people received commutations instead of full pardons, Trump's order granted clemency to all those who were criminally convicted. The president cast his decision as rectifying a "grave national injustice that has been perpetrated upon the American people over the last four years and begins a process of national reconciliation," marking a sharp turn from four-years earlier when Trump's standing within the GOP briefly appeared in question (Johnson et al., 2025).

In the immediate aftermath of the January 6th attack, several of Trump's appointees resigned, including Secretary of Transportation Elaine Chao, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos,

Vos, and former interim White House Chief of Staff and then-special envoy to Northern Ireland Mick Mulvaney. The *Wall Street Journal* editorial board wrote that Trump had “cost Republicans the House, the White House, and now the Senate. Worse, he has betrayed his loyal supporters by lying to them about the election and the ability of Congress and Mr. Pence to overturn it” and concluded that “It is best for everyone, himself included, if he goes away quietly” (2021).

Then-GOP Leader Kevin McCarthy joined in the condemnation, saying: “The president bears responsibility for Wednesday’s attack on Congress by mob rioters” (Sykes, 2022). Republican Senate Leader Mitch McConnell went further, declaring on the Senate floor that,

January 6th was a disgrace. American citizens attacked their own government. They used terrorism to try to stop a specific piece of democratic business they did not like... They stormed the Senate floor. They tried to hunt down the Speaker of the House. They built gallows and chanted about murdering the Vice President... They did this because they had been fed wild falsehoods by the most powerful man on Earth – because he was angry he’d lost an election (CNN, 2021).

Despite these condemnations, as well as remarks from Vice President JD Vance just days earlier that, “if you committed violence on that day, obviously you shouldn’t be pardoned,” Trump’s pledge to release those implicated in the events of January 6th was a mainstay of his 2024 campaign and became one of his day-one oval office priorities (*Associated Press*, 2025).

Although Democrats widely condemned his decision, including Georgia Senator Jon Ossoff who called it a “disgraceful pardon of more than 1,000 criminals, many of them violent, who overran the U.S. Capitol, desecrated the seat of our democracy, and assaulted law enforcement in their failed attempt to prevent the peaceful of power,” it was met with a muted reaction from incumbent Republican officeholders (Ossoff, 2025). Even Senator Lindsey Graham, who offered rare pushback to Trump when he said that he thought that, “when you pardon people who attack police officers you’re sending the wrong signal to the public at large,” balanced that criticism by acknowledging, “but he has that power... [and he] at least said ‘I’m going to do this’” during his

2024 campaign (*State of the Union*, 2025). Indeed, from the days after the attack in 2021 through his 2025 inauguration, the events of January 6th offer a textbook example of how Trump has wielded populism to overwhelm traditional notions of conservatism, while pressuring down ballot Republicans to fall in line.

EVANGELICALS AND CULTURAL CONSERVATIVES FLOCK TO THE GOP

The movement that began with the Moral Majority founded by Jerry Falwell, Sr., in 1979, rapidly expanded after Falwell’s group claimed credit for swaying the 1980 election against Jimmy Carter by turning his fellow evangelicals against him. Historian Randall Balmer traces the origins of the religious right’s political rise to conservative frustration boiling over after the IRS took punitive action against schools engaging in racial segregation—including in 1976 by revoking the tax status of Bob Jones University, an evangelical college in Greenville, South Carolina (Balmer, 2014). Speaking at an August 1980 rally in Dallas, Reagan referenced the issue, castigating the “unconstitutional regulatory agenda” carried out by the IRS “against independent schools” (Ibid).

During the Reagan era, the Christian Right grew to encompass a vast ecosystem with evangelical involvement in a variety of conservative priorities from anti-abortion policy to public education to crime and public safety (Bullock & Rozell, 2022; Maxwell & Shields, 2019). The agendas promoted by these groups sometimes involves the use of public resources, such as tax exemptions and vouchers for private education, or applying the force of law to advance policy goals resembling edicts from an evangelical interpretation of the Bible. In this vein, Louisiana Governor Jeff Landry signed legislation in 2024 to mandate the placement of the 10 Commandments in public school classrooms—prompting an immediate legal challenge.

Between 2008 and 2022, white evangelical Christians comprised 24% to 28% of the national electorate, while reliably supporting Republican candidates by margins of 50+ percentage points (National Election Pool, 2008A, 2022A). In 2020, evangelical voters netted Trump a raw margin of 14.5 percentage points in the national popular vote, while Black voters contributed 9.75 percentage points to Biden's net margin (National Election Pool, 2020A). In 2024, although turnout among both groups dipped slightly, Trump's support among white evangelicals increased slightly from 76% to 82%, while Harris' share among Black voters was essentially unchanged from Biden's at 86% (National Election Pool, 2024). These figures demonstrate the relative strength of white evangelicals as a core element of the contemporary national Republican base, ranking second only to Black voters in their cohesion as a major voting bloc based on demographic characteristics alone (Bullock et al., 2022, 92).

In 2014, the *Pew Research Center* conducted the most comprehensive religious landscape study of its kind, surveying more than 35,000 Americans from all 50 states. The study found that 71% of Americans identified as Christian, with evangelical Protestants making up the largest overall religious cohort at 25.4% of the adult population (*Pew Research Center*, 2014). The South registered as the nation's most evangelical region, with 10 out of 11 states—all but Florida—outpacing the national average in their share of evangelical Protestants. Averaging 37% of the population across the full region, the South was led by Tennessee at 52%, followed by Alabama at 49%, and Arkansas at 46%. The states selected for case studies hewed closer to the regional average, with Georgia at 38%, South Carolina at 35%, and Louisiana at 27%. Six Southern states ranked in the top 10 nationally, joined by four other states with similar demographic profiles, including Kentucky at 49%, Oklahoma at 47%, West Virginia at 39%, and Missouri at 36%.

In 2021, recognizing the pivotal role of White evangelical Protestants in electing Trump, the *Pew Research Center* explored how that phenomenon would affect perceptions from inside the denomination, asking: “Would there be an exodus from the church on the part of those who do not share their fellow evangelicals’ enthusiasm for the former president?” (Smith, 2021). On the contrary, the study found “solid evidence that White Americans who viewed Trump favorably and did *not* identify as evangelicals in 2016 were much more likely than White Trump skeptics to *begin identifying as* born-again or evangelical Protestants by 2020” (Ibid). Beginning in 2016, about 25% of white, non-Hispanic adults identified as evangelical in 2016. By 2020, that figure was up to 29%, with approximately two percent of white adults discontinuing their affiliation and six percent entering the group—for a net increase of four percentage points (Ibid).

When the Supreme Court’s 2022 decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* reversed the constitutional protections for abortion rights previously enshrined under *Row v. Wade* (1973), a seismic shift was ushered in for Republicans. For the first time, policymakers were forced to reckon with the real-world implications of implementing their stated preferences of outlawing abortion in all or most cases after achieving the cornerstone priority championed for four decades by the Christian Right. Individual state case studies featured in subsequent chapters examine the unique effects of the *Dobbs* decision in Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina, while evaluating evidence of the electoral consequences of making abortion policy a state-level issue.

These assessments contribute to testing hypotheses H4, H6, H8, and H10 to evaluate whether gender polarization has increased within the electorate and among elected officials after these states effectively enacted bans on abortion led by an overwhelmingly male set of political leaders. In addition to affecting the availability of abortion services, these laws have also had

downstream effects on access to women's health care services, which could contribute to reduced levels of GOP support among women. To this end, the national debate over abortion policy did not end with the *Dobbs* decision. Rather, scholars have found that the *Dobbs* decision "incited a new struggle over what abortion entails, and both abortion supporters and opponents will contend with whether recent bans include fertility services or specific contraceptives as well as how bans apply when patients face medical emergencies" (Rebouché & Ziegler, 2023).

Although white evangelicals have remained steady as a significant bloc of the electorate during the 16-year period of this study, what it means to practice fellowship as an evangelical has developed along with other societal trends. *New York Times* columnist David French, who is an evangelical Christian, described the state of affairs in 2023. French writes that: "About half of self-identified evangelicals now attend church monthly or less often. They have religious zeal, but they lack religious community. So they find their band of brothers and sisters in the Trump movement" (French, 2023).

Tim Alberta explores this phenomenon in *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory* (2023), recounting his own experience as the son of a Presbyterian pastor as part of a national investigation into how conservative Christians have blended theology with politics in the contemporary era. Alberta describes that "To some evangelicals, the purpose of the Church is to 'own the libs' with an aggressive, identitarian conservatism. They might cloak their ambitions with biblical language—like Ralph Reed at his Faith and Freedom conferences or Charlie Kirk at his flag-waving sanctuary symposiums—but that façade isn't sustainable" (2023, 432-433). Surmising that, "Many right-wing pastors simply cannot stomach the notion of their churches being accountable to secular actors—legal bodies, law enforcement agencies, media outlets—because their vision for Christianity is one of absolute supremacy," Alberta arrives at a foundational

explanation for what is driving increased political engagement from evangelical leaders (433). In this respect, Alberta concludes that, “The Church, in their view, answers to no one but God; but they are the authority to which *the rest of culture* must answer... This effort to assert dominance over culture is a precondition for dominating the country itself” (Ibid).

The reverence for Trump from evangelical leaders was lifted to even greater heights after an assassination attempt in July of 2024 resulted in a bullet grazing Trump’s left ear, coming within centimeters of what would have likely been a fatal shot. Trump himself credited divine intervention, writing on social media that “it was God alone who prevented the unthinkable from happening” (Trump, 2024). Around the nation, evangelical pastors echoed this sentiment. For example, in Georgia, Pastor Jentezen Franklin of Free Chapel shared a prayer with his congregation, thanking God and saying, “You preserved [Trump’s] life, and you don’t preserve anything you don’t have a purpose for” (Fertig & Rivard, 2024).

Trump’s populist rhetoric, along with his penchant for attracting political and legal controversy, have endeared him to the evangelical right. During the 2024 general election campaign, Trump followed a speech to a crowd of evangelicals at a Powder Springs church with a rally where he referred to voters who don’t support him as “Nazi” and called Harris “a fascist” (Bluestein & Mitchell, 2024). Indeed, by building his political brand around highly polarizing identity-based appeals, Trump found a common cause with a wide swath of leaders on the evangelical right. As Alberta writes, “More than any figure in American history, the forty-fifth president transformed *evangelical* from spiritual signifier into political punch line, exposing the selective morality and ethical inconsistency and rank hypocrisy that had for so long lurked in the subconscious of the movement” (2023, p. 438).

FROM TALK RADIO TO SOCIAL MEDIA: SHAPING AMERICA'S POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Cultural conservatives initially built power by helping to carve out the frontier of political broadcast television and radio in the 1980s, with pioneers such as Bob Grant, Neal Boortz, and Rush Limbaugh becoming leading talk radio personalities. These media figures were aided by Reagan's presidency and administration, which laid the groundwork for exponential growth in political media during the decades ahead. Helping to open the floodgates for conservative talk radio, in 1987 the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) repealed the "fairness doctrine," which had required broadcast television and radio stations to present both sides of controversial political topics for nearly four decades (Rosenwald, 2019). That same year, after establishing the Christian Broadcasting Network in 1960, Pat Robertson founded the Christian Coalition, which served as a political springboard to vault the televangelist over sitting Vice President George H.W. Bush in the 1988 Iowa presidential caucus before his campaign faltered in New Hampshire and South Carolina (Kornacki, 2018).

Another major policy change that paved the way for the growth of the conservative media landscape was the passage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, which accelerated a process of consolidation by eliminating the national cap limiting any company from owning more than 40 stations. By 2002, 67% of radio revenues were controlled by 10 companies (Rosenwald, 2019, 109). The early 2000s saw a new generation of conservative media stars created through nationally syndicated talk radio programs, a domain that in the 1990s was exclusively held by Rush Limbaugh. Several of these syndicated voices became active participants in reshaping the Republican Party over the next two decades, including Sean Hannity, Laura Ingraham, Glenn Beck, Michael Savage, Dennis Prager, and Bill O'Reilly. Rosenwald (2019) charts the ways in

which conservative media turned against the Republican establishment during this period—in service of maximizing profitability by providing the most compelling entertainment possible—writing:

On the whole, talk radio was supportive of the GOP when it held unified control of government from January to May 2001 and from 2003 to 2007... The alliance solidified again during President Barack Obama’s first two years in office...

But the cooperation evaporated almost as soon as Republicans regained the House in 2010. Once again hosts proved uncompromising, excoriating Republican leaders for purportedly surrendering to Obama’s demands. Ignoring the basic realities of divided government, talk radio fueled a sense among conservative voters that elected Republicans were sniveling cowards who could have delivered on their promises had they just fought harder (113-114).

Between 2004 to 2006, Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005), Reddit (2005), and Twitter (2006) were launched; and in 2007, the iPhone 1 was released. When Facebook’s news feed debuted in 2006, 11% of Americans were on social media, with between two and four percent using Facebook (Fisher, 2022, 23). By 2014, nearly two-thirds of Americans were active on social networks, with Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter taking hold as national leaders and upstart media companies like Snapchat, Twitch, Discord, and others followed behind with their own multibillion dollar valuations. Fisher finds that, in 2014, “For the first time, the 200 million Americans with an active Facebook account spent, on average, more time on the platform (40 minutes per day) than they did socializing in person (38 minutes)” and “by the Summer of 2016, nearly 70% of Americans used Facebook-owned platforms, averaging fifty minutes per day” (2022, 23). In the years since, these trends have only continued to accelerate, promoting the rise of a stable of conservative personalities—from Steve Bannon to Candace Owens to Charlie Kirk—who thrive by engaging users to consume a steady stream of lifestyle and political entertainment in an era where social interaction is otherwise decreasing.

New forms of media—such as podcasts, streaming, and the seemingly-infinite reaches of the internet—have vastly expanded the offerings available to Americans interested in political entertainment and news, while dismantling the hold previously possessed by just a few major networks. Now spread across a disparate network of digital platforms, these technology companies act more as hosts to a vast array of programming and personalities than curators of content—deploying highly sophisticated algorithms intended to keep users engaged (Fisher, 2022).

Further, the development of the conservative digital ecosystem has added new pressure on traditional media outlets, as more brash upstarts have tapped into new streams of advertising revenue by catering to more extreme factions of the Republican Party. After *Fox News* reached a \$787 million settlement with Dominion Voting Systems over defamation claims related to claims of a stolen 2020 election, Tucker Carlson exited the network to find offers in excess of \$20 million annually—more than he was paid at Fox—from right-wing media companies Rumble and Newsmax (Allen, 2023). Ultimately, Carlson struck a deal with Elon Musk to move his show to Twitter, the network acquired by the billionaire in 2022 and later renamed X. Trump’s second term also offered a shake-up to the media ecosystem in the White House Press Corps, as *Newsmax* and *The Blaze* were added to the press pool in 2025 to replace *The Associated Press* and *Reuters*.

As the GOP morphed into the party of Trump and voters jettisoned establishment Republican leaders, one of the only constants was the staying power of a handful of Republican media personalities such as Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity, who played outsized roles in stoking the ire of the GOP base. About three-weeks after the 2020 presidential election—and well after media outlets called the election for Joe Biden—a caller into the *Rush Limbaugh Show*, who identified himself as a Georgia voter, demonstrated a window into the devotion of some GOP base

voters to Trump over the Republican Party. The exchange also reveals the role conservative media personalities like Limbaugh played as intermediaries between GOP voters and Trump:

Caller: They should be very afraid, very afraid. Trump and you are all we have left, Rush. We spent our lives voting for these people because they're not them. And we just can't do it anymore. We're tired of being stabbed in the back, Rush. It's better to have an enemy that's in front of you than a friend that's behind you that's just gonna stab you. They do it every time. We have a Republican controlled state and they won't do an audit of the vote. They won't! They just basically told every Georgian that they don't care! We were in Washington on Saturday. Me and my 32-year-old son. We saw more people than we've ever seen in our lifetimes. Ever!... I have never seen so many people. But were there any Republicans there? No! None. None!

Rush Limbaugh (confused): Wait, wait, wait. What? There were no Republicans? What was this thing that you went to?

Caller: A week ago Saturday in Washington DC. MAGA Rally. There must have been hundreds of thousands of people.

Rush Limbaugh: Okay, it's a MAGA rally and there were no... you mean no elected Republicans, is that what you mean?

Caller: Yes, I do. Our party "leadership." If this were a Democrat Rally, they would all be there. They were there for the anti-Tea Party movement walking hand-in-hand up the steps. No one stands for us, Rush! Only you and Donald Trump! God forbid. What do we have left? I love my president. I am not a revolutionary, Rush. But I will die for my president. This man has given more to this country than anybody and he has no need to. None. He's a billionaire. He doesn't need this.

Rush Limbaugh: That's exactly right. (Whitehouse, 2020).

Limbaugh's exchange demonstrates the desire of Americans with extreme political views to have those views validated by their sources of news and information. This is especially relevant in an era of decentralized information, where approximately one third of American adults regularly get most of their news from Facebook and YouTube (*Pew Research Center, 2024*). Further, in the aftermath of Trump's 2024 general election victory, Facebook's parent company, Meta, cited a "shifting political and social landscape and a desire to embrace free speech" in announcing a series of policy changes (*Horvath et al., 2025*). In addition to ending its fact checking program, the

company changed “its content moderation policies around political topics and [undid] changes that reduced the amount of political content in user feeds” (Ibid).

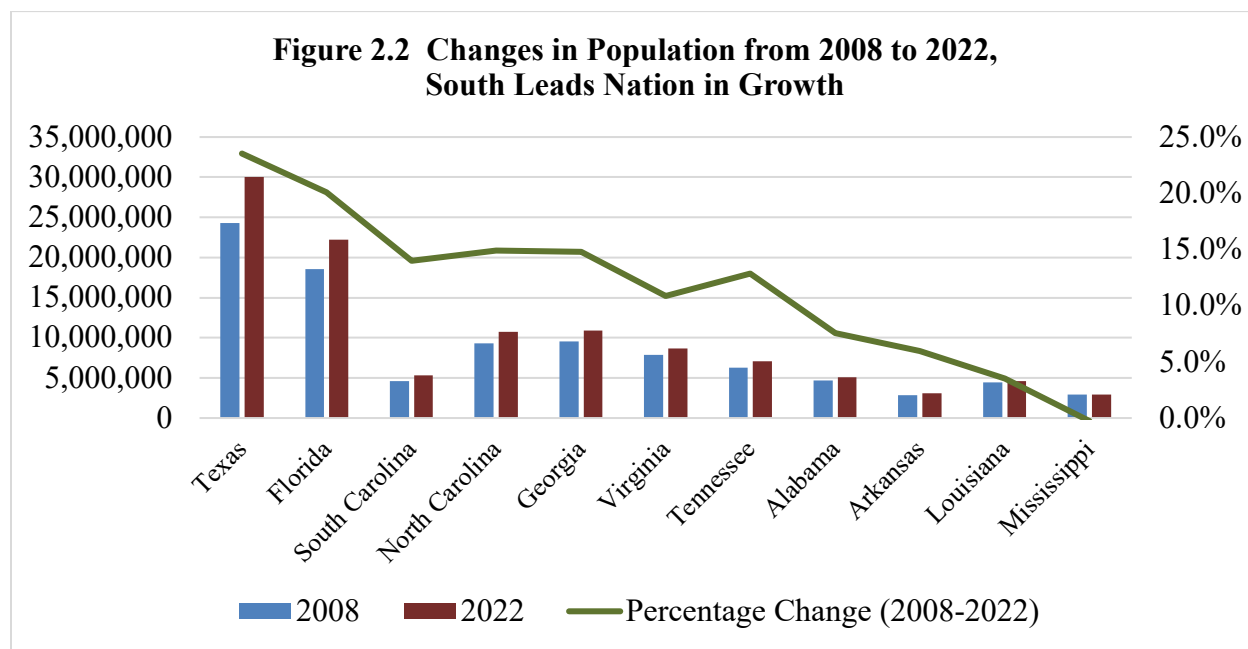
As social media has assumed a more prominent role in defining American society and culture, a recent *Pew Research Center* study found that public opinion on social media among U.S. adults differs considerably from that of citizens of other advanced economies (Wike et al., 2022). Across 19 advanced economies, about 35% of citizens in the median nation said that social media has been more of a bad thing than a good thing for democracy (Ibid). Further, about 46% of respondents outside of the U.S. expressed the opinion that the internet and social media has made people less civil in the way they talk about politics (Ibid). For both questions, the U.S. was a considerable outlier globally, with 65% of respondents identifying social media as more of a bad thing for democracy and 69% of respondents expressing that it has made political discourse less civil (Ibid).

Although not explicitly incorporated into this study’s hypotheses, the effects of social media are present throughout the three case studies and strongly inform the ways that contemporary political discourse unfolds. From the point he entered electoral politics, Trump has been a leading user of social media, taking to online platforms to issue endorsements, policy announcements, and to regularly inform the news cycle. In this vein, a significant contingent of other leaders followed his model, alongside media figures, and other political actors. Thoroughly exploring contemporary political trends, therefore, requires at least a cursory understanding of how social media informs polarization, discourse, and support or opposition to political actors. Furthermore, this overview demonstrates the ways that social media platforms follow broader changes in how Americans—and Republicans in particular—receive information and engage

politically, from the talk radio era to the advent of cable news to the present day. As such, this study incorporates a variety of citations derived from social media platforms.

GROWTH IN THE SOLIDLY REPUBLICAN SOUTH SETS THE STAGE FOR A NEW DYNAMIC

As a region, the 11-state South has grown to comprise approximately one-third of the United States population as of 2022, significantly outpacing the nation’s population growth to add 15.3 million residents since 2008 (16.1% overall growth compared to 9.6% nationally). Of these newly-minted Southerners, the vast majority—approximately 13.8 million—flocked to the six Growth South states. In presidential elections, the South punches slightly below its weight in terms of population. Overall, the region held slightly less than 30% of 538 electoral votes and supplied between 31-32% of the popular vote in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. As of 2024, the region is represented by 142 seats (33%) in the U.S. House and 22 U.S. senators (22%).



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division (2008-2022), compiled by author.

Between 2008 to 2022, all states in the Growth South, in addition to Tennessee, have outpaced the nation in annual population growth. Figure 2.2 charts recent population trends in the

South, in comparison to the nation at-large. Only Mississippi lost population overall, although four-out-of-five states in the Stagnant South—save for Louisiana—recorded more deaths than births between 2020 to 2023. In the Growth South, South Carolina and Florida also recorded more deaths than births but more-than made up the difference through in-migration. From 2008 to 2022, all states across the South have become more diverse, with fewer people identifying as white-alone in every state and the percentage of Black residents increasing in all but four states (North and South Carolina, Tennessee, and Louisiana).

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Between the Carter era and the most recent presidential election, the share of the nation's electoral votes generated by Republican presidential candidates in the South increased from five percent (12 electoral votes) in 1976 to 48% in 2024. As charted in Table 2.2, the South's importance to GOP presidential candidates has only increased in recent decades as states in the Northeast and Pacific Coast regions have shifted outside of the swing state column and become reliably oriented towards Democrats (Sabato & Kondik, 2019). With a greater share of the nation's most populous areas falling in the Democratic column, the lone GOP presidential candidate to win a majority of the national popular vote in the 21st Century (2000-2024) was George W. Bush in his 2004 re-election victory over Sen. John Kerry. In 2024, Donald Trump won a plurality of the popular vote in his comeback bid over Vice President Kamala Harris.

Table 2.2 Electoral Votes for GOP Nominee						
Year	South (11)	Growth South (6)	Growth South (4)*	Stagnant South (5)	Nation	Total from South (%)
1976	12	12	12	0	240	5%
1980	118	76	33	42	489	24%
1984	138	95	45	43	525	26%
1988	138	95	45	43	426	32%
1992	108	92	35	16	168	64%
1996	96	80	48	16	159	60%
2000	147	105	48	42	271	54%
2004	153	112	51	41	286	53%
2008	98	57	23	41	173	57%
2012	118	78	40	40	206	57%
2016	145	105	40	40	306	47%
2020	131	91	24	40	232	56%
2024	151	111	41	40	312	48%
<i>Source: Federal Election Commission, compiled by author; *Growth South excluding Florida and Texas.</i>						

Since 1992, all GOP presidential campaigns have relied on the 11-state region to produce between 47% and 64% of their electoral vote total. In 2016, 2020, and 2024 Trump obtained just over one third of his share of the popular vote and between 47% to 56% of his electoral votes from the 11-state South. Although losses in Georgia and Virginia were not the sole factors sinking Trump’s 2020 re-election bid, his repetition of Carter’s 10-state near sweep of the South proved decisive in 2016 and 2024.

CONGRESS

Over the six decades between 1964 and 2024, six Southern states (all Growth South states) have gained representation in Congress, led by Florida and Texas, which added 16 and 15 seats, respectively, and followed by Georgia (four), North Carolina (three), South Carolina (one), and Virginia (one). Tennessee and Arkansas have remained stagnant with no change, while Alabama and Mississippi have each lost one seat and Louisiana has lost two. This metric is the clearest

distinction that divides the states of the Growth South and the Stagnant South, although similar groupings arise when considering education levels, share of population born in state, changes in racial composition, and other recent demographic trends. Republicans’ chances of achieving a federal governing majority in Congress depend heavily on running up significant margins in the South, a feat made increasingly challenging in areas experiencing high rates of growth (Bullock et al. 2019). Table 2.3 shows the central role of Southern states in contributing to the GOP’s elected membership.

Table 2.3 Southern Delegation Powers House GOP Conference						
Year	Full South (11)	Growth South (6)	Growth South (4)*	Stagnant South (5)	Nationwide	Total from South (%)
2009	72	56	21	16	178	40%
2011	94	69	27	25	242	39%
2013	98	73	32	25	233	42%
2015	101	76	34	25	247	41%
2017	99	74	33	25	241	41%
2019	90	65	28	25	199	45%
2021	91	66	26	25	211	43%
2023	98	72	27	26	222	44%
2025	99	75	30	24	220	45%
<i>Source: Compiled by author; *Growth South (4) excluding FL and TX.</i>						

Between 2011 to 2019 and 2023 to 2025, House Republicans controlled the speakership and majority during six sessions of Congress, and in each instance, were elevated to power by winning an outsized majority of seats in the South. For example, in the razor-thin 222-seat GOP majority of the 118th Congress—with five Representatives standing in the way of a Democratic trifecta—Republicans won 69% of 142 House seats representing the South to elect 98 members, or 44 percent of their seats in the House. Had the size of the GOP conference not increased by

seven-seats from 91 in 2021 to 98 in 2023, Rep. Kevin McCarthy would have remained minority leader instead of rising to the speakership.

Similarly, the GOP’s net gain of three seats in North Carolina in 2024, under the state’s newly drawn maps, helped to preserve the conference’s majority by offsetting the loss of two seats in Alabama and Louisiana that were redrawn into majority Black districts after the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Allen v. Milligan*. The South’s growing influence also helped to elevate Louisiana Congressman Mike Johnson to the Speakership, in addition to helping his Bayou State delegation colleague Steve Scalise hold the Majority Leader post as second in command to the conference. Overall, Southerners have comprised between 39% to 45% of the House GOP conference during the previous eight sessions of Congress.

Table 2.4 Senate GOP Majorities Depend on Southern Sweep						
Year	Full South (11)	Growth South (6)	Growth South (4)*	Stagnant South (5)	Nationwide	Total from South (%)
2009	15	8	5	7	41	37%
2011	16	8	5	8	47	34%
2013	16	8	5	8	45	36%
2015	19	9	6	10	54	35%
2017	19	9	6	10	52	37%
2019	19	10	6	9	52	37%
2021	18	8	4	10	50	36%
2023	18	8	4	10	49	37%
2025	18	8	6	8	53	34%
<i>Source: Compiled by author; *Growth South (4) excluding FL and TX.</i>						

Table 2.4 shows the distribution of Republicans elected to represent Southern states in the U.S. Senate between 2008 and 2025. During this period, the GOP has governed as the majority party for four of the prior nine sessions of Congress, between 2015 to 2021 and in 2025, in addition to maintaining a 50-50 split with Democratic Vice President Kamala Harris as the tie-breaking

vote between 2021-2023. In every instance, GOP majorities were made possible by sweeping greater than 82% of U.S. Senate seats (18+) from the 11-state South to comprise upwards of 34% of Republican members.

Alternatively, in the House, a GOP majority is dependent on winning considerably more seats than Democrats in the Growth South, while essentially running the table across the smaller Stagnant South. In 2024, GOP members won 67% of 112 Growth South Seats and 80% of 30 Stagnant South Seats, yielding 75 Republican representatives from the Growth South compared to 24 from the Stagnant South in the 119th Congress. As presented in Table 2.3, this trend has remained consistent over a decade-plus.

On the other hand, Senate Republican majorities are historically built on achieving near-perfect results across the 11-state South. Changing political environments in the Growth South could have a strong effect on the viability of obtaining and holding a Senate Republican majority, with GOP Senate candidates reliably running up safe-seat margins across five states of the Stagnant South. In recent years, the primary exception to this trend is Roy Moore, the Alabama candidate dogged by repeated allegations of sexual misconduct and other controversies.

Table 2.5 Republicans Rely on Southern Fundraising Advantage to Compete Nationally					
Year	Location	Total Contributed	GOP (%)	Amount to GOP	GOP Total (%)
2008	National	\$2,776,721,772	43%	\$1,190,562,455	100%
	Full South	\$741,608,214	57%	\$422,997,635	36%
	Growth South	\$618,324,438	56%	\$343,708,717	29%
	Stagnant South	\$123,283,776	64%	\$79,288,919	7%
2010	National	\$1,853,307,666	46%	\$849,578,669	100%
	Full South	\$496,852,170	57%	\$283,134,698	33%
	Growth South	\$409,674,533	56%	\$229,619,231	27%
	Stagnant South	\$87,177,637	61%	\$53,515,468	6%
2012	National	\$3,743,880,610	55%	\$2,066,139,373	100%
	Full South	\$1,025,052,718	69%	\$710,147,138	34%
	Growth South	\$885,684,867	68%	\$603,617,617	29%
	Stagnant South	\$139,367,851	76%	\$106,529,521	5%
2014	National	\$2,405,847,072	52%	\$1,256,110,389	100%
	Full South	\$599,155,642	67%	\$400,632,325	32%
	Growth South	\$490,385,267	66%	\$323,260,827	26%
	Stagnant South	\$108,770,375	71%	\$77,371,498	6%
2016	National	\$4,964,347,757	45%	\$2,217,487,772	100%
	Full South	\$1,180,505,437	62%	\$731,797,690	33%
	Growth South	\$1,005,014,117	60%	\$607,329,699	27%
	Stagnant South	\$175,491,320	71%	\$124,467,991	6%
2018	National	\$4,244,856,474	42%	\$1,761,185,167	100%
	Full South	\$971,168,522	57%	\$555,585,940	32%
	Growth South	\$838,249,207	56%	\$466,342,993	27%
	Stagnant South	\$132,919,315	67%	\$89,242,947	5%
2020	National	\$10,355,552,179	40%	\$4,184,766,305	100%
	Full South	\$2,620,021,478	59%	\$1,538,457,828	37%
	Growth South	\$2,266,614,263	57%	\$1,299,201,114	31%
	Stagnant South	\$353,407,215	68%	\$239,256,713	6%
2022	National	\$5,820,341,623	41%	\$2,415,266,786	100%
	Full South	\$1,441,358,836	61%	\$873,223,153	36%
	Growth South	\$1,246,949,218	59%	\$733,776,347	30%
	Stagnant South	\$194,409,618	72%	\$139,446,806	6%
2024	National	\$10,516,578,947	41%	\$4,332,830,526	100%
	Full South	\$3,042,906,743	60%	\$1,824,097,241	42%
	Growth South	\$2,719,057,781	59%	\$1,608,168,409	37%
	Stagnant South	\$323,848,962	67%	\$215,928,832	5%
<i>Source: OpenSecrets (2025), compiled by author.</i>					

As shown in Table 2.5, across all federal offices, Republicans have raised an outsized share of campaign funds from Southerners. Between the 2008 and 2024 election cycles, GOP candidates for federal offices—along with the national party and allied PACS that disclose their donors—generated between 32% (2014) to 42% (2024) of their fundraising totals from Southern states (OpenSecrets). During the previous nine election cycles, the GOP has reliably collected between 57% to 69% of the total amount contributed across the 11-state South.⁷ This trend has extended across the vast majority of individual states, and in both the Growth South and Stagnant South.

Even as Republican candidates have struggled in states like Virginia and Georgia, the party has remained reliant on their resident donors. For example, in the 2022 cycle, Republicans secured most funds contributed to political races across all 11 states with the only exception being North Carolina (49%), while capturing 62% of \$120 million raised in Georgia and 52% of the \$324 million raised in Virginia (OpenSecrets). The 2022 cycle is also unique in that it represents the first time since 2008 that all states in the South ranked higher in importance as a percentage of the amount donated to federal Republicans than their overall rank in total contributions nationally. This trend continued in 2024, with all 11-states ranking higher as a share of GOP donations than in total contributions. The only instances in which Republicans have led Democrats in fundraising nationally in the past eight cycles have come when Republicans claimed over two-thirds of total contributions in the South (2012 and 2014).

EDUCATION AND IN-MIGRATION

In 2010, all Southern states aside from Virginia lagged behind the nation in educating their residents, with greater than 45% of the population earning a high school diploma or less. As of

⁷ These figures do not track the locations of donors to Super PACS and “dark money” groups that do not disclose their donors. Contributions are tracked based on reporting from Open Secrets that accounts for publicly disclosed sources of campaign funds.

2022, the Growth South states have considerably narrowed this gap—with three states exceeding the national average in education levels, and three others following closely behind within two percentage points. Nearly all Growth South states, aside from Texas, recorded 20+ percentage improvements in reducing the number of residents whose highest level of education is high school. These trends are shown in Table 2.6. Stagnant South states continue to observe a higher share of their populations registering lower educational levels, with gaps of between 12% to 24% below the national average.

Table 2.6 Stagnant South Trails Growth South and Nation in Education Levels				
	2010	2022	Percentage Change	Share Above National Average (2022)
High School or Less (Population 25 years and over)				
United States	44.0	36.5	-17%	0
Virginia	40.3	32.3	-20%	-4.2
North Carolina	45.7	34.7	-24%	-1.8
Florida	45.2	36.2	-20%	-0.3
South Carolina	48.2	37.2	-23%	0.7
Georgia	46.8	37.5	-20%	1.0
Texas	45.5	38.1	-16%	1.6
Tennessee	51.5	40.9	-21%	4.4
Alabama	50.4	41.6	-17%	5.1
Mississippi	52.9	43.2	-18%	6.7
Arkansas	53.3	45.1	-15%	8.6
Louisiana	55.4	45.2	-18%	8.7
<i>Source: U.S. Census Bureau: 2010 ACS 1-Year Estimates; 2022 ACS 1-Year Estimates.</i>				

Although all states have recorded significant improvement since 2010, gaps in the proportion of residents educated beyond high school between growth and stagnant states remains relatively consistent across time. After winning the Nevada GOP Caucus in 2016, Donald Trump expressed his admiration for this group, saying “We won with poorly educated. I love the poorly educated” (Hafner, 2016). Nationally, Trump won support from a majority of non-college educated

voters in both 2016 (+7), 2020 (+2), and 2024 (+13) in contrast to previous GOP nominees who lost this segment of the electorate by seven percent and four percent, respectively, in 2008 and 2012. As Democrats have emerged as the party of more highly educated Americans, the GOP's coalition has been rebuilt around a working-class base. After the 2022 elections, Democrats represented nine of the 10 wealthiest congressional districts, while Republicans held 64% of congressional seats where median incomes fall below the national level (Knight, 2023).

Table 2.7 GOP Wins by Attracting Non-College Voters			
Type	Year	Share of Electorate	Margin (GOP)
Presidential	2008	56%	-7
Presidential	2012	53%	-4
Presidential	2016	50%	7
Presidential	2020	59%	2
Presidential	2024	57%	13
House	2008	56%	-12
House	2010	48%	7
House	2012	53%	-3
House	2014	49%	8
House	2016	50%	6
House	2018	59%	0
House	2020	58%	1
House	2022	57%	12
House	2024	57%	12
<i>Source: National Election Pool, 2008-2024.</i>			

In the House, Republicans obtained their majority, in part, by improving from losing non-college voters by 12 points in 2008 to winning them by the same margin in 2024. Table 2.7 demonstrates the increasing importance of non-college educated voters to GOP candidates. At the presidential level, Trump improved on McCain's seven-point deficit with non-college voters to win the group by seven points in 2016 and thirteen percentage points in 2024. Between 2008 to 2024, exit polls have reported the share of the electorate without a college degree at between 48%

to 59% of all voters (National Election Pool). In these contests, GOP candidates have been increasingly reliant on securing support from most non-college educated voters.

Driving this overarching trend is the delta between white college educated voters and white non-college educated voters. Whereas the GOP’s gap between non-white college graduates and those without a four-year degree stood at just two percentage points in the 2024 presidential election, Trump won support from 66% of non-college educated white voters and just 45% of those with a college diploma—a gap of 21 percentage points. Table 2.8 demonstrates how the GOP’s performance differs between white and non-white voters, depending on their level of education, between 2008 and 2024.

Table 2.8 GOP Gap Between White College and Non-College Voters Hits Record High			
Type	Year	Margin (GOP) Between White Voters without College Degrees and with College Degrees	Margin (GOP) Between Non-White Voters without College Degrees and with College Degrees
Presidential	2008	7	-6
Presidential	2012	6	-6
Presidential	2016	18	-2
Presidential	2020	19	1
Presidential	2024	21	2
House	2008	2	-5
House	2010	5	-5
House	2014	7	-3
House	2016	12	-5
House	2018	16	0
House	2020	16	-8
House	2022	19	-1
House	2024	20	1
<i>Source: National Election Pool, 2008-2024. Figures shown are percentage points.</i>			

From 1956 to 2016, every Republican presidential candidate won at least a plurality of white college educated voters. That trend ended in 2020, when Joe Biden claimed 51% of white

college educated voters to Trump's 48%, as the GOP's gap in support between white voters without a college degree and those with a college education reached a record 19 percentage points. Two years earlier, in the 2018 mid-terms, this flip was foreshadowed when House GOP candidates lost among white college educated voters nationally with 45% support in comparison to 53% for Democratic candidates. Matching that figure, in 2024, Harris won support from 53% of white college educated voters, as compared to support from 32% of white voters who did not graduate from college. As reflected in Table 2.8, the gap between support for Republicans between white voters with a college education and those without a degree—at both the presidential and congressional level—has steadily expanded since 2008, when the GOP registered a margin of just two percentage points among House candidates and seven percentage points in the presidential race.

This pattern can partly be explained by the growing imbalance between the share of women with college degrees in comparison to men, providing support for testing gender polarization in addition to racial polarization as part of hypothesis H4, H6, H8, and H10. As of 2022, among all U.S. adults over 25 years of age, 39.1% of women reported completing a bachelor's degree or higher in comparison to 36.2% of men (U.S. Census). Among younger adults, the gender gap is even more stark. Approximately 47% of women between 25 to 34 have at least a bachelor's degree, in comparison to 37% of men (Hurst, 2024). In 1995, there was parity between men and women, with 25% of both genders having earned a bachelor's degree (Ibid). Since then, the share of women in this age cohort with a bachelor's degree has grown by 22 percentage points from 25% to 47%, while the share of men with the same level of education has increased by 12 percentage points from 25% to 37%.

In 2016, although Hillary Clinton narrowly lost white college educated voters to Trump by a margin of three percentage points (45% to 48%), she won 51% of college educated women in comparison to 39% of college educated men. Whereas white college educated voters comprised 37% of the overall electorate, 20% of these voters were women and 17% were men. This 12-percentage point gap between white college educated men and women supporting Clinton is similar to the 11-percentage point gap between white non-college educated men and women observed in 2016, when 23% of non-college educated men supported Clinton in comparison to 34% of white women without college degrees. In 2020, Biden recorded support from 54% of white college educated women and 48% of white college educated men. In 2024, this gender gap expanded slightly as Harris won support from 56% of white college educated women and 46% of white college educated men.

Table 2.8 tracks the performance of Republican candidates among non-white voters with the same educational distinction. At the beginning of the period observed by this study, people of color with college degrees were considerably more likely than those without degrees to support GOP candidates. For example, in 2008, 22% of non-white voters with college degrees supported McCain over Obama in comparison to 16% of those without college degrees, with a similar gap seen at the congressional level. Throughout the 16-year period observed by this study, these voters followed a similar, albeit significantly less pronounced trend to that observed among white voters. By 2024, people of color without college degrees were slightly more likely to support GOP candidates than those with college degrees, with 34% of non-college educated voters of color casting ballots in Trump's favor in comparison to 32% of voters of color with college degrees.

Table 2.9 Most of Southern Population Born In-State			
Share of Population Born in State	2010	2022	Percentage Change
Florida	35%	35%	-0.05%
Virginia	50%	49%	-1.18%
South Carolina	59%	53%	-5.81%
Georgia	55%	53%	-1.97%
North Carolina	58%	54%	-4.83%
Tennessee	61%	57%	-3.77%
Texas	60%	58%	-2.19%
Arkansas	61%	60%	-1.27%
Alabama	70%	68%	-2.24%
Mississippi	72%	71%	-1.18%
Louisiana	79%	78%	-1.27%
<i>Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2022 American Community Survey, 1-year estimates; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 American Community Survey.</i>			

Another important characteristic of each state’s electorate is the share of its population born in state. As demonstrated in Table 2.9, since 2010, all 11-states across the South have seen a decrease in the percentage of residents who were born in state, with the sharpest drops coming in the Carolinas. In all five Stagnant South states, as of 2022, over 57% of their residents are native-born, with Louisiana recording the highest share at 78%. Most Growth South states have rates in the mid-50s, with Florida ranking lowest at 35%. All other Growth States examined as part of this study range between from 49% (Virginia) to 54% (North Carolina) in their native-born populations and have seen the share of residents born in-state fall between one to six percent over the last decade.

CONCLUSION

Between 2008 and 2024, the importance of the South for Republicans to win the presidency or majorities in Congress has only increased (see Table 2.2, Table 2.3, and Table 2.4). In 2024,

Trump won 10 Southern states, adding 151 electoral votes (48%) to his total of 312, while Southern members of Congress contributed 99-seats (45%) to the narrow three-seat Republican majority in the House and 18-seats (34%) to the GOP's 53-seat Senate majority. These figures reflect the outsized role of the 11-state South to the prospect of Republicans winning a governing majority, as well as the increased influence of Southerners in guiding the direction of the GOP at-large.

The framework for this study is rooted in the politics of race and requires blending findings from Bullock et al. (2019) on changes in the South's population and politics over the past half century, along with those of Bullock et al. (2024) that reflect the growing political power of minority groups and women in the South and recent coalitions between emergent populations and Black voters. This scholarship is coupled with findings from Hood et al. (2012) and Hood and McKee (2022) on the parallel growth of Black representation and Republican political domination across the South. These seminal works offer a foundation to explain the changes observed in contemporary GOP coalitions and the importance of the South in intra-party politics and to two-party competition nationally, setting up a series of 15 hypotheses to be tested by this study.

This literature review demonstrates that, under Trump's leadership, the GOP has grown to depend on near-uniform support from white evangelicals (Alberta, 2023; Smith, 2021), while also carrying forward an increasingly populist agenda (Howell & Moe, 2020). The South remains America's most evangelical region, as well as the nation's most racially polarized political battleground. As charted in this review, part of the GOP's electoral success can be attributed to conscious efforts to posture as the party of white Americans, while using political and legislative means to position Democrats as the party of Black Americans (Bullock, 2021; Bullock et al., 2024; Hood & McKee, 2022). These efforts are rooted in exploiting racial divisions that have long been foundational to Southern politics. This study seeks to contribute to a significant existing body of

scholarship by taking stock of how intra-GOP political contests, in addition to two-party competition, have developed across three Southern states between 2008 to 2024.

A strong body of scholarship has produced the consensus finding that Trump built his political base of support by leveraging white racial anxiety (Abramowitz, 2018; Grossman & Thaler, 2018; Mutz, 2018; Sides et al., 2018). This review also demonstrates that the South remains at the leading edge of racial polarization nationally (see Table 2.1), making Southern states ideal testing grounds for qualitative research to tease out the consequences of extreme levels of identity-based polarization. Further, part of what makes Southern states unique—particularly in the case of the Deep South—are highly diverse electorates capable of facilitating two-party competition even in cases of extreme racial polarization. Building on decades of scholarly research (Black & Black, 1987; Bullock et al., 2019; Bullock et al., 2024), this study assesses whether the Trump era has been correlated with the reignition of two-party competition in the Growth South, as well as if similar changes have occurred in the Stagnant South.

CHAPTER 3: GEORGIA CASE STUDY: 2008 TO 2024

INTRODUCTION

On April 7, 2016, Georgia state Representative Tom Taylor was arrested in Rabun County and charged with driving under the influence, registering a blood-alcohol content of .225 or nearly three times the legal limit. Taylor was clocked driving 72-mph in a 45-mph zone and found to be carrying a firearm on his hip as he was traveling with four children as passengers in his vehicle (Pirkle, 2016). With no Democratic opposition in the 2016 general election, Taylor was re-elected to his fourth term representing House District 79, based in the suburban Atlanta city of Dunwoody and which included parts of northern DeKalb County. The following cycle, in 2018, Democrat Michael Wilensky defeated Dunwoody's founding mayor, Republican Ken Wright, to flip the seat and cement its status as a consistently Democratic district that would adopt an increasingly blue hue in subsequent cycles. This illustration is emblematic of the changing headwinds that saw Georgia shift from a reliably Republican mainstay to a wellspring of perennial political competition, which delivered its electoral votes to Joe Biden in the 2020 presidential election and elected two Democrats to serve in the U.S. Senate after GOP campaigns faltered in 2020, 2021, and 2022. Even in Trump's successful comeback bid in 2024, he won Georgia by just 2.2 percentage points and a margin of 115,000 votes—a similar performance to the 1.5 percentage point margin he won in the national popular vote.

Despite the string of recent federal victories and improved prospects for Democrats, Georgia is by no means a blue state and Republicans retain significant electoral advantages and residual strength from operating as the state's majority party for over two decades. In 2022, even

as Raphael Warnock bested Herschel Walker by nearly 38,000 votes (one percentage point) in the first round of voting, Republican candidates swept elections for Georgia’s eight statewide constitutional officers by an average margin of 286,000 votes (7.2 percentage points). This performance was closer to the GOP’s average margin of 326,000 votes in 2010 (12.4 percentage points) than to 2018, when Democrats registered their strongest performance of the contemporary era—losing all eight statewide executive races by an average margin of 136,000 votes (3.4 percentage points) and flipping 13 legislative seats distributed across the suburbs of Metro Atlanta.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THIS STUDY

Over the 16-years between 2008 and 2024, Georgia was thrust into the national spotlight as a premier electoral battleground—with the state’s Democratic and Republican parties transforming in ways that echo the nation’s larger political transition. After the political standing of state Democrats fell to historic lows between 2010 to 2014, disfunction sowed in the state’s Republican Party by Donald Trump and his allied partisans—in combination with demographic changes accelerated by Georgia’s growth—helped to inspire a Democratic resurgence. By tracing out the outcomes of contests for president, governor, U.S. Senate, U.S. House, and the partisan balance of the Georgia General Assembly, this chapter assesses the ways in which Georgia’s growth has contributed to the state’s shift toward two-party competition.

Trends in political competition are evaluated alongside the interrelated phenomena of demographic change, characteristics of candidate quality in statewide contests, and evolutions in the platforms and tactics used to appeal to Georgia voters. This research is informed by personal interviews conducted with individuals involved in Georgia and national politics, private survey research, public polling, election returns, and a comprehensive analysis of social media activity, media reports, and campaign materials. Through its narrative and a qualitative approach, this study

aims to tease out shifts in the state by focusing on the political identity and ideological orientation of Georgia's top politicians, changes in racial and gender polarization among voters and elected officials, and the factors contributing to a resurgence in two-party competition.

The next section of this chapter contextualizes Georgia's recent political history in the framework of the Growth South (Bullock et al., 2019). This is followed by an exploration into contemporary political coalitions with an emphasis on the state's demographics, geography, and the conditions required for two-party competition. Then, as part of testing hypotheses H1 through H10, the study presents an analysis of survey research and election data to assess the role of race and gender in influencing voter choice over the 16-year period observed. Although Georgia's electorate has become less polarized by race (H7) and gender (H8), its elected officials have become considerably more polarized by race (H9) and gender (H10), with Democrats shifting to elect a group of state legislators who are mostly Black (74% in 2024) and female (58%) and Republicans electing a legislative majority that has been comprised of no less than 75% white males during the period of this study. To dig into the politics underpinning these trends, the second half of the study shifts to a narrative format that spotlights flashpoints in the political and ideological orientation of Georgia's Republican Party and its standard bearers, as well as major themes in primary and general election campaigns between 2008 to 2024.

Fifteen hypotheses are tested by this study. Twelve of which are incorporated into a longitudinal presentation for Georgia, as well as for case studies in South Carolina (chapter four) and Louisiana (chapter five). As part of Chapter Six, these findings are aggregated and presented in a broader analysis of the South. By using this format and providing an overview of election cycles between 2008 and 2024, this study offers a unique vantagepoint into how political trends

influencing intra-GOP politics and two-party competition have taken root and developed over this period.

Hypothesis H1 puts forward that, during the Trump era (2016-2024), Republican candidates have divided into three groups. In Georgia, this intraparty division for candidates and elected officials can be categorized between: (1) Republicans loyal to Donald Trump, (2) Republicans who are better described as part of the Johnny Isakson wing of the party, and (3) Republicans who have left or been forced out of the party since 2016. The Isakson wing includes those who hold conservative principles and position themselves as bipartisan problem solvers, as well as mainstream Republicans. Isakson described his philosophy as seeking to represent the entire state, which included “friends and future friends,” saying: “We’re a growth state, so you’ve got to expect as a Republican you’re going to have a growth in the electorate... I think there’s a lot of outreach that could be done and it ought to be done” to reach immigrant, Latino and African American communities (*CBS News*, 2019; Hallerman & Bluestein, 2018). Republicans who belong to the Trump wing can be characterized as those who promote support for and from Trump as central to their campaigns and objectives as an officeholder. Georgia’s 14th District Georgia Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene described the rationale behind this viewpoint, saying of “Republican voters, [that] their loyalty is to President Trump – most of them – and not necessarily to the Republican Party” (Boyer, 2020).

Several criteria are considered within each case study (see Table 3.5) to divide GOP elected officials and nominees into three groups: MAGA Republicans, Sometimes Trump Republicans, and Anti-Trump Republicans. MAGA Republicans are those who (1) supported Trump’s claims of a stolen 2020 election, (2) endorsed Trump ahead of Georgia’s 2024’s GOP presidential primary, and (3) have been endorsed by Trump. For members of the U.S. House who were serving

in 2020, I look at whether they signed on to the amicus brief to the U.S. Supreme Court led by Speaker Mike Johnson, and for those in office in 2021, if they voted in support of objecting to the certification of Electoral College votes from at least one state. For those who were not in office, I evaluate whether they otherwise supported Trump's claims of a stolen election. Anti-Trump Republicans include those who endorsed Trump's general election opponent in 2020 (Biden) or 2024 (Biden/Harris), as well as those who voted in support of impeaching Trump. These criteria are applied consistently through the three case studies and in Chapter Six.

To be sure, distinguishing top Republican officeholders into these groups requires careful nuance, which is parsed out as part of evaluating hypotheses H1A and H1B. Hypothesis H1A holds that, since 2016, maintaining at-least some level of support for Trump has become a requirement for elected and office-seeking Republicans to survive politically. This is tested by evaluating instances in which Republicans clash with Trump, how they respond, and the consequences for their political careers. H1B is applied as part of the longitudinal approach taken by this study, and tests whether Republicans elected during the Trump era are more closely aligned with Trump than their predecessors.

Hypotheses H2, H3, H4, H5, and H6 are applied to Democratic candidates and officeholders. Hypothesis H2 tests whether Democrats can prevail statewide in Georgia by meeting the minima of a 30-30 election, where candidates win support from 30% of white voters and Black voters comprise 30% of the electorate. As part of this assessment and based on findings from Bullock (2022) in recent Georgia elections, this study also considers whether strong levels of support among Asian and Hispanic voters can lower the 30-30 threshold needed for Democrats to win statewide. Hypotheses H3 and H4 test if Black voters and women have become a larger share

of those supporting Democratic candidates during the 16-year period evaluated by this study and, consequently, a larger share of Democratic Party officeholders (H5 and H6).

Focused on assessing trends in two-party competition, the next set of hypotheses evaluate whether racial (H7) and gender (H8) polarization have increased in the electorate, while H9 and H10 evaluate if gender and racial gender polarization have increased among public officeholders. In Chapter Six, hypothesis H11 tests the proposition that, since Trump was elected president in 2016, two-party competition has increased in the Growth States of the South. On the other hand, hypothesis H12 tests whether, since 2008, two-party competition has decreased in the Stagnant South states, making primary contests the determinative elections for selecting top officeholders. As part of this line of inquiry, hypothesis H13 tests whether Trump's influence has helped his supporters obtain a greater share of leadership positions in the Stagnant South than in the Growth South.

CHARTING GEORGIA'S GROWTH THROUGH ELECTORAL OUTCOMES

Suburban voters proved decisive in breaking decades of Democratic dominance when Georgia stood out as the final Southern state to elect a Republican governor. This breakthrough occurred in 2002, when Sonny Perdue defeated incumbent governor Roy Barnes. Perdue also presided over the GOP's flip of the state Senate in 2003, followed by the state House in 2005. Just over a decade later, considerable growth in the state's sprawling suburbs also helped create the conditions necessary for a Democratic resurgence in the state legislature and for the prospects of candidates statewide.

In recent years, the Growth South has experienced a wave of political change, powered by patterns of economic and population growth that have been accompanied by in-migration from a mix of people with diverse backgrounds who do not fit into the traditional Black-white electoral

dichotomy long-observed. Increasing diversity, made possible in part by economic globalization, has put new political coalitions into reach, contributing to greater political competition. Across the board, from education to demographic change, major indicators position Georgia as strongly representative of this electorally important subset of the South. In fact, during the period examined by this study (2008-2024), no state better exemplifies the characteristics of the Growth South than Georgia.

Table 3.1 Georgia's Growth Sets Stage for Return of Two-Party Competition		
	2010	2022
Total Population	9,711,881	10,913,150
Congressional Representation	13	14
Republican House Members (after general election)	8	9
High School or Less (Population 25 years and over)	47	38
Share of Population Born in State	55%	53%
Percentage of Population that is Black or African American	31%	33%
Percentage of Population is White Alone (not Hispanic or Latino)	57%	52%
<i>Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin for Georgia: April 1, 2010, to July 1, 2019, and April 1, 2020, to July 1, 2023.</i>		

As demonstrated in Table 3.1, Georgia added over 1.2 million residents between 2008 and 2022, while increasing its representation in Congress by one seat during the 2010 redistricting cycle. This wave of growth contributed to an increasingly diverse electorate, as the state's overall white population declined by 5.3 percentage points, while its Black, Hispanic, and Asian communities notched sustained growth (U.S. Census). At the same time, the state leaped forward in the educational attainment of its residents to fall in-line with the national average, while the percentage of Georgians born in-state decreased slightly.

Hood and Bullock (2021) find that steady increases in the share of Hispanics represented in Georgia's population portends greater political influence for this community in the years ahead. By 2023, the number of Asian Americans represented in the General Assembly ticked up to 11-members, resulting in the creation of the Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) Caucus that ranked as the nation's largest outside of Hawaii during the 2023-2024 legislative session. The newly formed AAPI Caucus included nine Democrats and two Republicans, while the Hispanic caucus that was founded during the same legislative session included four Democrats and three Republicans (Leonard, 2023). Statewide, as of 2024, Asian residents have grown to comprise five percent of Georgia's population, up from less than three percent in 2008, while Hispanic residents make up 11% of the population, up from eight percent (U.S. Census 2008-2024).

Although Hillary Clinton's 2016 performance—garnering approximately 45% of votes cast—matched the 45% threshold that Democratic candidates received in 2012 (Barack Obama), and 2014 (Jason Carter and Michelle Nunn), Clinton made history as the first statewide Democratic standard bearer since Zell Miller in 2000 to win a majority of votes cast in the populous suburban county of Gwinnett and a plurality in Cobb.

Even before Clinton's watershed victory in Cobb and Gwinnett counties, some Democrats had already been bullish about the party's prospects to compete in Georgia despite the state's otherwise challenging political environment. In November of 2012, Jon Ossoff noted that, "Romney only won GA 53-45. Almost the same margin of victory as Obama's in NH (52-47), a swing state" (Ossoff, 2012). However, it was not until Donald Trump and his affiliated candidates led the ballot that Democrats notched their first statewide victories of the contemporary era.

Table 3.2 Democratic Path to Victory Runs Through Suburban Cobb and Gwinnett Counties		
Democratic Candidate	Cobb Margin of Victory/Defeat	Gwinnett Margin of Victory/Defeat
Barack Obama (2008)	(29,741)	(29,721)
Jim Martin (2008)	(33,116)	(29,418)
Roy Barnes (2010)	(25,146)	(38,759)
Michael Thurmond (2010)	(53,644)	(54,232)
Jason Carter (2014)	(30,445)	(22,938)
Michelle Nunn (2014)	(27,674)	(21,153)
Hillary Clinton (2016)	7,209	19,164
Jim Barksdale (2016)	(35,398)	(13,411)
Stacey Abrams (2018)	29,915	45,099
Joe Biden (2020)	56,411	75,594
Jon Ossoff (2021 runoff)	43,356	74,783
Raphael Warnock (2021 runoff)	49,162	78,600
Stacey Abrams (2022)	14,174	30,975
Raphael Warnock (2022)	50,590	60,644
Raphael Warnock (2022 runoff)	53,426	64,466
Kamala Harris (2024)	59,725	69,466
<i>Source: Georgia Secretary of State, compiled by author.</i>		

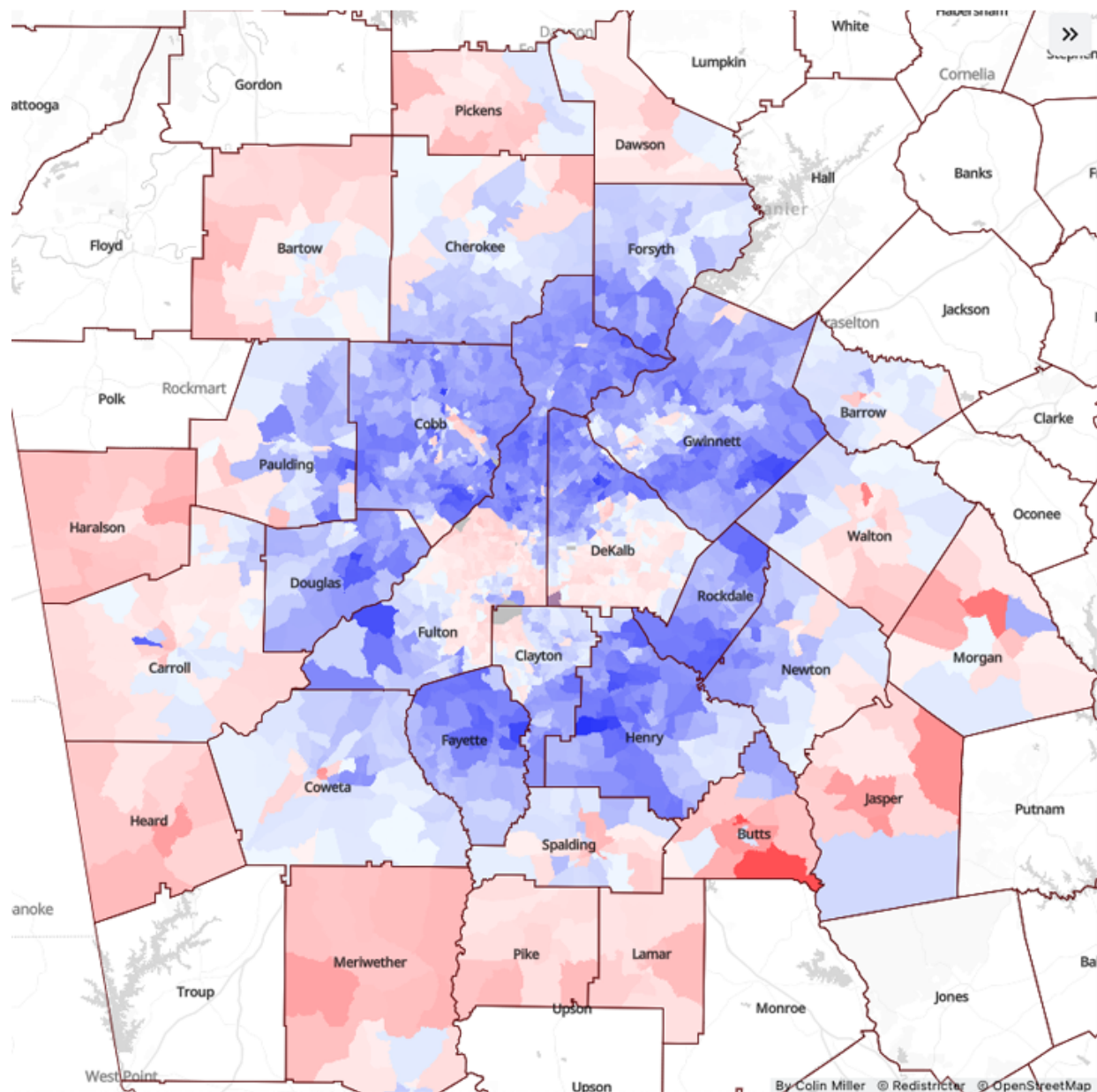
As Charles S. Bullock, III, predicted after the 2016 election, the fall of these suburban dominos portended consistent, increasingly large Democratic margins of victory across Metro Atlanta in subsequent electoral contests (Lutz & Wickert, 2016). These trends are shown in Table 3.2, which tracks how Cobb and Gwinnett counties flipped from GOP bastions to comprise a key part of the Democratic coalition. Prior to the Trump era, these suburban precincts were the foundation upon which several of the state’s most prominent Republican leaders were elevated, including Newt Gingrich, Johnny Isakson, and a host of other GOP candidates and officeholders (Hills, 2009).

In 2010, the 29-counties that make up Atlanta’s metro region were about 51% white. However, by 2020, the region reported that—for the first time—a majority of its residents (56%)

were now non-white (Redmond et al., 2021). The sprawling metropolis is home to about 6.2 million Georgians or about 56% of the state's population, and its diversification has been driven more by seismic changes in the makeup of suburban areas than from the City of Atlanta (U.S. Census, 2024A). As of 2024, the communities of Johns Creek, Buford, Dacula, Loganville, Snellville, Carrollton, and Newnan all boasted majority non-white populations. Taken together, the region's demographic changes helped to set the stage for increased political competition and broader multiracial coalitions.

Figure 3.1 charts the precinct-level shift in vote share across the 29-county Metro Atlanta region between the 2008 and 2020 presidential elections. Region-wide, precincts in suburban counties registered significant swings toward Democrats, while exurban and more rural areas trended toward Republicans. Overall, during this period, Metro Atlanta's 29 counties recorded a 10-percentage point shift toward Democrats, from 48% in 2008 to 58% in 2020.

Figure 3.1 29-County Metro Atlanta Shift in Presidential Vote Choice: 2008 to 2020



Source: Redistricter.com, created by author.

Democratic victories in recent years have depended on securing outsized gains in the populous suburban ring of 11-counties that form the center of Figure 3.1. While these gains are most dramatic in areas like Cobb and Gwinnett that have gone from reliably Republican to part of the Democratic base, also significant are the inroads made up Georgia 400 into areas like Forsyth County. In 2008, Sen. John McCain won Forsyth County by a margin of 59-percentage points, as

just under 75,000 voters turned out. By 2020, Democrats cut the GOP's margin in Forsyth County down by nearly 26-percentage points in Biden's 33-percentage point defeat to Trump.

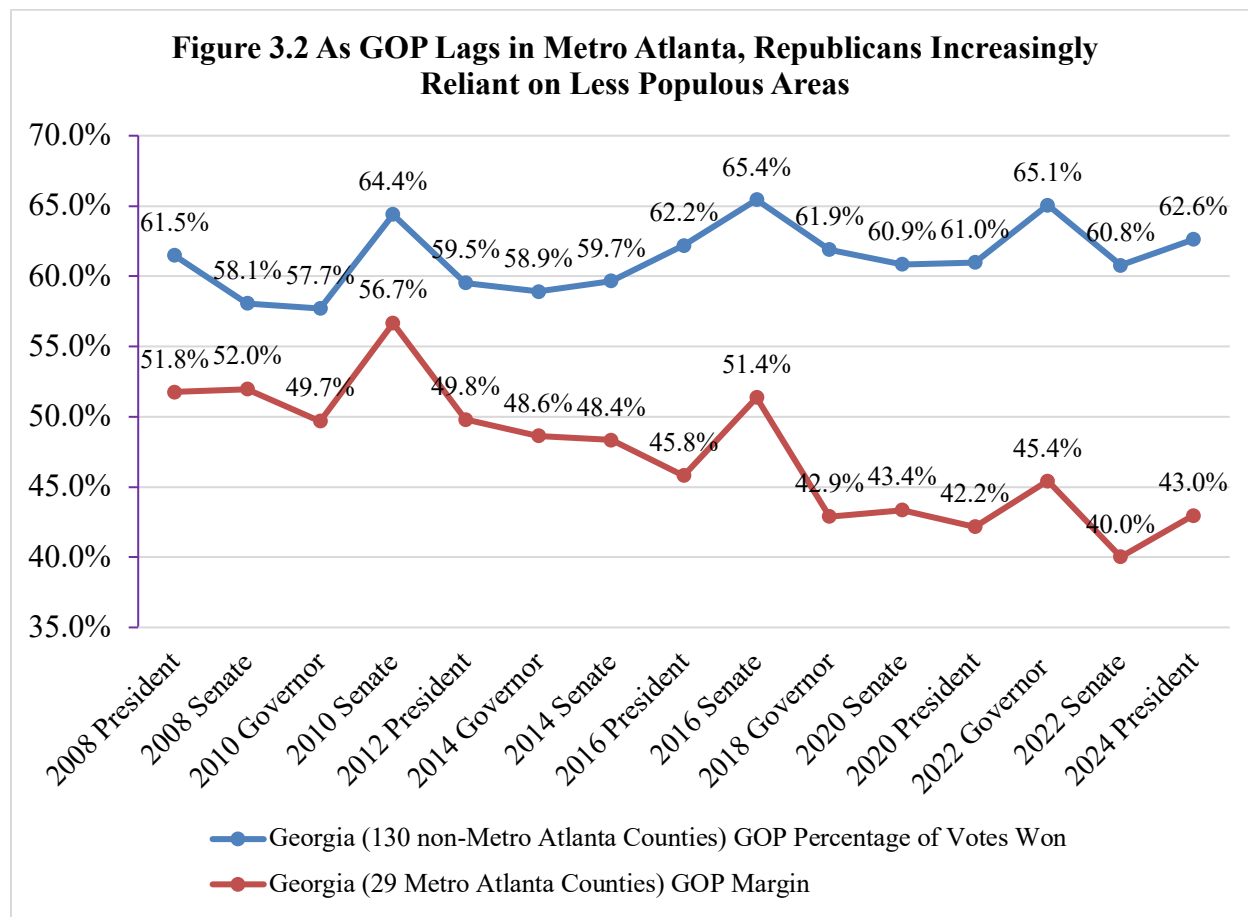
The rapidly growing exurban Forsyth County, anchored by the City of Cumming, was once the site for an infamous episode of the Oprah Winfrey Show, taped in 1987, in which the host introduced the scene to viewers by narrating:

You're looking at land in a county, in America, where not a single Black person has lived in 75-years. We bring you today to Forsyth County, Georgia, just 30-miles north of Atlanta, which in the past few weeks has gained the reputation of being a hotbed of racism and the current battlefield of the Civil Rights movement of this decade (Winfrey, 1987).

Even though the county's electorate grew to include over 127,000 voters by the 2020 presidential election, Trump netted a margin of just 42,208 votes, a slight decrease from McCain's raw margin of 43,760 votes in 2008. Supporting this trend is the fact that, between 2010 to 2020, the percentage of white non-Hispanic residents in Forsyth County declined from 85% to less than 71%—as the county's overall population also grew by 43% (U.S. Census). Nationally, Forsyth County ranks third among nine counties that shifted towards Democrats “in each of the presidential elections since 2012 and [that] shifted by a total of more than 25 percentage points” (Goldmacher et al., 2025). Five others were also in Metro Atlanta, including: Henry, Rockdale, Fayette, Douglas, and Cobb, while the three others were in Indiana, New Mexico, and Colorado (Ibid).

On the other hand, Figure 3.1 shows counties at the outer edges of Metro Atlanta delivering larger than average gains to Republicans over the same period from 2008 to 2020. The five counties producing the strongest margins for Republicans in recent years—Cherokee, Forsyth, Hall, Coweta, and Bartow counties—fit into or sit just outside of the Metro Atlanta area. Between 2020 and 2024, Donald Trump or Brian Kemp recorded the peak GOP margins in all five of these counties, ranging from 25,600 (Bartow) to 59,400 (Cherokee) votes. Although Republicans saw bigger net margins coming from more populous counties, smaller GOP strongholds such as

Haralson and Heard counties assumed a critical role in delivering more votes to the GOP column cumulatively by improving turnout and stretching already-dominant vote shares from the 60s and 70s into the 80s.



Source: *Redistricter.com*, *Georgia Secretary of State*, compiled by author.

Figure 3.2 demonstrates this overarching trend, in which Republican candidates have become less competitive in Metro Atlanta, and in recent cycles, have depended on turning out a greater number of voters from exurban and rural counties statewide. Since 2018, most Republican candidates for major state and federal offices have generated an equivalent or greater number of votes from the 130 counties outside of Metro Atlanta than from Georgia’s 29-county urban and suburban core. This marks a dramatic shift from previous cycles. Although both Mitt Romney and Saxby Chambliss narrowly carried the Metro region in 2008, the last candidate to secure a majority

of support from Metro Atlanta was Johnny Isakson in 2016, winning 51.4% and significantly outrunning the 45.8% of votes cast for Donald Trump when he shared the ballot with the popular GOP statesman.

The pace of growth in the Metro Atlanta region presents a significant challenge for Republican candidates who fail to remain competitive with suburban voters. Between 2008 to 2024, the share of the state electorate living in the Metro Atlanta area has remained consistent, varying between 57% to 59%, with the share from the other 130 counties ranging from 41% to 43%. In 2016, Trump carried the state by winning 62.2% of votes in the 130 counties outside of the Metro region (approximately 1,032,000 votes) and 45.8% of the vote in Metro Atlanta (1,057,000 votes).

Four years later, the incumbent Trump saw his margin fall slightly in exurban and rural areas to claim 61% of non-Metro Atlanta ballots (1,233,000)—but was bolstered by a significant increase in turnout. The share of active voters casting ballots climbed from 46.5% in 2016 to 56.7% in 2020, an increase of approximately 363,000 votes. However, Metro Atlanta saw an even larger increase in turnout, going from 49.6% in 2016 to 62.6% in 2020, an addition of 607,000 voters. At the same time, Trump's vote share in the Metro region fell from 45.8% to 42.2% (1,229,000), spelling doom for his 2020 reelection bid. In 2024, Trump managed a narrow statewide victory by increasing his vote share in Metro Atlanta to 43%, an increase of 83,000 votes from 2020, while slightly expanding his vote share in the other 130 counties to 62.6%, a gain of 118,000 votes. As statewide turnout reached its highest level since 2008, turnout in Georgia's 130 non-Metro Atlanta counties grew to 60.7%. In the in the 29-county Metro core, turnout reached 66.2%, representing 58% of the electorate statewide, or a total of 3,053,000 voters

In terms of vote share, the presidential margin in Georgia shifted 2.4 percentage points toward Trump in 2024, from a 0.3 percentage point Biden victory in 2020 to a 2.2 percentage point margin for Trump over Harris. This performance fell well-below the six percentage point swing Trump recorded in the national popular vote (from Biden +4.5 to Trump +1.5) and ranked second smallest among the 11-Southern states where Trump’s margin increased the least from 2020.⁸ This trend can partly be explained by the fact that several of Metro Atlanta’s suburban counties—including Barrow, Cobb, Douglas, Henry, Fayette, Forsyth, Newton, Paulding, Rockdale, and Walton—bucked the trend and were among just 11% of counties nationally to shift toward Harris from the vote share won by Biden in 2020 (Bloch et al., 2024).

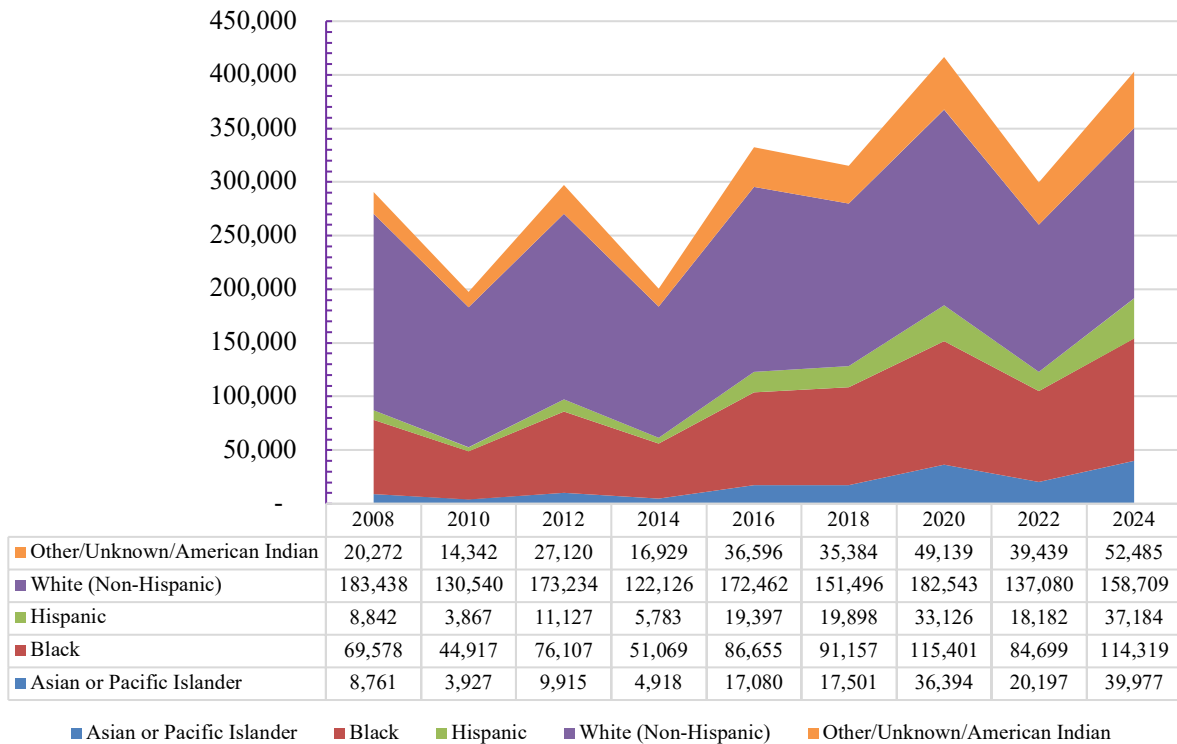
GWINNETT COUNTY AS A MICROCOSM OF GEORGIA’S CHANGING DEMOGRAPHIC LANDSCAPE

Perhaps no county better represents Metro Atlanta’s political shift in concert with its changing demographics than Gwinnett County. Figure 3.3 shows how the racial composition of Gwinnett County’s electorate shifted between 2008 to 2024, with the share of white voters decreasing as both a percentage of the electorate and in real numbers. These changes in the electorate help to explain why appealing to voters of color has become central to Democratic campaigns.

In 2008, when McCain carried Gwinnett by 12-percentage points, the suburban county’s 183,400 white voters comprised 63% of those casting ballots. By 2020, when Trump lost Gwinnett by 17-percentage points, the number of white voters had declined significantly from 2008, down to 158,700. As a percentage of the electorate, white voters fell to just 37%, while the overall number of voters increased by 43% from 290,900 to 416,600.

⁸ North Carolina recorded the smallest percentage point shift among the 11 Southern states, moving 1.9 percentage-points to toward Trump between 2020 and 2024.

Figure 3.3 Gwinnett County's Demographic Change Leads Increasingly Diverse Statewide Electorate

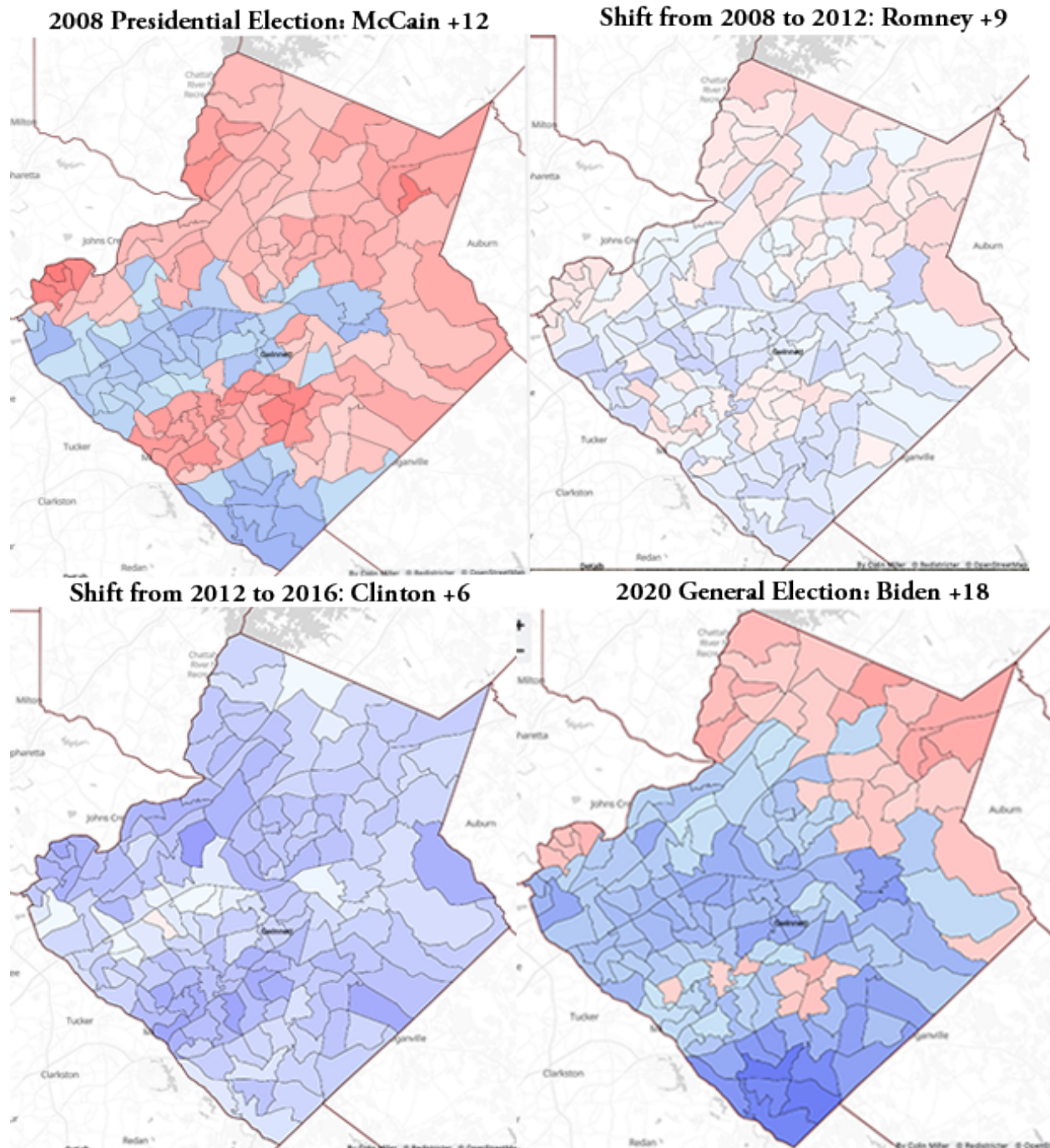


Source: Georgia Secretary of State, compiled by author.

Numerically, during this period, the number of Black voters increased the most, growing by 45,800 to 115,400. The number of AAPI and Hispanic voters increased exponentially, respectively growing by 27,600 and 24,300, to total 36,400 AAPI voters and 33,100 Hispanic voters. As of the 2020 election cycle, approximately 29% of the state's AAPI voters called Gwinnett County home. Although county level breakdowns of vote share by race are not available, if the Republicans won the same 76% vote share among white voters in Gwinnett County in 2008 that McCain won statewide in Georgia, he would have generated 139,400 votes. To claim the same number of white voters in 2024, Trump would have needed to win nearly 88% of ballots cast by white voters in Gwinnett. These figures are presented to demonstrate how Georgia's increasingly diverse electorate shifted the political calculus for two-party competition. As reflected in Table 3.2

and Figure 3.4, as Gwinnett's population grew more diverse, Democratic margins expanded significantly.

Figure 3.4 Gwinnett County: Shift in Presidential Preference by Precinct, 2008 to 2020



Source: Redistrict.com, created by author.

Figure 3.4 shows how these changes affected voter choice by precinct, reflecting the shift in presidential ballot preference between 2008 to 2020. During this period, Gwinnett led the Metro Atlanta region, recording a nearly 29 percentage point swing toward Democrats. While Democratic gains were most pronounced across precincts in Gwinnett’s population centers in the southern and western areas of the county—in some cases recording swings upward of 60-percentage points—all but three of the county’s 156 precincts shifted away from Republicans between 2008 to 2020. Remaining in the GOP column were a handful of precincts stretching into Johns Creek and the North Atlanta suburbs, along with areas bordering on the GOP bastions of Barrow and Hall counties. State Senator Nabilah Islam Parkes, who represents a large section of Gwinnett that stretches from Duluth to Lawrenceville, explained her home county’s changing political headwinds and what it means for its residents:

Gwinnett County is where I grew up. It's the fourth most diverse county in the entire country. And I believe that diverse places like our communities need to have people that understand their lived experiences and they should represent them, whether it's Congress, state senators, state House, I think it's really important that our leaders have shared lived experiences with their constituents. And so, I'm the daughter of working-class Bangladeshi immigrants. And I wanted to make a difference in American electoral politics because I learned that if you truly want to make change, you need to change the people that are in power (Islam Parkes, 2024).

In the 2022 general election, Sen. Raphael Warnock surpassed Biden’s 2020 margin, winning Gwinnett by 21 percentage points. On the same ballot, however, Gov. Brian Kemp improved on his 2018 performance, in which Stacey Abrams won the county by 14.5 percentage points, to eke out a narrower 10 percentage point defeat in their 2022 rematch. Even as demographic change plays a central role in shifting the preferences of the electorate, the 2022 cycle demonstrates the importance of candidate quality. Although the diversifying electorate generally appears inclined to favor Democratic candidates, more than 18,000 Gwinnett voters cast overlapping ballots for both Republican Brian Kemp and Democrat Raphael Warnock. Mirroring

the county’s changing demographics, voters casting ballots in Gwinnett during the 2022 cycle were rewarded with stickers featuring translations of “I voted” in Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese, English, and Spanish (Nigut, 2022).

OVERVIEW OF GEORGIA’S RECENT POLITICAL HISTORY

Early GOP gains in the 2000s were achieved through a combination of engineering party switches from disaffected Democrats—whose ranks Sonny Perdue himself abandoned in 1998—and by electing a new generation of politicians who first ran for office as Republicans. Generational change among Republicans after 2016 was also accompanied by an increasing focus on aligning with and mirroring appeals to voters successfully employed by Trump (H1A). Former GOP lieutenant governor (2007-2019) Casey Cagle—who began his political career in 1994 as a Republican and defeated an incumbent Democrat to become the youngest member elected to the state Senate at age 28—explained: “Georgia was just a Democrat state and, in order to win in an environment like that for a Republican, you had to have better ideas, you had to make it acceptable to vote Republican... And there wasn’t this tremendous distrust in government to the degree that we experience it today” (Cagle, 2022).

After securing major electoral milestones and capturing leadership posts across the board, Georgia’s Republican Party quickly reached juggernaut status, steamrolling Democrats and rising to win an effective super-majority⁹ in the General Assembly by 2012 (Stewart, 2012). In 2014, Republicans claimed a 10-to-four congressional majority. Over three cycles, including the apportionment of an additional seat in 2012, the GOP picked up three U.S. House seats from when Republicans had a seven-to-six majority in 2008 (Torres, 2012).

⁹ In the state Senate, Republicans held a 38-seat super majority, but in the House were just short of the 2/3rds threshold with a 119-60-1 majority, with Independent Rusty Kidd briefly considering, but deciding against, a party switch to the GOP after the election (Stewart 2012).

Table 3.3 Percentage of Seats Held by Georgia Republicans After Election				
Year	U.S. House	U.S. Senate	State House	State Senate
2008	54%	100%	59%	61%
2010	62%	100%	63%	64%
2012	64%	100%	66%	68%
2014	71%	100%	67%	68%
2016	71%	100%	66%	68%
2018	64%	100%	58%	63%
2020	57%	0%	57%	61%
2022	64%	0%	57%	59%
2024	64%	0%	56%	59%
<i>Source: Ballotpedia, compiled by author.</i>				

Table 3.3 demonstrates how Republicans expanded and preserved their electoral footprint after redrawing Georgia’s legislative and congressional maps following the 2010 Census. The election cycles between 2008 and 2016 were, by and large, a period during which Republicans padded their margins and expanded GOP majorities to achieve supermajorities. This period of electoral growth was paralleled by a simultaneous trend that saw the mass replacement of officeholders who had previously been elected as Democrats supplanted by those who came of age in an era of increasingly heightened polarization and rule by the state GOP. With retirements and electoral defeats, members who had first-hand experience as elected Republicans serving in the minority party also became a diminishing share of the GOP Caucus. As its elected leaders shifted further to the ideological right, Georgia continued to outpace the nation in both population growth and in the increasing diversification of its electorate. Further, as many of Georgia’s more conservative, white Democratic elected officials left their positions or switched parties, the state’s Democratic Party drifted into closer alignment with its national counterpart.

As shown in Table 3.3, Democrats started making in-roads to break the GOP's legislative supermajority ahead of the 2018 cycle, after picking up two state House seats in 2016 to narrow the GOP's advantage in the lower chamber to 118-62. In December of 2017, Democrat Jen Jordan won a special election to replace 6th district state Senator Hunter Hill, who resigned to seek the Republican nomination for governor, ending GOP's Senate supermajority. Shortly thereafter, in the 2018 cycle, Democrats picked up 11 House seats and elected replacements for two outgoing Republicans to increase the size of their Senate caucus to 21-members, approaching the 22-member threshold held by the party from 2004 to 2010.

Of the 16-seats gained by Democrats between 2016 to 2018, all were in Metro Atlanta—with six in Gwinnett, five in Fulton, two in Cobb, two in DeKalb, and one in Henry County. Democrats defeated seven Republican incumbents and replaced nine retiring GOP members in open seats, while electing 10 women among the diverse class, which also included an openly gay man (Rep. Wilson, 80th District), the lone Jewish member of the General Assembly (Rep. Wilensky, 79th District), and five new members of the Legislative Black Caucus. These gains support hypothesis H5 and H6, showing that Democrats have increased their membership by electing a greater number of women and Black leaders. During the 2018 cycle, Republicans counteracted these gains by flipping House seats in more rural and exurban districts, including the 138th District in Americus and the 117th and 119th Districts that surround Athens.

In 2020, as Democrats picked up a state Senate district and three House seats—all in Metro Atlanta—Republicans defeated Bob Trammell, the sitting Democratic House Minority Leader. Trammell was the lone remaining white male from rural Georgia, losing reelection after national Republican groups spent \$1 million to oust him from the Luthersville-based House district he represented for six years (Prabhu, 2020). Even as Democrats inched back up to win 76 House seats

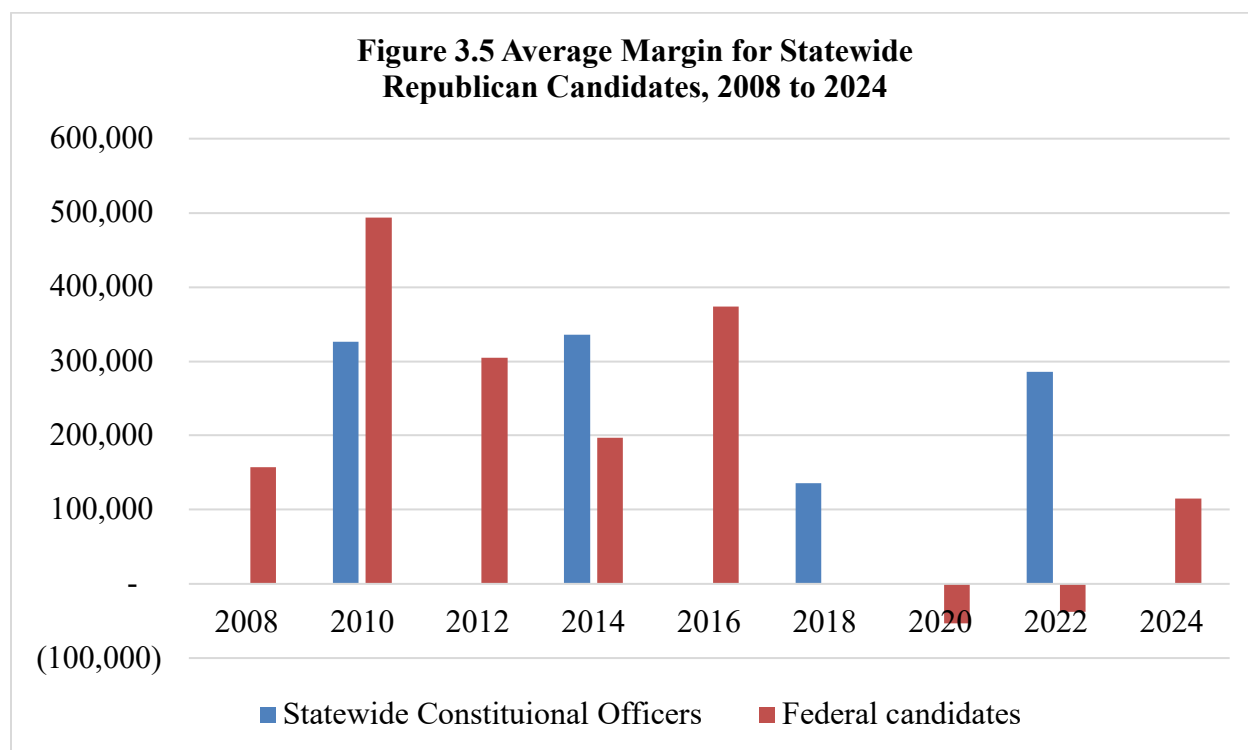
in 2020, followed by 79 seats in 2022 and 80 seats in 2024—the party’s best showing since it was thrust into the minority in 2004 with 86 seats—Trammell’s loss highlighted the dramatic change in racial and geographic polarization that had occurred within the legislature. By 2022, state Representative Debbie Buckner of the Talbot County-based 137th district was the only white Democrat representing a rural district in the Georgia General Assembly.

THE RISE OF RENEWED TWO-PARTY COMPETITION IN GEORGIA

Since at least 2015, veteran GOP pollster Whit Ayres has been calling attention to the widespread trend in which, “elderly whites are dying off, and [are] not going to be replaced by comparable numbers of whites coming along” (Ayres, 2015, 2024A). Meaning that, “in order to be competitive in the new America, the Republican Party has got to reach out to people who have not traditionally been part of the Republican coalition [... going] beyond the traditional white conservative Republican voter” (Ibid). After eight years with Donald Trump as the GOP’s presidential nominee and party leader in the 2016, 2020, and 2024 election cycles, a significant and expanding share of the electorate has little-to-no recollection of the Republican Party before it was helmed by Trump. Nevertheless, during this period, Republican campaigns have made modest inroads with people of color in Georgia. This is important for the party to remain politically competitive, as Georgia’s population is expected to reach the tipping point at which more than 50% of state residents will be non-white in 2028 (Georgia Office of Planning and Budget, 2024). Despite recent gains, Georgia ranked as the fourth most racially polarized state in 2020 and ranked fifth nationally in 2024 for the largest gap between the share of white and nonwhite voters casting ballots for Trump (*Fox News*, 2020, 2024).

Nationally, Georgia ranked seventh in 2020 and ninth in 2024 among the 50 states for the share of non-Hispanic white voters supporting Trump (Ibid). Among white voters, the lion’s share

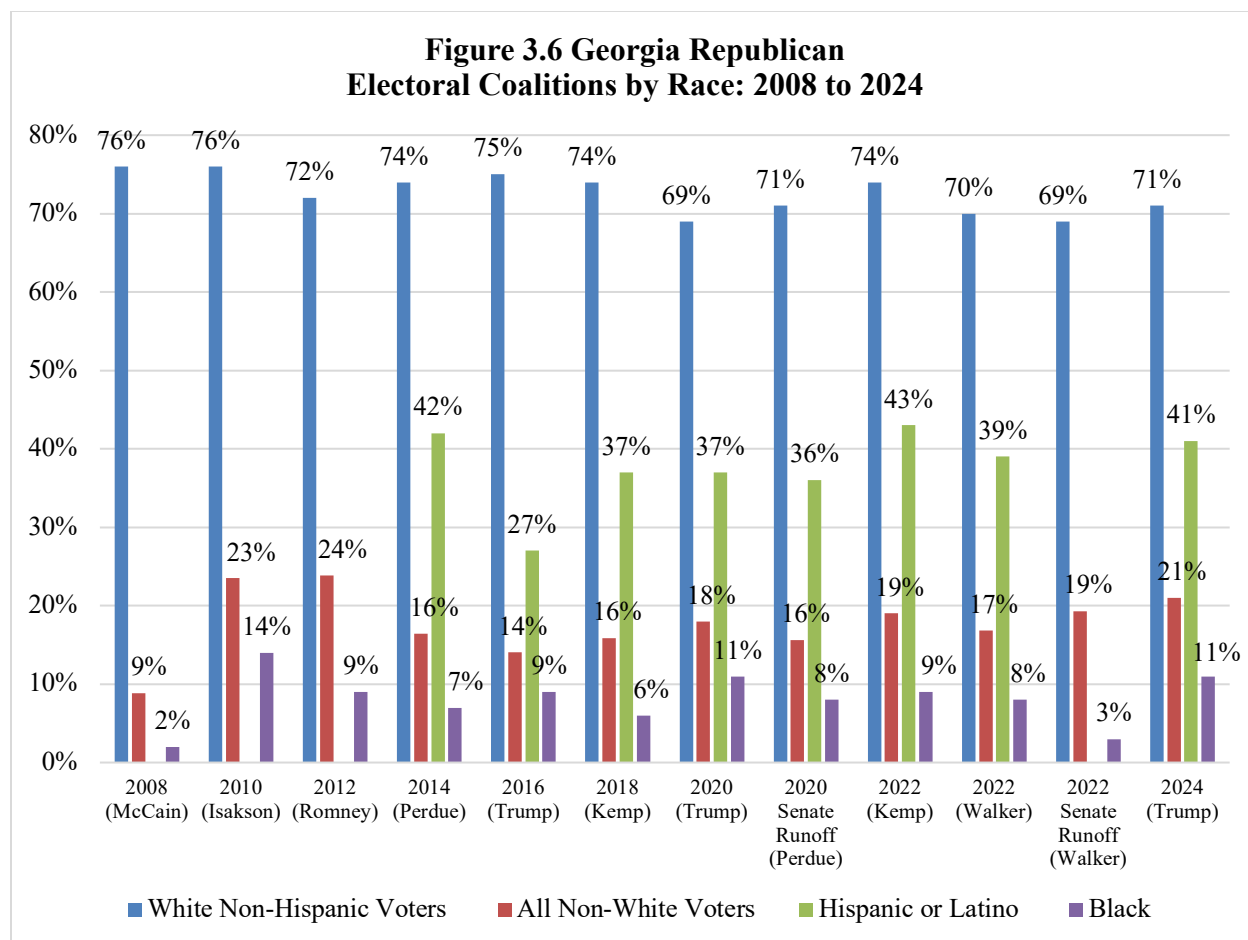
of those casting ballots in recent state elections have also identified as evangelical Christians. Overall, between 2008 to 2024, 26% to 37% of Georgia’s electorate has been comprised of white evangelicals (National Election Pool, 2008B, 2024). In 2016, Trump set the contemporary record for the GOP’s performance among these voters, winning 92% of ballots cast. This figure is slightly greater than the 91% of white evangelicals who supported Trump in 2024, when the group comprised 31% of the electorate (53% of white voters). In 2022, Kemp won a similar share of 91% of white evangelicals, who comprised 33% of the state’s full electorate and 53% of white Georgia voters.



Source: Georgia Secretary of State, compiled by author.

Figure 3.5 displays the average margin of victory for statewide Republican candidates for Georgia’s eight executive offices in comparison to races for president and U.S. Senate. While Democrats made inroads in 2018 to lose statewide by an average margin of 135,600 votes (3.4% of votes cast), in 2022, Republicans won by an average of nearly 286,000 votes (7.2% of votes

cast)—not far off from the raw vote margins generated at the height of GOP power. The closest contest that cycle was the race for lieutenant governor, in which Burt Jones defeated Democratic challenger Charlie Bailey by 194,000 votes (9.2%). In the previous cycle, Geoff Duncan had narrowly prevailed over businesswoman Sarah Riggs Amico by a margin of 0.4% and Gary Black was the top GOP performer statewide, winning his race by a margin of 6.2 percentage points.



Source: Exit Polls (2008, 2016, 2020, 2024 Presidential; 2014, 2022 U.S. Senate; 2018, 2022 Governor); Survey USA (2010 (Isakson), 2012 (Presidential)); CNN/SRSS (2022 runoff), Georgia Secretary of State, author calculations.

With Metro Atlanta’s suburban precincts shifting towards Democratic candidates, the share of white voters won by Republicans has consistently trended downward in recent years. Figure 3.6 displays how the GOP’s electoral coalitions evolved between 2008 and 2024. Republican candidates such as David Perdue (2020/2021), Herschel Walker (2022), and Donald Trump in his

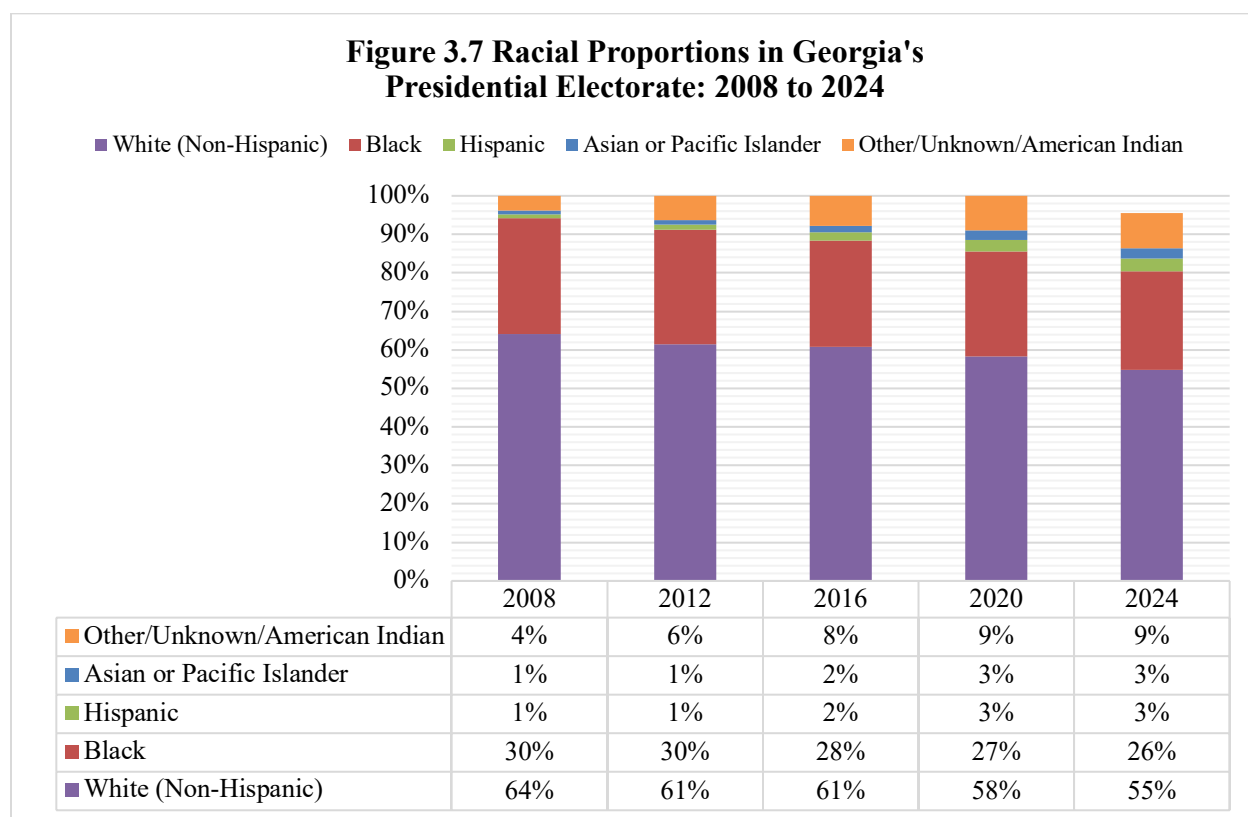
2020 campaign, who secured less than 72% of support from white voters and obtained meager levels of support from non-white voters—registering in the teens or low-20s—have been on the losing side of statewide races. The exception to this pattern was Trump’s 2024 victory, in which he won support from 71% of white voters who comprised 59% of the electorate and 21% of voters of color, who comprised 41% of the electorate. Had Harris won support from an additional two percent of white voters to reach the 30% threshold of support proposed as part of hypothesis H2, she would have likely defeated Trump.

Although maintaining significant margins among white voters is a key component for a successful Republican candidate in Georgia, it has become increasingly difficult to achieve a majority without making inroads among non-white voters. Further, as Hispanic and AAPI Georgians have grown to comprise a larger share of those casting ballots, the state’s electorate can no longer be captured simply through the traditional Black-white dichotomy long observed. In addition to holding Abrams to just 25% of support among white voters in 2022, Kemp also won 43% of Hispanic voters, 46% of Asian voters, and 47% of voters of other races. Since 2012, Kemp’s vote share of 19% among voters of color ranks third behind Isakson’s record 2016 performance, when he won 24%, and behind Trump’s 2024 campaign, in which he won support from 21% of non-white voters.

In 2008, when John McCain secured support from 76% of white voters, he needed just nine percent of non-white Georgians to cobble together 52.2% of the statewide vote because white voters comprised over 64% of the electorate (National Election Pool, 2008B). A decade later, when Brian Kemp received a comparable 74% of the white vote in 2018, he edged past Stacey Abrams with a vote share of just 50.2%, as the portion of the electorate made up of white voters slid to less

than 59%. Kemp won support from approximately 16% of non-white voters who cast the remaining 41% of ballots.

As shown in Figure 3.7 (and as reported by Georgia’s Secretary of State,) between 2008 and 2024, the representation of white (non-Hispanic) voters as a percentage of the electorate decreased from 64% to 55% and the percentage of Black voters decreased from 30% to 26%. At the same time, the percentage of other/unknown voters increased from four percent to nearly nine percent—accounting for about half of the combined drop from white and Black voters. During the same period, Asian and Hispanic voters increased their share of the electorate from two percent to six percent.



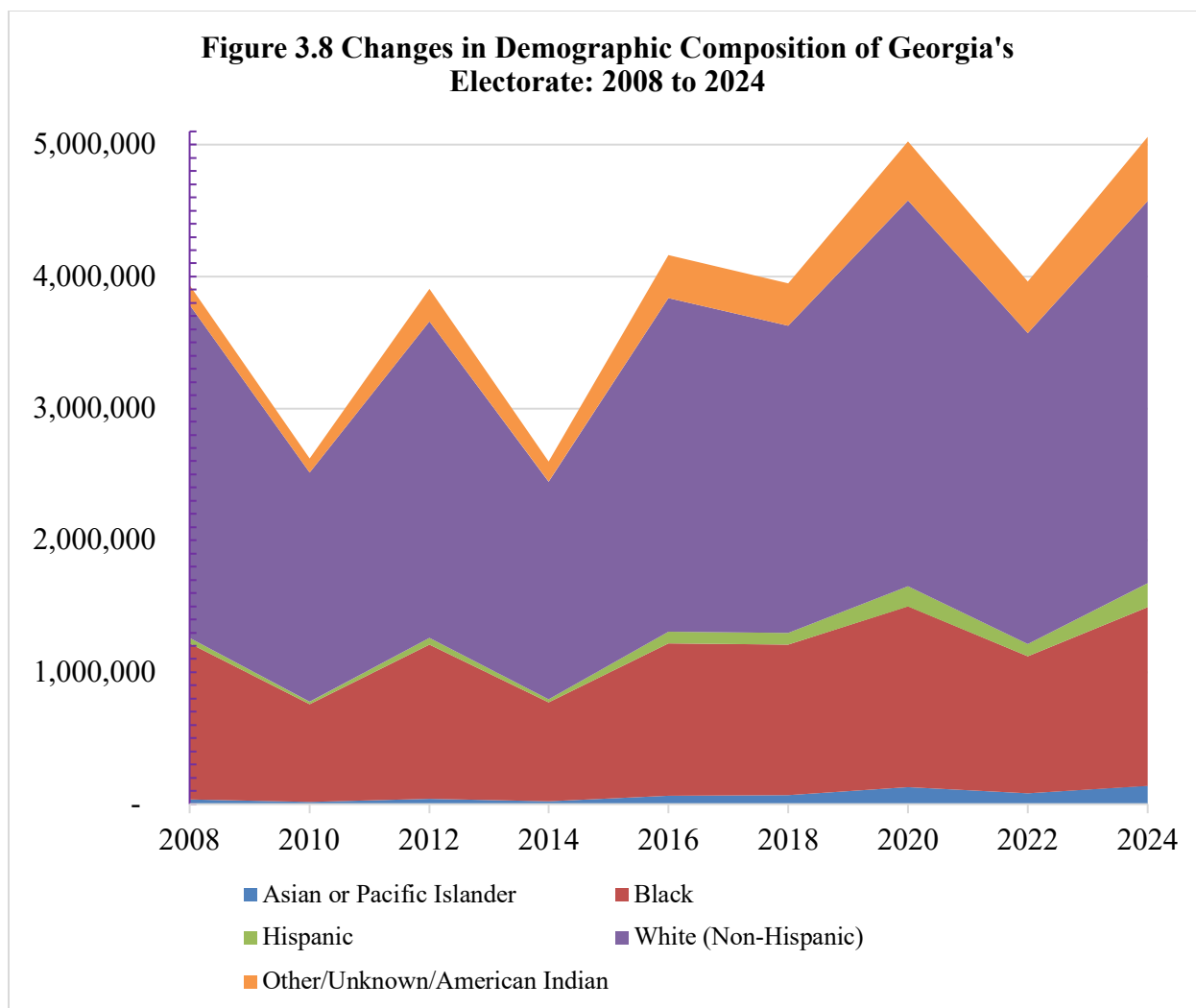
Source: Georgia Secretary of State.

In 2024, Trump received support from 11% of Black voters, up from nine percent in 2016, along with support from 41% of Hispanic voters, marking a significant improvement from the 27%

he won in his first presidential bid and the 37% he won in 2020 (National Election Pool, 2016B, 2020B, 2024). However, Trump made no gains among Black voters between 2020 and 2024. In the modern era, Johnny Isakson's dominant performance in 2016 remains the high watermark for Republicans in winning support from Black voters. That cycle, Georgia's senior U.S. senator registered support from 18% of Black voters against Democrat Jim Barksdale (National Election Pool, 2016B).

As displayed in Figure 3.7 and Figure 3.8, with the share of the electorate represented by white Georgians declining, the prospects of victory for Republican candidates depends on maintaining large margins among white voters in addition to securing greater support from non-white voters. Trends in the demographics of Georgia's electorate have mirrored the demographic shifts of the state's population, reenforcing the strong likelihood that the state's pool of active voters will become even more diverse in the future cycles. Despite the demographic headwinds that have improved the outlook for Democrats, Republicans have not lost an election for state executive office against a non-incumbent in more than two decades.¹⁰

¹⁰ Three incumbent Democrats last won in 2006: Attorney General Thurbert Baker (1997-2011), Commissioner of Agriculture Tommy Irvin (1969-2011), and Commissioner of Labor Michael Thurmond (1999-2011).



Source: Georgia Secretary of State.

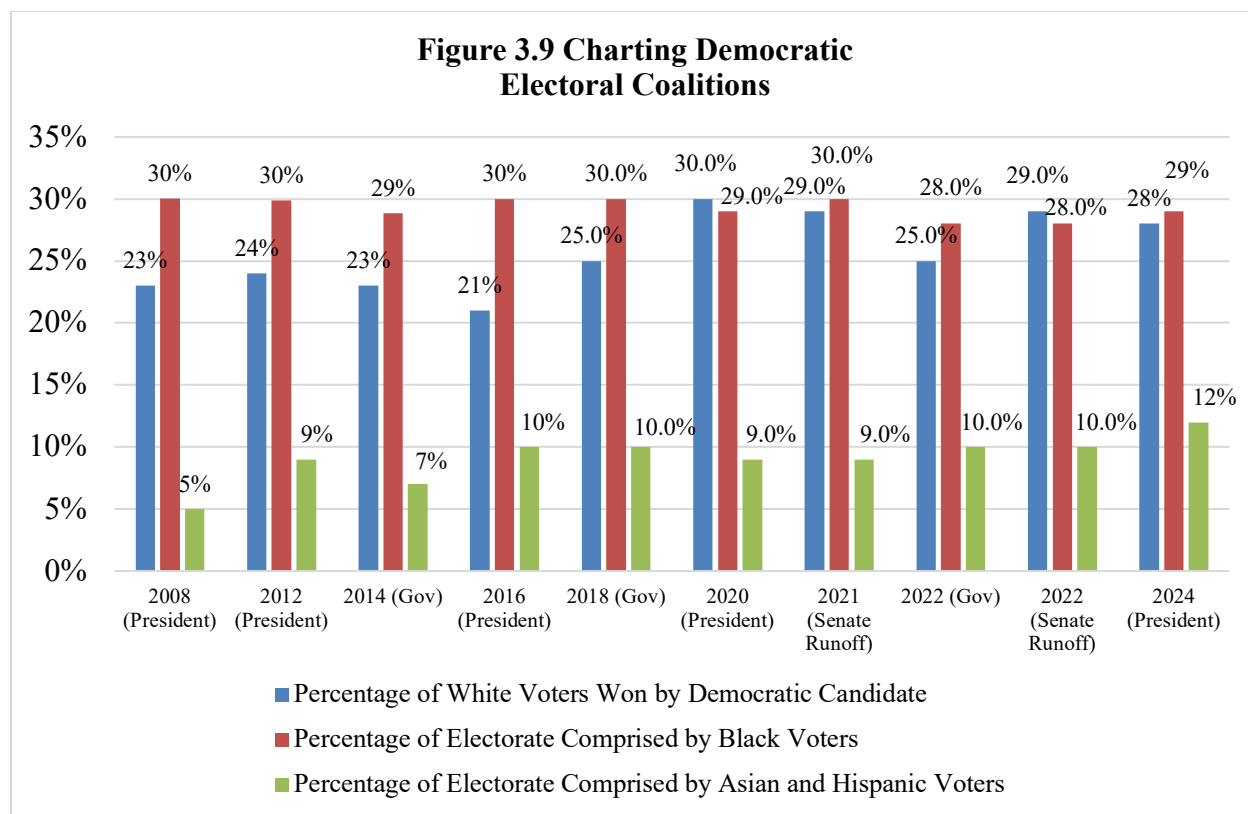
Between 2010 and 2022, the share of Georgia's electorate comprised by white voters has steadily ticked down from 66% (2010) to less than 60% (2022) in recent midterm cycles, and from 64% (2008) to 55% (2024) in presidential cycles (Georgia Secretary of State). The underlying population growth driving this trend is shown in Figure 3.8. During this period, the demographic group recording the greatest increase in voter participation is Asian and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Georgians. The number of AAPI voters in midterm cycles has increased nearly five-fold, from 16,600 (2010) to 80,600 (2022), and in presidential cycles from 36,400 (2008) to 140,000 (2025). Hispanic voters have also recorded significant gains to comprise greater than three percent of the

electorate in 2024 (179,600) and 2.3% in 2022 (92,600)—up from just over one percent in both 2008 and 2010. While exit polls generally report Hispanic turnout at significantly higher levels (see Figure 3.9), data from Georgia’s Secretary of State is used for Figures 3.7 and 3.8.

Georgia State Representative Michelle Au, chair of the General Assembly’s AAPI Caucus, has pointed to the success of Democratic efforts to activate and turnout AAPI voters as a core element that “turned the tide in Georgia” to produce a “margin of victory which was quite narrow,” but put the state’s sixteen electoral votes in the Democratic column for the first time since 1992 and elected Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock to the U.S. Senate (Au, 2024). Au described how the state’s changing demographics are being reflected in the electorate and what that means for campaigns and public policy in the future—making the case that:

Georgia especially has tended to view political demographics as white voters and Black voters, and that’s it... So, it’s like, why bother? [Asian voters are] only 4.5% of the Georgia population, right? However, a couple of things. One, it’s the fastest growing voting bloc in the country and in Georgia. So, that’s like—missed opportunity. And I think Republicans are realizing that [... AAPI voters] are gettable, just the same way they’re gettable by Democrats...

The second thing is that, recognizing that we are a smaller voting bloc than some others, is that we have a lot of shared interest with other communities of color... Even if Asians are only 4.5% of the population, with all the other communities of color, we actually have the majority of voters in this state. So, we should be able to use that majority and to use the power of that math to get the priorities that we share (Au, 2024).



Source: Exit Polls (2008, 2016, 2020, 2024 Presidential; 2021, 2022 U.S. Senate Runoff, 2014, 2018, 2022 Governor); Survey USA (2012 Presidential); CNN/SRSS (2022 runoff), Georgia Secretary of State (2008-2022), author calculations.

Figure 3.9 evaluates the performance of Democratic candidates for president, U.S. Senate, and governor in the context of support generated from white voters, the share of the electorate comprised of Black voters, and the proportion of voters from Asian and Hispanic backgrounds. The framework for a 30-30 election, in which Democrats win support from 30% of white voters and Black voters make up 30% of the electorate, is consistently applied across this study to test hypothesis H2. This analysis is also accompanied by subsequent explorations into the effects of gender and education levels on voter choice and polarization.

Although, at various intervals, Democrats have achieved 30% of support from white voters (2020) and Black voters have made up 30% of the electorate (2008 and 2012), no Democratic candidate for president, U.S. Senate, or governor has achieved both markers simultaneously in

Georgia during the period tracked by this study. Despite this shortcoming, Georgia has helped to define the standard for the 30-30 minima in the Deep South through recent Democratic victories. In 2020, 2021, and 2022, Democrats won 29% to 30% of white voters and Black voters comprised 27% to 29% of the electorate—a key point in support of the second hypothesis put forward as part of this theory (H2).

Georgians from Asian and Hispanic backgrounds represented between four to six percent of the electorate in each of these cycles, delivering consistently strong levels of support that helped to push Democrats over the 50% threshold in 2021 and 2022. In 2008, when Asian and Hispanic voters represented just five percent of the electorate, Jim Martin forced Saxby Chambliss to a runoff with 47% of the vote (and 3.4% won by Libertarian Allen Buckley). Martin claimed support from 26% of white voters, while Black voters represented 30% of the electorate.

A similar performance in 2018—in which she won 25% of white voters and Black voters made up 29% of the electorate—was almost enough to vault Stacey Abrams to the governorship, due in part to an increase in turnout among Asian and Hispanic residents, which had doubled relative to 2008 (to 10%) in her 1.4 percentage point defeat. These trends reveal that it is possible to offset weakness with white voters or in Black turnout levels by securing stronger levels of support from Georgians who do not fit into either of these categories. However, the 30% thresholds for white support and Black turnout remain useful to the extent that at least one of these markers should be achievable for a candidate to chart a path to victory, depending on that candidate's individual strengths.

In raw numbers, between 2008 to 2024, Georgia's presidential electorate grew by 1.4 million voters (35%), from 3.9 million to 5.3 million. Of the net increase to the state's voting rolls, 376,300 were white (28%), while 172,600 were Black (13%), 135,900 were Hispanic (10%),

103,500 were Asian (8%), and 540,500 were unidentified (40%) (Georgia Secretary of State). In mid-term cycles, between 2010 to 2022, the state's electorate grew by 919,600 voters (35%), from 2.6 million to 3.5 million. Of that net increase, 350,700 were white (38%), while 297,900 were Black (32%), 73,200 were Hispanic (8%), 64,000 were Asian (7%), and 235,000 (26%) were unidentified.

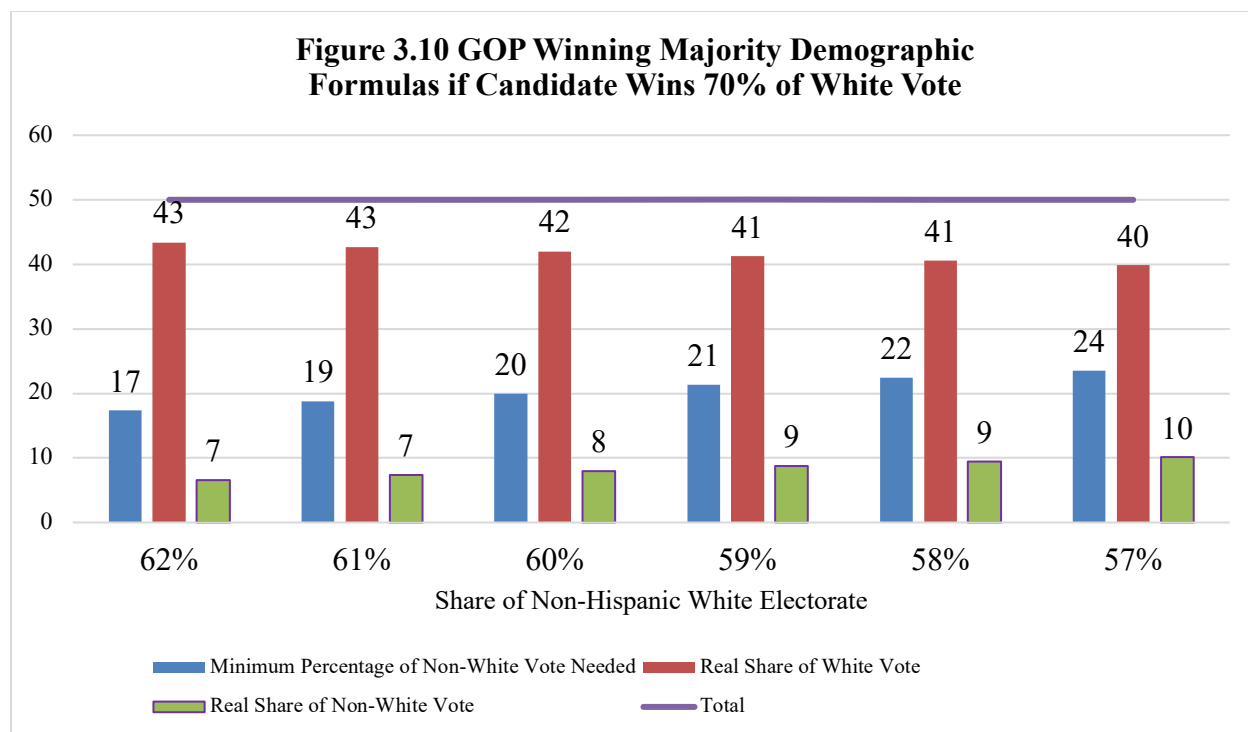
According to exit polls, in 2008, Obama received 23% of votes cast by white Georgians for about 580,000 votes or 31% of his 1.8 million total, in addition to 1.3 million votes cast by people of color (92% vote share) that comprised 69% of his total (National Election Pool, 2008B). Whereas, in 2024, Harris won 29% of votes cast by white Georgians for about 906,000 or 36% of the 2.5 million votes she earned, along with 1.6 million votes cast by people of color (77% vote share) that made up 64% of her total (Ibid). Although she received a greater share of votes from white Georgians overall, the differential between Obama in 2008 and Harris in 2024 represented a net increase of 326,000 votes from white Georgians and an increase of 378,000 votes from non-white Georgians.

This analysis offers mixed initial results for assessing hypothesis H3, which states that Black voters have become a larger share of those supporting Democratic candidates. During the period of this study, non-white voters overall have simultaneously gained ground as a share of the electorate and contributed a greater number of votes to Democratic candidates than white voters. However, Black voters have shifted to represent a smaller share of the overall support won by Democratic candidates for president, governor, and U.S. Senate. In 2008, Black voters comprised 63% of Obama's coalition—a figure that decreased to 53% for Harris in 2024. Similarly, in 2008, Black voters represented 56% of those won by Jim Martin, but in 2022, made up just 52% of

Raphael Warnock's overall support. In gubernatorial contests, Black voters delivered 58% of ballots won by Roy Barnes in 2010 and 55% of those won by Stacey Abrams in 2022.

In terms of the partisan split by gender, the GOP's gap with women was roughly equivalent in both cycles, which offers initial evidence to disconfirm hypothesis H4. In 2008, with women comprising 54% of the electorate, 54% of women cast their ballots for Obama. In comparison, 53% of women supported Harris in 2024 when women made up the same share at 54% of the electorate.

Figure 3.10 examines the share of non-white voters needed if a candidate wins 70% of white voters to achieve the 50% threshold required in Georgia. This 70% figure is in line with the share of support won by Republican candidates for major offices in recent cycles, however, it is no longer a foregone conclusion that Republican candidates will capture support from 70%+ of white voters as suburban precincts have trended towards Democrats. Since 2018, white voters have comprised less than 62% of the electorate in statewide midterms (including the 2021 and 2022 runoffs) and in the 2020 and 2024 presidential cycles (Georgia Secretary of State). As shown in Figure 3.10, once white voters fall below the 60% threshold, candidates must secure at least 20% of support from non-white voters to achieve a majority. In 2024, Trump narrowly crossed this marker with 21% of non-white support. When the overall share of white voters falls to 57% of the electorate, the percentage needed jumps up to 24%.



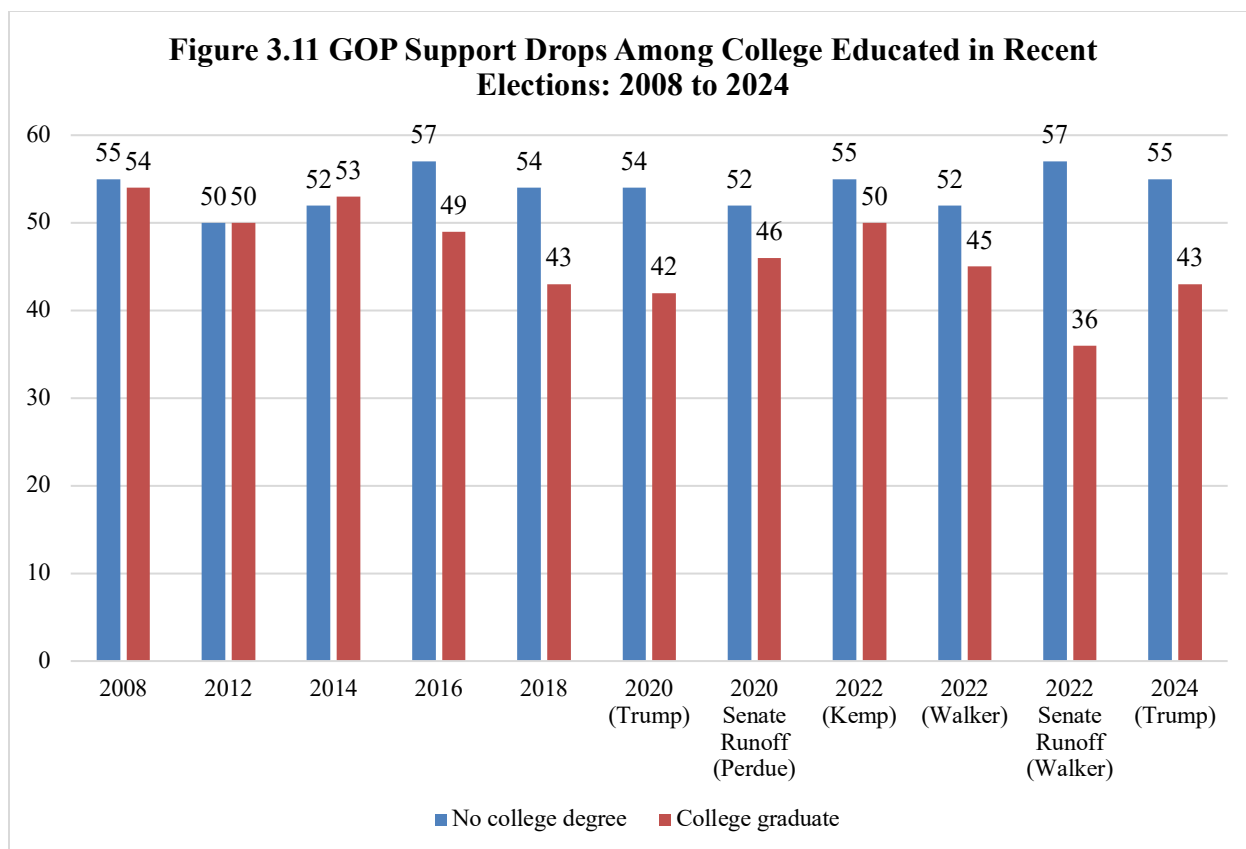
Source: Author calculations.

In recent cycles, GOP candidates have polled in the mid-to-high-30s among Hispanic voters in Georgia, a sufficient level of support to outperform Republicans nationally but not enough to claim victory in the 2020 presidential election or 2022 Senate contest. Pollster Whit Ayres characterized Trump’s performance among Hispanic voters, in which he outperformed Mitt Romney’s 2012 presidential campaign nationally, as “basically an economic vote” (Ayres, 2024A). Ayres asked, “what would Donald Trump’s Hispanic support be with his economic argument if he didn’t have that sort of [inflammatory] rhetoric? ...It’s still hard for me to believe that if you’re ripping into Hispanic immigrants [with] the kind of language he uses that that’s not doing some damage to him in the Hispanic community” (Ibid).

Pablo Cueto, Regional Political director for the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC)—who focuses on the South—is quick to say that Hispanic and Latino voters are “not a monolith, it’s a complex diaspora,” calling that “the biggest misassumption in the environment” (Cueto, 2024). In terms of national background, Mexican Americans represent the

largest share of the nation's 63.7 million Hispanic residents at 58% (37.2 million), followed by Puerto Ricans at nine percent (5.8 million), Salvadorans at 3.9% (2.5 million), and both Dominicans and Cubans at 3.7% (2.4 million) (Moslimani 2023). As of January 2025, approximately 398,500 Hispanic Georgians are registered to vote (Georgia Secretary of State). Estimates put the share of Georgia Latinos of Mexican descent at 49.9%, followed by Puerto Ricans at 10% (Latino Community Fund 2024). An estimated 62% of Georgia's Latino community is under 35, with about half of the total population residing in six counties: Gwinnett, Cobb, Fulton, DeKalb, Hall, and Clayton (Ibid).

As both Hispanic and AAPI voters have grown to comprise a larger share of the electorate, making inroads with these communities remains important to long-term GOP prospects as the vast majority of Georgia's Black voters have not wavered in supporting Democratic candidates. Setting the stage for future cycles, Ayres opined: "I continue to believe that [Hispanics] are the number one swing voter group in the country that will respond to economic messages and immigration messages and rhetoric in a positive or negative way depending on who's doing it. There's also a certain element of those who have been here for years, [who say] 'I've got mine now, I'm not going to worry about you getting yours.' But that's a natural human tendency" (Ayres, 2024A).



Source: Exit Polls (2008, 2016, 2020, 2024 Presidential, 2014, 2022 U.S. Senate, 2018, 2022 Governor); Survey USA (2010 (Isakson), 2012 (Presidential)); CNN/SRSS (2022 runoff), Author Calculations.

At the height of GOP dominance in Georgia, it was not unusual for Republicans to secure equivalent—or greater—levels of support from college-educated voters as from those without four-year degrees. Figure 3.11 demonstrates how Donald Trump’s influence atop the GOP has reset this trend, with GOP support among non-college educated voters remaining flat at 55% from 2008 to 2024, and support dropping precipitously among college graduates, from 54% to 43%, over the same period. As is the case nationally, the largest GOP education gap exists between white voters with college degrees and those without, which is displayed in Table 3.4.

In the 2024 presidential election, the GOP gap in support between white voters without college degrees and those with college degrees grew to a record high of 25-percentage points. As shown in Table 3.4, in the 2008 presidential election, the GOP had a significantly lower gap of

five percent between those voters. Although Trump’s support among white voters without college degrees grew to 82% in 2024 from the 78% won by McCain in 2008, a decrease in support among college educated white voters is most responsible for this widening chasm. In 2008 McCain won support from 73% of college educated white voters. By 2016, this figure dropped to 69% in Georgia. In 2020 and 2024, respectively, Trump won support from 55% and 57% of white college educated voters.

Table 3.4 Georgia GOP Gap Between White College and Non-College Voters Reaches Record High in 2024			
Type	Year	Margin (GOP) Between White Voters without College Degrees and with College Degrees	Margin (GOP) Between Non-White Voters without College Degrees and with Degrees
Presidential	2008	5%	1%
Presidential	2016	12%	-3%
Presidential	2020	24%	3%
Presidential	2024	25%	2%
Governor	2014	12%	-7%
Governor	2018	23%	1%
Governor	2022	20%	-6%
<i>Source: National Election Pool, 2008-2024.</i>			

Table 3.4 also tracks the same trend in the three most recent races for governor, finding a similar pattern. However, in 2022, although Kemp slightly exceeded Trump’s level of support among white non-college educated voters with 83%, he far outperformed among white college educated voters, winning a vote share of 63%. Although the results are mixed in recent cycles, Republicans have tended to garner similar or greater levels support from non-white voters who are college educated as those without college degrees. Kemp’s 2022 reelection bid represents the best recent GOP performance among college educated voters of color, in which the incumbent governor won 23% to 17% of those without college degrees. In 2024, Trump won 22% of support from voters of color without college degrees and 20% of support from those with college degrees.

Describing the GOP Base, NRCC polling director Daniel Luongo, said “I think it’s more of the lower educated, lower income, kind of those Reagan Democrats—what they used to be called—I think those are kind of the base. But then, I think you [reliably] get those college educated men—white men— [and] some of the suburban women” (Luongo, 2024). From 2010 to 2022, the share of Georgia voters with a high school diploma as their highest level of educational attainment has dropped by more than nine-percentage points, falling from 47% to less than 38%. In future cycles, this may present a foreboding trend for Republicans as rhetoric and policy positions from candidates risks further alienating more educated voters as they shift into a pattern of regularly supporting Democrats.

TESTING HYPOTHESES H1 TO H10 IN GEORGIA

Outside of a two-year period during which six Democratic members held office (2021-2023), Republicans have reliably won between nine and 10 of Georgia’s 14 seats in Congress. Marginal contests, in which a difference of less than 10 percentage points separates the top two candidates, have been rare. In 2024, there were no such contests and in 2022, there was just one race that narrowly breached the 10-percentage point threshold, as 2nd District Democrat Sanford Bishop faced his closest challenge in more than a decade against first-time GOP candidate Chris West. Perhaps due to the rarity of competitive general elections, most of Georgia’s congressional Republicans have remained steadfast in their loyalty to Trump.

None of Georgia’s Republican members voted to impeach Trump in either 2019 or 2021, while seven out of nine members of the U.S. House of Representatives serving in 2020 signed on to the amicus brief asking the Supreme Court to halt the certification of Biden’s 2020 Electoral College victory. The two incumbent Georgia House Republicans who declined to join that effort were retiring 7th District Representative Rob Woodall and retiring 14th District Representative Tom

Graves. The fact that the two retiring Republicans were the only Georgia delegation members absent from Mike Johnson's effort offers initial support for the notion that members seeking reelection generally saw value in supporting Trump's claims of a stolen election in ways that Republicans exiting office did not.

Six members of Georgia's House delegation voted to object to the certification of Biden's Electoral College victory, while three GOP members joined all Democrats in supporting the certification. The members breaking away from the pro-Trump wing included 3rd District Congressman Drew Ferguson, 8th District Congressman Austin Scott, and Senator Kelly Loeffler. However, of these three, Ferguson retired four years later and was replaced by staunchly pro-Trump Congressman Brian Jack, who worked as part of Trump's first administration. Loeffler had announced her support for objecting to the Electoral College certification at a rally with Trump ahead of Georgia's 2021 runoff vote but abandoned her position at the last minute. However, after investing more than \$1 million in Trump's 2024 reelection campaign, Loeffler was rewarded with a cabinet post to lead the Small Business Administration. Taken together, these points also offer support for hypothesis H1A, and the notion that Georgia's congressional delegation has shifted more closely in line with Trump's preferences between 2020 and 2024.

Overall, as reflected in Table 3.5, among 21 Republicans elected to U.S. House, U.S. Senate, and Georgia's governorship between 2016 and 2024, 12 fit into the category of MAGA Republicans and nine are classified as Sometimes Trump Republicans, while none of these officeholders fit into the third category of anti-Trump Republicans. In addition to tracking endorsements from Trump and those delivered in support of his presidential campaign ahead Georgia's 2024 primary, this study also considers views expressed in relation to Trump's claims of a stolen election by officeholders who were not eligible to sign on to the 2020 Supreme Court

amicus brief or to vote on the certification of Biden's electoral college victory in 2021. Four Georgia Republicans are credited with defending Trump's claims as part of this group, including David Perdue, Rich McCormick, Mike Collins, and Brian Jack.

Even as Trump campaigned against Brian Kemp and recruited Perdue as his challenger in 2022, Georgia's popular governor did not attack Trump back and consistently offered his support for the former president during the general election campaign in 2024 (VandeHei & Allen, 2024). In fact, as detailed in subsequent portions of this study, Kemp's muted reaction to Trump's attempt to oust him offers support for hypothesis H1A and the idea that maintaining support for Trump—even in the face of oncoming attacks from Trump—is a requirement for office-seeking Republicans to survive politically. Although Deal lent his support to an effort to bolster confidence in state elections that was inspired at least, in part, by Trump-led efforts casting doubt on the outcome of Georgia's 2020 election, the former governor—like other establishment-minded Republicans examined by this study—did not publicly abandon Trump or satisfy the criteria set forth to be considered an anti-Trump Republican. Alternatively, former Republican lieutenant governor Geoff Duncan was the highest-ranking Georgia Republican to actively campaign against Trump, making the case that “If you vote for Kamala Harris in 2024, you're not a Democrat, you're a patriot” (Manchester, 2024).

Table 3.5 Hypothesis H1: Most Georgia Republicans Run with Trump								
Office	Name	Class	Trump Endorsed?	Endorsed Trump in 2024 Primary?	2020 Amicus Brief? (2020 Reps.)	EC Obj. Vote? (Cong.)	Stolen 2020 claims? (If N/A for others)	Hypothesis 1:
GA-01	Buddy Carter	2014	Yes (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	MAGA Republican
GA-03	Brian Jack	2024	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican
GA-03	Drew Ferguson	2016	Yes (2022)	No	Yes	No	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
GA-03	Lynn Westmoreland	2004	No	No	N/A	N/A	No	Sometimes Trump Republican
GA-06	Rich McCormick	2022	Yes (2022)	Yes	N/A	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican
Ga-06	Karen Handel	2017	Yes (2017)	No	N/A	N/A	No	Sometimes Trump Republican
GA-07	Rob Woodall	2010	No	No	No	N/A	No	Sometimes Trump Republican
GA-08	Austin Scott	2010	Yes (2020)	Yes	Yes	No	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
GA-09	Andrew Clyde	2020	Yes (2022)	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
GA-09	Doug Collins	2012	No	Yes	Yes	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican
GA-10	Mike Collins	2022	Yes (2022)	Yes	N/A	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican
GA-10	Jody Hice	2014	Yes (2022)	No	Yes	Yes	N/A	MAGA Republican
GA-11	Barry Loudermilk	2014	Yes (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	MAGA Republican
GA-12	Rick Allen	2014	Yes (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	MAGA Republican
GA-14	Marjorie Taylor Greene	2020	Yes (2022)	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
GA-14	Tom Graves	2010	No	No	No	N/A	No	Sometimes Trump Republican

U.S. Sen.	David Perdue	2014	Yes (2020, 2022)	Yes	N/A	Said he would have	Yes	MAGA Republican
U.S. Sen.	Kelly Loeffler	2019	Yes (2020)	Yes	N/A	No, but spoke in favor at rally	Yes	MAGA Republican
U.S. Sen.	Johnny Isakson	2004	No	No	N/A	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
Gov.	Brian Kemp	2018	Yes (2018); No (2022)	No	N/A	N/A	No	Sometimes Trump Republican
Gov.	Nathan Deal	2010	No	No	N/A	N/A	No	Sometimes Trump Republican
<i>Source: Compiled by author; Washington Post (2021); Ballotpedia.</i>								

As Republicans embraced Trump, Georgia Democrats sought to rebuild a viable coalition to reignite two-party competition statewide. Hypothesis H2 evaluates whether Democratic candidates can win by claiming support from 30% of white voters and turning out Black voters to comprise 30% of the electorate. The next series of tables shed light on the level of support won by Democrats (as reported by exit polls) from white voters, Black voters, and those of other races, and how that support stacks up in terms of the share of overall support won by Democratic candidates. This analysis also offers a framework to assess hypotheses H3 and H7 on changes in racial polarization within Georgia's electorate.

Table 3.6 Black Turnout in Georgia (Percentage of Electorate)									
Office	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
President	30		30		30		29		29
Governor		28		29		30		28	
U.S. Sen.	28	28		29	30		30	28	
<i>Source: Exit polls, Black turnout adjusted to level reported by Secretary of State for 2010 and 2012, otherwise National Election Pool (2008, 2014-2024); Survey USA (2010 and 2012).</i>									

As demonstrated in Table 3.6, Black turnout as a percentage of Georgia’s overall electorate has remained remarkably consistent, shifting from 30% in the 2008 to 2016 presidential elections to 29% from 2020-2024. In gubernatorial elections, Black voters comprised 28% of the electorate in both 2010 and 2022. In U.S. Senate races, Black voters represented the same share of 28% of the electorate in 2008 and in 2022. However, in terms of the level of support won, Democratic presidential candidates slid from winning 98% of Georgia’s Black voters in 2008 to 88% in 2020 and 2024, while remaining consistent in gubernatorial elections from the 88% won by Roy Barnes in 2010 to the 90% of Black voters won by Stacey Abrams in 2018. Alternatively, Democratic U.S. Senate candidates have maintained consistently stronger levels of support, going from winning 93% of ballots cast by Black voters in 2008 to 92% in 2020 and 96% in the 2022 runoff.

Table 3.7 White Vote Share for Democratic Candidate in Georgia									
Office	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
President	23%		24%		21%		30%		28%
Governor		21%		23%		25%		25%	
U.S. Sen.	26%	15%		23%	19%		29%	30%	
<i>Source: Exit polls, white turnout adjusted to level reported by Secretary of State for 2010 and 2012, otherwise National Election Pool (2008, 2014-2024); Survey USA (2010 and 2012); CNN/SRSS (2022).</i>									

Expanding this analysis to voters of other races, Table 3.7 shows the share of ballots won by Democratic candidates from white voters in Georgia between 2008 and 2024. In terms of satisfying the requirements for a 30-30 election, Democrats have usually approached the threshold

needed from Black Georgians but fallen far short among white Georgians. In this respect, Black voters comprised 30% of the electorate in seven out of 16 elections recorded as part of this study between 2008 and 2024—and hit 29% in four others.

Alternatively, Democrats won 30% of white voters just twice, in the case of Raphael Warnock in the 2022 U.S. Senate runoff against Herschel Walker and Joe Biden’s 2020 presidential breakthrough, while also achieving 29% in the two 2020 U.S. Senate races. It is no coincidence that these are the four statewide elections that Democrats won. Democratic candidates recorded their lowest levels of support from white voters during the earliest cycles observed, bottoming out at 15% in the 2010 Senate contest. However, the share of white voters won by Democratic candidates increased by five percentage points between the 2008 and 2024 presidential elections, by four percentage points between the 2010 and 2022 gubernatorial races, and by four percentage points between the 2008 and 2022 U.S. Senate cycles.

Table 3.8 Other Vote Share for Democratic Candidate in Georgia									
Office	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
President	53%		50%		66%		57%		54%
Governor		74%		62%		59%		52%	
U.S. Sen.	77%	84%		54%	59%		62%	59%	
<i>Source: Exit polls, turnout adjusted to level reported by Secretary of State for 2010 and 2012, otherwise National Election Pool (2008, 2014-2024); Survey USA (2010 and 2012); CNN/SRSS (2022).</i>									

As shown in Table 3.8, over the 16-year period tracked, the level of support won by Democratic candidates from voters of other races has varied to a greater degree than support from white or Black voters. Although Jason Carter won an estimated 74% of these voters in 2010, Stacey Abrams won just 52% of voters of other races in 2022. Moreover, Democratic support among voters of other races dropped from 77% in the 2008 U.S. Senate race to 59% in 2022. However, in presidential cycles, Democratic performances have remained consistent at a lower level of

overall support, with Obama winning 53% of Georgia voters of other races in 2008 and Harris winning 54% in 2024. Because of the huge levels of growth in turnout among voters of other races, Democrats still gained more net support among voters of other races than from Black or white voters in presidential and U.S. Senate contests between 2008 and 2024. Tables 3.9, 3.10, and 3.11 calculate the share of support won by Democratic candidates from Black voters, white voters, and those of other races using the same methodology of multiplying the vote share received by Democrats with the level of turnout recorded for each demographic group and then dividing that figure by the overall share of support won by each Democratic candidate.

Table 3.9 Democratic Vote Share from Black Voters in Georgia									
Office	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
President	63%		58%		58%		52%		53%
Governor		58%		57%		57%		55%	
U.S. Sen.	56%	62%		59%	58%		54%	52%	
<i>Source: Compiled by author using data from National Election Pool (2008, 2014-2024); Georgia Secretary of State (2010, 2012); Survey USA (2010 and 2012); CNN/SRSS (2022).</i>									

Table 3.10 Democratic Vote Share from White Voters in Georgia									
Office	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
President	32%		32%		27%		37%		34%
Governor		32%		33%		31%		34%	
U.S. Sen.	38%	25%		33%	28%		35%	36%	
<i>Source: Compiled by author using data from National Election Pool (2008, 2014-2024); Georgia Secretary of State (2010, 2012); Survey USA (2010 and 2012); CNN/SRSS (2022).</i>									

Table 3.11 Democratic Vote Share from Voters of Other Races in Georgia									
Office	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
President	6%		10%		14%		11%		13%
Governor		10%		10%		12%		11%	
U.S. Sen.	7%	12%		8%	14%		11%	12%	
<i>Source: Compiled by author using data from National Election Pool (2008, 2014-2024); Georgia Secretary of State (2010, 2012); Survey USA (2010 and 2012); CNN/SRSS (2022).</i>									

Hypothesis H3 puts forward the proposition that, between 2008 and 2024, Black voters have become a larger share of those supporting Democratic candidates in the electorate. However, while support generated from Black voters declined slightly, Democratic candidates saw increased support from white voters and those of other races. At the presidential level, the share of Democratic votes from Black voters decreased from 63% in 2008 to 53% in 2024. In races for governor, the share of Democratic votes provided by Black voters decreased from 58% in 2010 to 55% in 2022, while shifting from 56% in the 2008 U.S. Senate race to 52% in 2022. Between 2008 and 2024, the net margin generated for Democrats from Black voters declined by four percentage points for candidates for president, while remaining essentially flat for candidates for governor (+0.3 percentage points), and increasing slightly among Democratic U.S. Senate candidates (+0.8 percentage points). While the decrease in vote share is partly due to Democratic candidates picking up increased support from white voters and those of other races, these figures nonetheless provide support to disconfirm hypothesis H3 for Georgia.

As outlined above, because of the relative dip in Democratic performance with Black voters, Democrats lost ground with Black voters in presidential elections, while remaining essentially level in gubernatorial and U.S. Senate contests. By steadily improving and increasing their vote share from the teens and low-20s to reach 30% of ballots cast by white voters during the final cycles covered by this study and making even stronger gains among voters of other races, Democrats put themselves in position to claim victory in 2020, 2021, and 2022.

Table 3.10 shows that, between 2008 and 2024, white voters have generally become a bigger part of the democratic coalition. At the presidential level, the share of overall Democratic support won from white voters increased from 32% in 2008 to 34% in 2024, a shift equivalent to adding approximately 1.6 percentage points to the Democratic candidate's margin. In

gubernatorial races, the share of Democratic support won from white voters increased from 32% won in 2010, when Barnes secured 43% statewide, to 34% in 2022, when Abrams won 46% of all ballots cast, representing a nearly identical 1.6 percentage point addition to her overall margin. At the U.S. Senate level, Warnock's 2022 performance, in which white voters comprised 36% of his majority coalition statewide, represented a slight decrease from 2008, when white voters made up 38% of Martin's 47 percentage point haul. However, by winning 30% of white voters in comparison to the 26% claimed by Martin, Warnock still picked up an additional net percentage point among white voters, even as the share of the electorate comprised by white voters decreased from 68% in 2008 to 62% in 2022.

Table 3.11 demonstrates that in contests for president and U.S. Senate, Democrats have gained the most ground in statewide vote share among voters of other races. In presidential races, Democrats saw the share of support contributed from voters of other races more than double from six percent in 2008 to 13% of all ballots won in 2024. This shift is equivalent to a 3.8 percentage point boost to the Democratic candidate's margin. In U.S. Senate races, Democrats moved from generating seven percent of Martin's support from voters of other races in 2008 to 12% of Raphael Warnock's winning majority in 2022, representing an increase of approximately 2.8 percentage points in statewide vote margin. However, so far, this change has been more muted at the gubernatorial level, with Abrams winning just 52% of voters of other races in 2022, in comparison to 59% won by Warnock (see Figure 3.8). Still, Abrams added approximately one percentage point to her margin from Barnes' 2010 performance, in which other voters contributed approximately four percentage points to his margin (10% overall) and secured 11% of the ballots she won from voters of other races.

Table 3.12 Testing Hypothesis H2 by Adjusting Black Turnout to 30% of Electorate and White Democratic Support to 30% of Ballots Cast									
Office	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
President	51.6%		49.3%		51.3%		49.9%		50.1%
Governor		49.6%		49.8%		51.8%		50.3%	
U.S. Senator	50.3%	49.5%		50.1%	47.6%		51.4%	52.8%	
<i>Source: Compiled by author using data from National Election Pool (2008, 2014-2024); Georgia Secretary of State (2010, 2012); Survey USA (2010 and 2012); CNN/SRSS (2022).</i>									

To test hypothesis H2, Table 3.12 holds all other exit poll figures constant while increasing the vote share for Democratic candidates to 30% from white voters in each cycle and adjusting turnout among Black voters to 30% of the electorate. These figures were calculated to account for the fact that increasing the proportion of Black turnout to 30% causes overall turnout to total above 100% in some instances. This is addressed by pro-rating the vote share included from white voters and those of other races down slightly to account for the proportional increase in turnout estimates for Black voters. Under these conditions, Democrats would have crossed the 50% threshold in 10 out of 16 elections tracked by this study and won a plurality of votes cast in five others (which includes the presidential contests of 2012 and 2020), while losing only the 2016 U.S. Senate race outright. Table 3.12 shows Democratic totals under this scenario, offering support to confirm hypothesis H2.

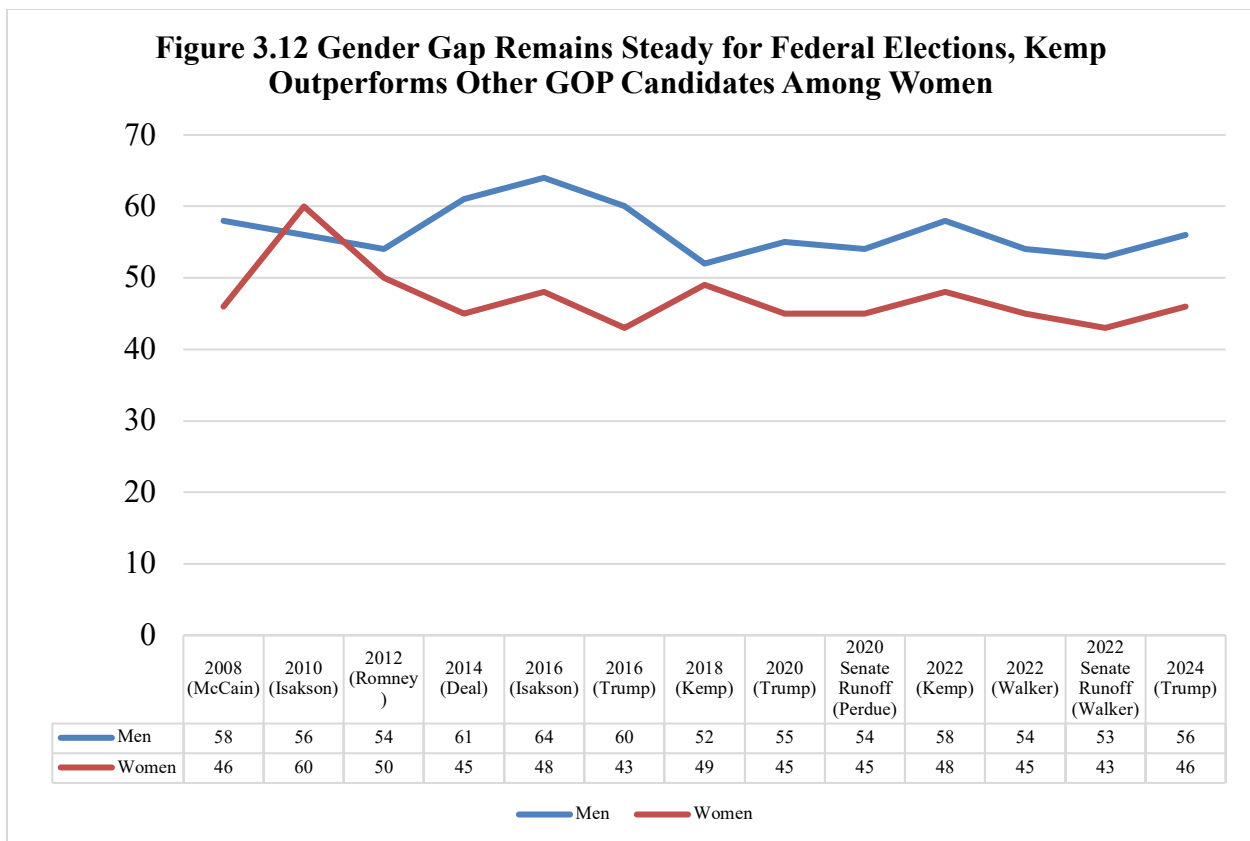
Under these conditions, Democratic candidates would have won a plurality vote share in five cycles and a majority in 10 races, including: the 2008 presidential, the 2008 U.S. Senate race, the 2014 U.S. Senate race, the 2016 presidential, the 2018 gubernatorial, the 2020 U.S. Senate contests (Ossoff and Warnock), the 2022 gubernatorial, the 2022 U.S. Senate contest, and the 2024 presidential. However, largely because most of these candidates failed to reach 30% of support

from white voters, Democrats claimed victory in just four of the at-least 10 hypothetical contests they would have won by meeting the criteria of a 30-30 election.

Table 3.13 Democratic Vote Share from Women Voters in Georgia									
Office	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
President	62%		55%		65%		61%		59%
Governor		47%		60%		56%		59%	
U.S. Sen.	62%	45%		61%	64%		60%	57%	
<i>Source: Compiled by author using data from National Election Pool (2008, 2014-2024); Georgia Secretary of State (2010, 2012); Survey USA (2010 and 2012); CNN/SRSS (2022).</i>									

As the racial demographics of Georgia’s electorate evolved during the 16-year period observed by this study, women remained a majority of those casting ballots in all sixteen elections tracked for president, governor, and U.S. Senate. Table 3.13 demonstrates the share of overall Democratic support from women between 2008 and 2024. These figures provided an initial test of hypothesis H4, which holds that women became a larger share of those supporting Democratic candidates between 2008 and 2024.

As the data show, hypothesis H4 is not supported by evidence from exit polls and other survey research compiled where exit polls were not available (2010, 2012, and 2022 U.S. Senate runoff). Indeed, these materials show the share of overall Democratic support comprised by women voters slid from 62% in the 2008 presidential race to 59% in 2024, from 60% in the 2014 gubernatorial contest to 59% in 2022, and from 62% in the 2008 U.S. Senate race down to 57% in 2022. One clear explanation is that, in the process of becoming more electorally competitive, Democratic candidates improved upon previously dismal performances with men, which dropped as low as 31% of ballots cast in the 2016 Senate contest and 37% for Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign. Alternatively, in 2024, Harris won 43% of men and in 2022 Warnock won 46% of men in the runoff against Walker.



Source: Exit Polls (2008, 2016, 2020 Presidential, 2014, 2022 U.S. Senate, 2018 Governor); Survey USA (2010 Isakson), (2012 Presidential); CNN/SRSS (2022 runoff); Georgia Secretary of State; Author calculations.

In recent cycles, the GOP’s gender gap between men and women in Georgia has remained remarkably consistent, with few exceptions. Most notably, Brian Kemp has outperformed his co-partisans among women, winning 49% of those casting ballots in the hotly contested 2018 gubernatorial race against Stacey Abrams, who if elected, would have become Georgia’s first female governor and the first Black woman to hold a gubernatorial office in the nation. As shown in Figure 3.12, since 2020, the GOP gender gap has hovered around 10-percentage points, with men favoring Republican candidates and women favoring Democratic candidates by similar margins.

In 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, eliminating the constitutional right to

an abortion. As a result, Georgia’s House Bill 481 was implemented, effectively banning abortion in the state. The legislation, which was narrowly passed in 2019, was one of the first major policy priorities of Gov. Kemp. Although Kemp was reelected with support from 48% of women—down only slightly from his 2018 performance—the state’s newly implemented abortion ban also factored into down ballot races. Most notably, in the race for state attorney general, former state Senator Jen Jordan challenged Chris Carr in a campaign that media reports noted, “built most of the foundation” around the issue of abortion (Garbus, 2022). Jordan highlighted an issue that has been the subject to years of litigation around “conflict” between “robust privacy protections” in the state’s constitution and the measure (Ibid). However, although the race was the second closest of eight statewide contests to the open race for lieutenant governor, the incumbent, Carr, prevailed by a margin of 5.2 percentage points, or a difference of more than 206,000 ballots cast.

Since 2020, the GOP’s gender gap among Black Georgia voters has surpassed that among white Georgians in every major cycle. In the 2020 and 2024 presidential elections, the gender gap among white Peach State voters was five percentage points. Among Black voters, the gap was nine percentage points in 2020 and eight percentage points in 2024, with 16% of Black men casting ballots in support of Trump in both cycles, in comparison to a single digit percentage of Black women. Among Latino voters, this gap was 18 percentage points in 2020 and six percentage points in 2024. The narrowing of this gap among Latino Georgia voters is primarily due to an increase in support for Trump among Latino women, which grew from 30% in 2020 to 39% in 2024, as support for Trump among Latino men decreased slightly from 48% to 45%.

Table 3.14 Racial Polarization in Georgia's Electorate									
Office	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
President	74%		63%		66%		58%		60%
Governor		58%		63%		68%		65%	
U.S. Sen.	66%	62%		67%	58%		63%	66%	
<i>Source: Compiled by author using data from National Election Pool (2008, 2014-2024); Georgia Secretary of State (2010, 2012, 2022); Survey USA (2010 and 2012); CNN/SRSS (2022). Figures shown document the gap in vote share won by Republican candidates from Black voters subtracted by the share won from white voters.</i>									

Hypothesis H7 tests whether racial polarization has increased in the electorate between the 2008 and 2024 election cycles. Table 3.14 evaluates this trend by subtracting the vote share won by Republican candidates from Black voters from the share won from white voters. Contrary to hypothesis H7, the largest gap recorded was 74% in the 2008 presidential election, which steadily decreased down to 58% in 2020 and 60% in 2024. However, in gubernatorial elections, the GOP's racial divide expanded slightly during the period of this study, going from 58% in 2008 to 68% in 2018 and 65% in 2022. In U.S. Senate contests, racial polarization was essentially flat, leveling off at 66% in 2008 and in 2022, with minor fluctuations in the intervening cycles.

One possible explanation for the variance in these results from hypothesis H7 is that high levels racial polarization can facilitate two-party competition in instances where Democratic candidates hold support from the vast majority of Black voters but still make inroads with white voters in a 30-30 style election. For example, in 2020 Ossoff and Warnock won an average of 92% support from Black voters and Warnock won 96% in 2022. Combined with 29% of support from white voters in 2020 and 30% in 2022, these figures still produced a racial polarization margin of 63% in 2020 and 66% in 2022. While these figures are on the higher end of the racial polarization margins recorded across the 16-elections examined, they were driven more by high levels of unity among Black voters than from Democratic underperformance among white voters. This comes in

contrast to other instances of extreme racial polarization like the 2014 U.S. gubernatorial contest, in which the gap between the share of white and Black voters won by Nathan Deal stood at 63% but was driven by Deal’s relatively strong performance, in which he won 73% of white voters and 10% of Black voters.

Table 3.15 Gender Polarization in Georgia's Electorate									
Office	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
President	12%		4%		17%		10%		10%
Governor		-3%		14%		3%		10%	
U.S. Sen.	17%	-4%		16%	16%		9%	10%	
<i>Source: Compiled by author using data from National Election Pool (2008, 2014-2024); Survey USA (2010 and 2012); CNN/SRSS (2022). Figures shown document the gap in vote share won by subtracting the share of support won by Republican candidates from women voters with the share of support won from men voters.</i>									

Modeled similarly to H7, hypothesis H8 tests whether gender polarization increased between 2008 and 2024 by comparing the gap in the vote share won by Republican candidates from men and women, respectively. Table 3.15 records gender polarization in the electorate across the sixteen statewide elections considered as part of this study. Though not as clear as the data used to disconfirm hypothesis H7, exit polling and survey research demonstrates that gender polarization has generally decreased in contests for president, governor, and U.S. senator. In 2008, the GOP’s gender gap stood at 12%, a figure that seesawed between 2012 and 2016, before plateauing at 10% in 2020 and 2024. Similarly, in the 2014 gubernatorial race, Deal’s gender gap stood at 14%, a margin that narrowed slightly to 10% in Kemp’s 2022 reelection. U.S. Senate cycles saw the most volatility observed, with the GOP’s gender gap falling from 17% in 2008 and 16% in both 2014 and 2016 to nine percent in 2020 (averaged between the two Senate runoffs) and 10% in 2022.

Table 3.16 Percent Black among Democratic Officeholders in Georgia After Election									
Office	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
Statewide (U.S. Sen., Gov., Constitutional Officers)	66%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	50%	50%	50%
Congress	67%	67%	80%	100%	100%	100%	100%	83%	100%
State Senate	55%	65%	72%	78%	83%	67%	73%	74%	74%
State House	55%	67%	78%	78%	76%	68%	67%	71%	74%
General Assembly	55%	66%	77%	78%	78%	67%	68%	71%	74%
<i>Source: Compiled by author, Georgia General Assembly.</i>									

Of the full 103-member contingent of Democrats serving in the General Assembly in 2025, 74% of the party's membership was comprised by Black legislators (76), up from 55%, or 53 of 97 members in 2009. With 76 members, Georgia's Legislative Black Caucus ranked as the nation's largest of its kind after the 2024 elections (Fuentes, 2024). Recognizing this apparent trend, hypothesis H5 tests whether Black officeholders became a larger share of Democratic Party officeholders between 2008 and 2024 across statewide posts, U.S. House, state Senate, and state House.

Table 3.16 presents longitudinal data collected over the full period of this study. Across almost every category, the share of Black officeholders as a percentage of all elected Democrats has increased between 2008 and 2024. Since 2014, outside of the two-year period between the 2020 and 2022 cycles, Georgia Democrats have only elected Black officeholders to the U.S. House. Among members of the legislature, the share of Black Democratic state senators increased from 55% (12 of 22) to 74% (17 of 23), while the share of Black Democratic state Representatives increased by the same proportion, from 55% (41 of 75) to 74% (59 of 80).

At the state level, this transition can be partly explained by redistricting efforts led by Georgia's GOP majority, which increased the number of majority Black state House seats from 47

after the 2010 Census to 54 after lawmakers redrew maps in 2023, while increasing the number of majority Black state Senate districts from 15 to 16 (Dave's Redistricting, 2020A, 2021A, 2024A, 2024B). Overall, the number of majority-minority state House districts increased from 60 to 81, while the number of majority-minority Senate districts increased from 17 to 22 (Ibid). In contrast to trends observed in Louisiana and South Carolina, however, as the party grew to include a larger share of Black leaders, Democrats have also increased the number of seats won between 2008 and 2024.

Applying a difference of proportions test to each category of officeholders listed in table 3.16 reveals that, at a 95% confidence interval (one-tailed), the shift in the racial composition of Democratic members of the House, as well as state legislators in general, is significant. Testing the shift in the proportion of Black Democrats from 2008 (55%) to 2024 (74%) produces a Z score of -2.49 and a p value of 0.006; similarly, testing the shift in state legislators overall produces a Z score of -2.82 and a p value of 0.002, demonstrating significance at a 95% confidence interval. However, significance is not found for statewide constitutional officers (none in 2010, one of two in 2024), Congress (Z score of -1.42 and p value of 0.076 between 2008 and 2024), or state senate (Z score of -1.25 and p value of 0.087 between 2008 and 2024) when tested alone.

With widespread changes in the makeup of the Democratic Caucus at large, there have also been shifts in the party's leadership at the state Capitol that offer further support for hypothesis H9, which holds that racial polarization has increased in the ranks of elected officeholders, as well as H10, which looks for an increase in gender polarization among officeholders. During the full 16-year period assessed by this study, the top leadership positions in the General Assembly, including the office of speaker of the House, the majority leaders of the House and Senate, and the lieutenant governor's office, have been held by white non-Hispanic men. The lone exception was

a brief two-month period between November of 2022 to January of 2023, when House speaker pro-tempore Jan Jones was elevated to the speakership following the death of incumbent Speaker David Ralston (2010-2022). However, the entirety of this period came while the General Assembly was out of session and Jones was quickly replaced by Speaker Jon Burns when the House convened in January of 2023. Further down the rungs of GOP statehouse leadership also sits Senator Jason Anavitarte, who served as the Senate Majority Caucus Chairman from 2023 to 2025, in addition to chairing the Hispanic Legislative Caucus. As of 2025, Anavitarte is the only non-white member among the full slate of all male GOP leadership in the Senate.

On the Democratic side of the aisle, the Senate caucus was led by Minority Leader Steve Henson from 2010 to 2021. A white male, Henson replaced Mike Brown, who had served as Democratic leader of the Senate from 2005 to 2011 and was a member of the Legislative Black Caucus. In 2021, Senate Gloria Butler became the first Black woman to lead the Senate Democratic Caucus—and the first woman to lead either party’s caucus in the state Senate—a position she held until retiring in January of 2025. Butler was succeeded by Harold Jones, II, who is also a member of the Legislative Black Caucus. For the 2025-2026 legislative session, Jones was elected as party leader alongside four women who complete the Senate Democratic leadership team.

From 2011 to 2017, Stacey Abrams served as House minority leader, where she became the first woman to lead either party in the Georgia General Assembly and the first Black Caucus leader in the House. Abrams was succeeded by Bob Trammell, who held the position from 2017 to 2021. Trammell’s service as House minority leader was followed by James Beverly, a member of the Legislative Black Caucus, who was elected to the position in 2021 and served until 2025. In 2025, House Democrats selected Carolyn Hugely as minority leader, who became the second Black woman to lead a caucus in the House of Representatives. Hugely also made history in 2008,

when she became the first Black member to serve as minority whip, a distinction she held until 2018.

Of the seven-member Democratic leadership team elected for the 2025-2026 legislative session, six legislators are people of color and four are women. This serves as a sharp contrast to the House Republican leadership team, which includes five white non-Hispanic members and two women. These differences in membership between the Democratic and Republican caucuses provide support for hypotheses H9 and H10, demonstrating how the legislative leadership of both parties has tended to reflect the demographics of their membership, as a wider gulf has opened between the Democratic and Republican parties in terms of racial and gender polarization. Beyond legislative leadership, Table 3.17 compares the gap between the number of non-white Republicans and the number of non-white Democrats elected statewide, as well as to Congress, state Senate, and state House.

Table 3.17 Racial Polarization among Officeholders: GOP Gap in Number of Non-White Officeholders in Georgia After Election									
Office	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
Statewide (U.S. Senate, Governor and constitutional officers)		0		0		0		0	
Congress	(4)	(4)	(4)	(4)	(4)	(5)	(5)	(5)	(5)
St. Senate	(12)	(13)	(13)	(14)	(15)	(15)	(17)	(18)	(18)
St. House	(40)	(41)	(45)	(45)	(47)	(52)	(54)	(57)	(63)
<i>Source: Compiled by author, Georgia General Assembly. Figures shown are the number of non-white GOP officeholders minus the number of non-white Democratic officeholders.</i>									

Although Republicans made some strides during the period covered by this study, the vast majority of GOP elected officials are white, in contrast to the vast majority of Georgia's Democratic elected officials who are Black, as demonstrated by Table 3.16 and Table 3.17. Between 2008 and 2024, the GOP moved from including two non-white legislators among the 139

Republicans elected in 2008 to five non-white legislators elected in 2024 as part of a 133-seat legislative majority. Although none of the Republican members of Congress elected during the 16-year period observed by this study were non-white, state Insurance Commissioner John King, who was initially appointed by Brian Kemp, made history as Georgia’s first statewide elected official of Hispanic descent. Taken together, the demographics of Georgia’s congressional delegation, along with the makeup of the state’s House and Senate chambers, support hypothesis H9 and the notion that the gap between the number of non-white Republican and Democratic elected officials has generally increased during the period of this study.

Table 3.18 Chi Square Test: Georgia General Assembly, Non-White and White Members by Political Party									
	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
Chi Squared	92.8	48.4	153.1	156.7	162.2	136.8	139.4	142.5	155.8
P Value	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01
Significance?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Source: Compiled by author, Georgia General Assembly.</i>									

Table 3.18 calculates chi squares for white and non-white members of the Georgia Assembly between the Democratic and Republican parties. Each cycle examined is significant. Further, the chi squared statistic generally increased during the 16-year period observed, following a pattern in which the level of racial polarization within Georgia’s General Assembly has steadily increased. Testing the change in the number of white members in each party between 2008 and 2024 to evaluate hypothesis H9 produces a chi squared value of 7.9 and a p value of <0.01, indicating that the change is significant. These results offer additional evidence beyond Table 3.17 to support hypothesis H9. Whereas the number of non-white Republican state legislators more than doubled from two to five members between 2008 and 2024, the number of non-white Democrats increased by 32 members from 54 to 86. At the same time, the number of white

Democrats decreased by 26 members from 43 in 2008 to 17 in 2025, while the number of white Republicans decreased slightly from 137 to 128 over the same period. Put proportionally, following the 2008 elections, 56% of Democratic legislators and two percent of Republicans were non-white. By 2024, 82% of Democrats and four percent of Republicans elected to the General Assembly were non-white.

Table 3.19 Percent Women among Democratic Officeholders in Georgia After Election									
Office	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
Statewide (U.S. Sen., Gov., Constitutional Officers)	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Congress	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	20%	40%	50%	40%
St. Senate	27%	40%	39%	44%	61%	62%	68%	61%	52%
St. House	37%	48%	48%	47%	52%	57%	61%	59%	60%
General Assembly	35%	46%	46%	46%	54%	58%	62%	59%	58%
<i>Source: Compiled by author, Georgia General Assembly.</i>									

Hypothesis H6 posits that women have become a larger share of all Democratic Party officeholders. Table 3.19 charts changes in the share of women as a percentage of Democratic officeholders statewide, in Congress, state House, and state Senate chambers. This hypothesis can be confirmed for Georgia in Congress, state Senate, and state House, as the share of women representing the Democratic Party increased significantly in these categories. However, Georgia did not elect a female statewide officeholder from either the Democratic or Republican Party between the 2010 and 2024 cycles (despite Kelly Loeffler’s brief appointment to the Senate). Overall, the number of Democratic women in the state legislature has grown from 34 (35%) in 2008 to 60 (58%) elected in 2024. Over the same period, the number of Republican women in the General Assembly has increased from 14 (10%) in 2008 to 21 (16%), including one state senator and 20 representatives among the 133 GOP members elected in 2024.

Testing hypothesis H6 using difference of proportion tests reveals significance for Congress, state house, and state senate. In 2008, Georgia elected an all-male congressional delegation. By 2024, two female Democrats were elected to Congress (Z score of -1.7 and p value of 0.044). Applying a difference of proportions test to the share of Democratic women elected to the state Senate yields a Z score of -2.29 and a p value of 0.01, with a Z score of -2.739 and a p value of 0.003 for state House. Overall, testing the proportional change in the General Assembly produces a Z score of -3.29 and a p value of 0.005—indicating the highest level of significance measured across all these categories.

Table 3.20 Chi Square Test: Georgia General Assembly, Men and Women Elected by Political Party									
	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
Chi Squared	22.0	34.1	35.4	32.1	43.4	56.3	59.5	49.3	45.6
P Value	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01
Significance	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Source: Compiled by author, Georgia General Assembly.</i>									

These data also offer support for hypothesis H10, which tests if gender polarization has increased in the ranks of Georgia’s officeholders. However, comparing the change in female representation in both parties between 2008 and 2024 produces a Z score of 0.16 and a p value of 0.34, indicating that the change in gender polarization is not statistically significant. Table 3.20 applies similar criteria as Table 3.18 to test this proposition further. Although statistically support for hypothesis H10 is not found over the full 16-year period, support is found at a 95% confidence interval for every election cycle examined, with the probabilities associated with the chi squared figures generally increasing. This finding aligns with the observational data recorded in Table 3.19, in which the number of Republican women serving in Georgia’s General Assembly peaked at 21 or 16% of the 133 GOP members elected in 2024, up from 14 (10%) of 139 Republican members

in 2008. Alternatively, the highest recorded figure for Democratic women was 61 or 62% of all Democratic legislators elected in 2020, a figure that remained relatively consistent in 2022 and 2024, and was nearly double the 34 (35%) of 97 members in 2008. These observational data offer clearer confirmation for hypothesis H10.

2008 TO 2012: GEORGIA REPUBLICANS ON THE ASCENT

With Republicans perceived as being safely entrenched in the majority also came an increasingly inward focus on party primaries and internal machinations. Furthermore, the period of GOP redefinition between 2008 and 2012 coincided with the advent of social media, the rise of the Tea Party, and the emergence of Sarah Palin as a GOP national celebrity—elevated to political stardom after she was selected as John McCain’s 2008 vice presidential running mate. Former three-term Lieutenant Governor Cagle (2007-2019) explains, “I really think that a lot of it started with the Tea Party, and that became a big, big moving point on Republicans—the litmus test if you please—and, you know, was the beginning of [increasing] polarization, and obviously Donald Trump took that to a whole new level” (Cagle, 2022). Continuing, Cagle identifies the central role of frustration over the issue of immigration, in addition to the rise of social media, as the thread that connects the Tea Party movement to Trump’s successful 2016 candidacy, opining:

George W. Bush was someone who [today] would be viewed as soft on immigration, right? However, Donald Trump basically won a national election by being as hard [right] as you could possibly be on immigration, right? And why is that? What made the issue of immigration change and become such a dividing point among the electorate? It is the ability that social media had to get information to individuals, either right or wrong, that changed their minds. So, this is what we will deal with well into the future—is how do you decipher what is right, and factually right, versus something that is sensationalized and not 100% accurate?

...As someone who lives in the political environment—if you have a shock and awe moment with a video [or a viral social media post], and all of this played out with the [2020] riots and all that went on, people immediately place either guilt or innocence and it moves the electorate—it moves the electorate—and it changes potential behavior. It changes the way politicians deal with a situation. And the point of all this, I mean the reason

I'm saying all this, is that used to not happen... The old saying in politics is you never let a crisis go to waste. So, the story of the day was this crisis, and we've got to solve that crisis. Those crises have always existed. But in today's environment, it ignites so much faster than it did previously. And when it does ignite, and you do have a blazing fire in front of you, politicians are going to, they're going to grab a hold of it. So, it may make good politics, but it doesn't always make good policy (Cagle, 2022).

As political discourse evolved into the contemporary era, the combination of increasing levels of distrust within the electorate and the growing role of social media as a primary source for political information proved to be a potent force (Wike et al., 2022).

The 2008 presidential election, in which Barack Obama rose from the U.S. Senate to claim the presidency as the nation's first Black commander in chief also reverberated throughout Georgia, which was home to both, the nation's third largest proportion of Black residents at 31% of the population, and America's largest monument to the Confederacy in the Stone Mountain Memorial Carving (U.S. Census, 2010). In years previous, Georgia had grappled with bitterly divisive debates over removing the emblem of the "stars and bars" Confederate Battle Flag from its own official state flag. During his 2002 campaign for governor, Sonny Perdue successfully exploited this wedge issue after Roy Barnes lobbied the General Assembly to approve a new flag design during the 2001 legislative session (Hills, 2009). Now, after the 2008 presidential campaign that saw Barack Obama strike closer to carrying Georgia's then-15 electoral votes than any national Democrat since Bill Clinton won the state in 1992—reaching nearly 47% statewide and driving turnout among Black voters to a historic 68%—Republicans smelled blood in the water and sought to define state Democrats in the 44th President's image and as the political party of Black Georgians (Bullock & Gaddie, 2016). Although Obama only visited Georgia once during the 2008 general election campaign—staging a July rally in Cobb County—he visited the state 11-times during his presidency, presenting state Democrats seeking distance from Obama's brand with sometimes awkward encounters (Suggs, 2017).

With Sonny Perdue constitutionally limited to serving two consecutive terms as governor—and Georgia’s two U.S. Senate seats already claimed by Republicans Saxby Chambliss and Johnny Isakson in 2002 and 2004, respectively—2010 provided the first major statewide contest for an open seat since Georgia was thrust firmly into the GOP column. This opportunity quickly developed into a crowded GOP primary for the chance to vie against former Democratic governor Roy Barnes. State insurance commissioner John Oxendine was the contest’s early favorite until his involvement in a major public corruption scandal was exposed. Also in the race was secretary of state Karen Handel, 9th District Congressman Nathan Deal, state Senator Eric Johnson, and state Representative Austin Scott, who dropped out before any votes were cast to instead challenge incumbent Congressman Jim Marshall of Georgia’s 8th District.

With Georgia law requiring candidates to receive over 50% of votes to avoid a runoff in both primaries and general elections, the contest headed to an August head-to-head matchup between first-place finisher Handel and runner-up Deal. First elected as a moderate Democrat in 1992, Gainesville-based Deal switched parties in 1995 to join Newt Gingrich’s Republican majority before shifting rightward for the duration of his eight-terms in the U.S. House. Alternatively, Handel, who was at the tail end of her first term serving as Georgia’s first Republican Secretary of State, sought to claim the Tea Party lane, bolstered by an endorsement from Sarah Palin who rallied voters behind her chosen candidate with a familiar refrain, extolling: “She will fight like a mamma grizzly for you, Georgia” (Jones, 2010). Ultimately, Deal prevailed by less than 2,600 votes out of nearly 580,000 cast in the runoff, a margin of 0.4% before handily defeating Barnes by approximately 10 percentage points.

After exiting the gubernatorial race before votes were cast, state Representative Austin Scott mounted a successful challenge in Georgia’s 8th District against conservative incumbent

Democratic Congressman Jim Marshall. In 2006, Marshall had narrowly defeated six-term Republican Mac Collins in a Democratic wave year that saw the party net 31-seats to capture the House Majority and replace Dennis Hastert with the nation's first female speaker, Nancy Pelosi. Scott sought to label Marshall a "Pelosicrat," an attack that was so potent it prompted Martin to proclaim: "Georgia is a long way from San Francisco" and to pledge to oppose Pelosi for Speaker in support of a more moderate candidate (Shiner, 2010). Although Marshall was one of 39 House Democrats who voted "no" on Obama's signature Affordable Care Act (ACA)—popularly branded Obamacare by Republicans—Scott mocked his opponent as weak and ineffective, declaring "A vote for Jim Marshall is a vote for Nancy Pelosi," adding "He can't stop her from taking anybody's firearms any more than he could stop her from passing Obamacare" (Bynum, 2010). Scott won the 2010 race by over 10,000 votes, a margin of about five-percentage points.

Following the passage of Georgia's 2010 redistricting and reapportionment plans—in which the 14th district was newly created—the Peach State's other Blue Dog, moderate Democratic congressman John Barrow immediately found himself in an increasingly competitive district. Like Marshall, Barrow opposed the ACA both times it came to a vote on the House floor. After being displaced by the Republican-drawn legislative map for the 12th district, Barrow moved for the second time, now relocating to Augusta. In 2005, he had previously relocated to Savannah when Republicans removed Athens from the district—to continue living among the constituents he represented.

Characterizing Barrow as, "the last of the Blue Dog Democrats," a term coined from the post-Reconstruction era adage that Southerners would prefer to vote for a dog than to support a Republican, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* identified a change in Barrow's politics that matched the new political leanings of his district. The paper described that, "Many in Athens detected an

ideological shift, as well, from a liberal outlook in line with this university town to a crusader for gun rights and against excessive government spending and regulation” (Malloy, 2014). For his part, Barrow rejected this characterization, despite winning reelection in 2012 after touting an endorsement by the National Rifle Association (NRA) in a closing campaign ad, in which he brandished both a Smith and Wesson pistol and a rifle that he inherited from his grandfather and father (Friends of John Barrow, 2012). Despite holding on longer than many expected in difficult territory, Barrow succumbed to a challenge by Rick Allen and was defeated in 2014. That year, 11th District Congressman Barry Loudermilk was also elected, alongside Austin Scott and Tom Graves, giving Georgia three Tea Party-aligned GOP congressmen (Sabetai et al., 2014).

With Georgia’s Republican Party approaching supermajority status in the early 2010s, internal squabbling increased as elected GOP officials vied to wield power and shape the identity of the sprawling yet still-budding Republican majority. In Deal’s first year as governor, he attempted to wrest control over the state Republican apparatus by aggressively supporting a challenger to the party’s two-term chair, Sue Everhart, instead backing his long-time supporter, Tricia Pridemore. After Everhart was reelected at the state’s convention by a margin of 11-percentage points (946 of 1,701 votes), Deal was “loudly booed” by the audience of party faithful, demonstrating the limitations of the newly elected governor’s grip on the Georgia GOP (Bennett, 2011). Pridemore was subsequently defeated in 2014 by Tea Party favorite Barry Loudermilk (and Bob Barr who claimed the second-place spot in the runoff) to fill the vacated 11th District congressional seat previously held by Phil Gingrey. However, in 2018, Pridemore was appointed by Deal to complete the unexpired term of Public Service Commissioner Stan Wise, who stepped down after nearly two decades at the post.

Taylor Schindler, who worked under Everhart at the state GOP in 2012 before transitioning to other roles in and around state government, described the schism by saying that Deal's intervention "caused a lot of consternation between various constitutional officers because you [had] the newly elected governor making calls to folks to try and lobby delegates" (Schindler, 2023). More broadly, Schindler described,

That was when you started to see those growing pains, and frankly, where it started to kind of reach critical mass because you had these different factions growing, not just even in the legislature but in party politics. The gun wing would kind of have their own people and they would be more liberty minded. And then you would have people that are more libertarian minded, and Americans for Prosperity and other outlets that are courting different types of delegates. And I think it was just the dynamic of what happens when everybody can kind of be fat, dumb, and happy. And, obviously, I think it was six years we got to live that life before it ended [with more challenging Democratic competition in 2018] (Schindler, 2023).

Although Deal occasionally used sharp rhetoric reminiscent of well-worn racial dog whistles—from joining a small group of House members sending a letter calling on President Obama to release his birth certificate in 2009 to infamously using the term "ghetto grandmothers"—the Gainesville politician generally comported himself as a mainstream conservative (*Associated Press*, 2009; Smith, 2009). Beyond making criminal justice reform his signature policy priority during his eight years as governor, Deal also vetoed legislation popularly referred to as "religious liberty" or "RFRA," a measure that was met with heavy criticism from business leaders and Georgia's LGBT+ community but heavily touted by conservative personalities such as radio host, Erick Erickson (Bluestein, 2016A). Further, Deal vetoed a version of "campus carry" legislation that would have allowed college students to arm themselves with concealed firearms on public higher education campuses across the state—before signing a similar, slightly more restrictive measure the following year (Whitehead, 2016).

Deal also made clear that he was not interested in enacting legislation to remove the state's requirement for permits to carry a concealed firearm, also known as "constitutional carry," which was later signed into law by his successor, Gov. Brian Kemp (Office of Governor Brian Kemp, 2022). However, to compromise with proponents for expanded gun rights, Deal signed legislation entitled the "Safe Carry Protection Act," referred to as "guns everywhere" by those critical of the measure. That legislation expanded the range of venues where firearms could be carried legally to include bars, schools, churches, and other areas (Copeland & Richards, 2014). Over the course of his eight-years in the governor's office, the policies championed under Deal's administration pushed state government in a more ideologically conservative direction, even as the governor negotiated a decidedly incremental approach to policies championed by the Republican base and insurgent legislative leaders. Further, as a contrast with other similarly situated states such as South Carolina, Deal's narrow win over Handle in 2010 limited the influence of the Tea Party in state politics, even as its themes influenced races for the 8th, 11th, and 14th congressional districts.

2014 TO 2016: SETTING THE STAGE

In 2014, with the retirement of two-term U.S. Senator Saxby Chambliss, Georgia saw its first glimpse at competition for an open statewide seat in the era of GOP super majorities. The sprawling field included three sitting U.S. House Representatives—Jack Kingston, Phil Gingrey, and Paul Broun—along with former secretary of state and 2010 gubernatorial primary runner-up Karen Handel, and David Perdue, businessman and cousin of former governor Sonny Perdue. One of the key elements that proved decisive in crafting Perdue's early image was his decision to hire veteran Los Angeles-based ad-maker Fred Davis. A dozen years earlier, Davis had helped vault his cousin Sonny to the governorship with a colorful 30 second spot that depicted a giant crowned rat, dubbed King Roy, climbing atop Georgia's gold dome Capitol in reference to Barnes' hard-

charging reputation won through brutal state House campaigns in favor of changing the state flag, reforms that rankled teachers, and an overzealous redistricting plan intended to preserve Democratic control (Hayes & McKee, 2004).

In this vein, Perdue's first campaign ad featured his opponents reduced to crying toddlers with their first names embroidered on onesies, as the first-time candidate talked up his business record and lamented the fact that his opponents had been in office for a combined "63 years," before he flashed across the screen dressed in the jean jacket that soon became the hallmark of his campaign (Perdue for Senate, 2014). However, the novice candidate was not without his stumbles, as Perdue caught flack after referencing Handel's lack of a college diploma to an audience in Bibb County, when he implored them: "Look at the credentials. There's a high school graduate in this race, okay?" (Warren, 2014). At the time, nearly 43% of the state's adult population over 25 had a high school diploma or less as their highest level of educational attainment (U.S. Census).

In the first round of voting, Michelle Nunn easily claimed the Democratic nomination, while Perdue—who narrowly won first place by a margin of approximately five-percentage points with 30% of the total vote share—advanced to face off against Kingston in a July runoff. With the state's Chamber of Commerce backing Kingston, Perdue's campaign homed in on a closing message that his rival was "bought and paid for" and chastised the establishment business group's support for the veteran congressman, declaring "Kingston's largest backer, who has pumped almost \$3 million into Kingston TV ads, is 100 percent openly pro-amnesty. Kingston now owes them big" (Galloway, 2014). Earlier, the former CEO had walked out of a candidate interview with the Chamber's top brass after feeling insulted that the group was not rushing to lend its unqualified support to one of their own, a preview of the candidate's temper that would flare in subsequent campaigns (Bluestein, 2022A). Ultimately, the former Dollar General CEO narrowly

prevailed over the 11-term Savannah congressman by winning the entire metro region and most of North Georgia, while Kingston ran up big margins across much of South Georgia and won all but 12-counties below the state's Gnat Line which divides Georgia's Piedmont from its Coastal Plain.

All told, the 2014 primary campaign—accentuated by themes of outsiders versus establishment insiders and the weaponization of immigration as the contest's top policy issue—served as a harbinger for subsequent cycles that saw Georgia's Republican base descend into its current form. In contrast, the 2014 general election campaign, led by contests between Democratic scions Carter and Nunn against Deal and Perdue, represented the last gasp of what remained from the state's former Democratic establishment with candidates tacking to the middle to avoid alienating moderate-to-conservative voters. *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* political reporter Greg Bluestein observed,

Jason Carter and Michelle Nunn, the mainstream Democratic [candidates], they were not outliers in their stance of staying away from Barack Obama... they didn't talk about abortion rights unless pressed, they didn't talk about guns. They certainly didn't advocate for any sort of statewide gun control measures, right? Jason Carter voted for a gun expansion and the reason why was that he didn't want to make that a wedge issue—he didn't want to lose the election on a vote (Bluestein, 2024A).

Prior to the campaign, the General Assembly enacted legislation signed by Governor Nathan Deal that transferred power to expand Medicaid from the governor to the legislature, ensuring that, even if Jason Carter were elected governor, he could not expand Medicaid without the GOP dominated General Assembly's approval (Williams, 2014A). An August 2013 poll from McLaughlin & Associates found opposition to the ACA as one of the highest intensity policy issues animating Republican voters, with 87% of likely GOP primary voters opposing the ACA and just nine percent supportive of the policy (McLaughlin & Associates, 2013). Similarly, a 2014 poll found just 25% of state Republicans supported expanding Medicaid (Williams, 2014B). With federal policies underwater in popularity among a wide swath of the state's electorate, Bluestein

reflected on Nunn's cautious 2014 campaign to distance herself away from the national party, noting:

No one really batted an eye when Michelle Nunn was visiting peach farmers in South Georgia when Barack Obama came to town, like it was conventional wisdom that Democrats should stay the hell away from any national Democratic candidate who could be associated as the far left... I think 2016 accelerated [that too], but you started seeing that change right after, there was a reckoning of "hey the same strategies aren't working." Smart Democrats will always kind of say, "we're not trying just to get white voters, or just to get Black voters, we're trying to get both." But in reality, there's limited resources and how your fine tune those messages is difficult (Bluestein, 2024A).

Undoubtedly, Georgia's 2014 gubernatorial and Senate campaigns represented a low point in alignment between state and federal Democrats, which have since grown more closely in-line with one another, even as divisions between state and national Republicans have become more prominent.

After Trump's February 2016 victory in South Carolina's presidential primary, his first stop was Georgia, where he held a rally at the Georgia World Congress Center with a capacity crowd of 10,000 (Bluestein, 2016B). That year, Georgia's presidential primary was held in concert with six other states, including Alabama, Arkansas, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia and dubbed the "SEC Primary" after the regional NCAA athletic conference. Then-Secretary of State Brian Kemp took credit for leading "the movement to hold a regional presidential preference primary," which he said would be "the largest regional primary since 1992" and designed to bring "the road to the White House through America's new heartland – the South" (Kemp, 2016).

Despite Trump's momentum, he attracted few prominent endorsements from Georgia elected officials prior to the 2016 primary. Incumbent governor Nathan Deal urged Georgians to support one of the four current and former governors running, who included Mike Huckabee, Chris Christie, Jeb Bush, and Bobby Jindal (Bluestein, 2015). Although he suspended his campaign following a disappointing fourth-place finish in South Carolina, Jeb Bush touted endorsements

from former governor Sonny Perdue and sitting lieutenant governor Casey Cagle. If endorsements alone decided elections, Marco Rubio would have been the favorite, with public support from 22 members of the state House, five members of the state Senate, Congressmen Austin Scott and Lynn Westmoreland, and a bevy of elected officials further down ballot (*AJC Politics*, 2016). Trump claimed just four prominent endorsers: state Senators Burt Jones and Michael Williams, former GOP chair Sue Everhart, and Atlanta Tea Party founder Debbie Dooley (Ibid).

When ballots were cast on March 1, Trump won easily with 38.8% of votes cast, a higher share of support than he had achieved in earlier contests in Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina. In second place was Marco Rubio with 24.4% of support, who was the only other candidate to carry a county, winning Metro Atlanta's Cobb, Fulton, and DeKalb counties, in addition to Clarke County, which is home to Athens and the University of Georgia. Ted Cruz followed narrowly behind Rubio with 23.6% of support, and the remaining candidates attracted support in the single digits. That day, Trump carried six out of seven of the SEC Primary states—all save for Cruz's native Texas—putting him well on his way to the GOP nomination as he dominated across the South.

Trump's final visit to Georgia during the 2016 cycle came ahead of his formal nomination at the RNC convention. In June of 2016, he visited the state for breakfast with Governor Nathan Deal and held his final in-state rally at the Fox Theatre in Midtown Atlanta. For her part, Hillary Clinton also avoided Georgia after securing the Democratic Party's nomination. However, high profile surrogates, including Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, visited in her place, as did Trump's running mate Mike Pence (Bluestein, 2016C).

When ballots were cast in November, Clinton won support from an abysmal 21% of white voters, the lowest level tracked for a presidential candidate in the five cycles observed by this study

(National Election Pool, 2016B). However, that weakness was partially offset by her strong performance among Black voters who comprised 28% of the electorate, along with Asian and Hispanic voters who saw their vote share double from two percent in 2012 to four percent in 2016 (Georgia Secretary of State). Overall, Trump won just over 50% statewide, a five-percentage point gap to Clinton's 45%. For Georgia Democrats, the brightest spots came with Clinton's surprising inroads to win a plurality of votes cast in suburban Cobb County and a majority in Gwinnett County (see Table 3.2). Once in office, Trump appointed Sonny Perdue as U.S. Secretary of Agriculture and developed a close relationship with his cousin, Senator David Perdue, tightening his connection to two prominent Georgia politicians.

Internal surveys conducted by pollsters John McLaughlin and Rob Schmidt of McLaughlin and Associates—the same firm hired by Trump's campaign in 2016 and 2020—reveal the extent to which Donald Trump's rise to the presidency fundamentally reshaped Georgia's Republican voter base and provide an explanation for the electoral incentive structure that is at the core of hypotheses H1, H1A, and H1B (Haberman, 2016, 2020). McLaughlin found that between April and December of 2016—after his election to the presidency—Trump's net favorability rating among GOP primary voters skyrocketed by 33-percentage points, from 57% favorable in April to 90% favorable by December (McLaughlin & Associates, 2016). As GOP voters rallied around Trump and professed loyalty to him as a core political value, Republican politicians responded by moving closer to Trump and attempting to ingratiate themselves with him.

Table 3.21 Surge of Republican Voters Say Georgia is on Right Track with Trump in Office		
Date	Right Track	Wrong Track
Feb-05	69%	18%
Feb-06	64%	19%
May-08	53%	36%
Nov-08	54%	35%
Jan-14	56%	28%
Dec-16	69%	22%
<i>Source: McLaughlin & Associates, Statewide Republican Primary Voter Survey, compiled by author.</i>		

The pollster also identified other new developments in Georgia’s Republican electorate, finding that a majority of voters shifted to no longer prefer a hypothetical candidate running on a record of experience in elected office (32%) versus a hypothetical candidate who is new to politics (51%) (Ibid). These numbers moved significantly from the firm’s January 2014 survey, in which voters were asked to make the same choice and instead preferred the more experienced hypothetical candidate by a margin greater than “two-to-one [of] 60% to 29%” (McLaughlin & Associates, 2014).

With Trump headed to the White House, McLaughlin noted that the 2016 survey captured the highest percentage of primary voters on record saying that Georgia was on the right track (69%) since 2005, after the GOP flipped both chambers of the General Assembly for a Republican trifecta. The evolution of these right/wrong track numbers is charted in Table 3.21. Finally, the 2016 survey found that 51% of respondents were regular listeners to talk radio, while 67% used social media networks regularly with Facebook far-and-away ranking as their top choice (54%)—showing that voters were now receiving most of their news and information from decentralized sources.

2018 TO 2020: A NEW WAVE OF POLITICAL COMPETITION IN THE TRUMP ERA

Following Trump's 2016 election, Georgia's 2018 gubernatorial race quickly took center stage to fill the open governor's seat relinquished by the term-limited Gov. Nathan Deal. The first candidate to launch his campaign, declaring immediately after the 2017 legislative session ended in late-March, was then-Secretary of State Brian Kemp. The two-term statewide elected official won a state Senate seat in 2002 and was later appointed by Sonny Perdue to fill the vacancy created by Karen Handle's resignation in pursuit of the governorship in 2010. Kemp modeled his campaign on a decidedly Trump-inspired platform using the slogan "Georgians First," which mirrored Trump's "America First" mantra, and built his apparatus around the central issue of immigration and a pledge to outlaw "sanctuary cities" or safe havens for undocumented immigrants (Bluestein, 2018A).

Other entrants included apparent front runner and three-term lieutenant governor Casey Cagle, state senators Hunter Hill and Michael Williams, and consultant Clay Tippins. Cagle's campaign surveys generally pegged the lieutenant governor in the range of the low-40's—a level insufficient to avoid a runoff—while identifying Kemp and Hill as the closest challengers, albeit hovering between single digits and the low-20s for most of 2017 and into early 2018. Although fringe candidate Michael Williams boasted of being Trump's first and most ardent elected endorser when he backed his candidacy in late 2015, Williams' campaign's stunts to draw attention by campaigning with "Dog the Bounty Hunter" and parading around the state in a "deportation bus" largely fell flat (Bluestein, 2018B). After the campaign, Williams was indicted on charges of insurance fraud and subsequently apologized for even running for governor (Bluestein, 2022A).

When the race began, Cagle was widely perceived as part of the more traditional, business-friendly wing of the Republican Party, much closer to Johnny Isakson than to Donald Trump.

Notwithstanding his 16-year political career, Kemp started his campaign with an effort to tie himself closely to Trump's brand of politics. Rapidly, the primary campaign devolved into the most viscerally partisan contest that Georgia had experienced in its contemporary political era. Despite the apparent salience of the immigration issue, Kemp received a muted response from his first campaign ad, called "Track and Deport," in which a scowling Kemp declares "Donald Trump is right. We must secure the border and end sanctuary cities" (Kemp, 2018). Bluestein recalls that although Kemp invested heavily in the gamble, it flopped: "Not only did that ad not work, he lost ground in the polls... at least his internal tracking showed that... So, they thought their campaign was over" (Bluestein, 2024A).

Shortly thereafter, Kemp reshuffled his team and turned to a familiar name in Georgia political circles for candidates looking to redefine their image, hiring Fred Davis as the campaign's media consultant. Quickly, the Kemp campaign pivoted in April of 2018 to another approach that struck gold in "Jake," wherein Kemp quizzes a young man portraying a suitor for one of his three daughters while brandishing a shotgun for good measure. The ad was an instant hit, driving tremendous media coverage and reinvigorating the ailing campaign. Kemp's campaign followed that up with "So Conservative" released in May of 2018, in which the candidate declares: "I'm so conservative, I blow up government spending. I own guns that no one's taking away. My chainsaw's ready to rip up some regulations. I've got a big truck, just in case I need to round up criminal illegals and take em' home myself" (Cummings, 2018). To be sure, Kemp was not alone in courting the far-right wing of the GOP, with the rest of the field also racing to outflank the 16-year denizen of state government.

As the immediate front-runner with 24-years of experience between the state Senate and lieutenant governorship, Cagle's campaign team wanted to dispel the notion that he was a career

politician, entrenched in state government. In an October 2017 memo, Cagle’s campaign sketched out the state of the race and the challenge ahead:

Republican primary voters continue to be optimistic on the direction of Georgia and President Trump remains extremely popular, as does Governor Deal... Cagle is well positioned, however, he lacks strong intensity to his key benchmarks and he is perceived as less conservative than the voters. Ideologically, we are flat. We must take the lead on things like creating jobs, being tough on illegal immigration, increasing educational choice and protecting Southern culture and Christian values to avoid being outflanked from the right. Voters are still showing a strong inclination to support an “outsider” for Governor, even as they have a positive outlook for the state. While Cagle’s experience and record are largely driving his positives, we must avoid becoming the “Establishment” candidate (McLaughlin & Associates, 2017B).

Though Cagle far surpassed his rivals in fundraising—including enlisting the support of a dedicated independent expenditure group called “Changing Georgia’s Future” that reported raising over \$1 million by July 2018—the lieutenant governor’s long career in politics had propagated a bevy of rivals intent on quashing his ambitions to claim the governorship (Salzer, 2018). Explaining the unique dynamic of starting in the pole position, Cagle remarked: “Being a frontrunner, everyone is shooting at you. And it’s very difficult to shoot at everyone else as those arrows are coming at you” (Cagle, 2023). With the 2018 legislative session set to conclude less than eight weeks ahead of the first round of voting that May, Cagle saw an opportunity to address his vulnerabilities and to bolster his record in the eyes of conservatives, while also solidifying his standing with other state leaders such as Governor Nathan Deal, Speaker David Ralston, and the down ballot Republicans serving in the General Assembly.

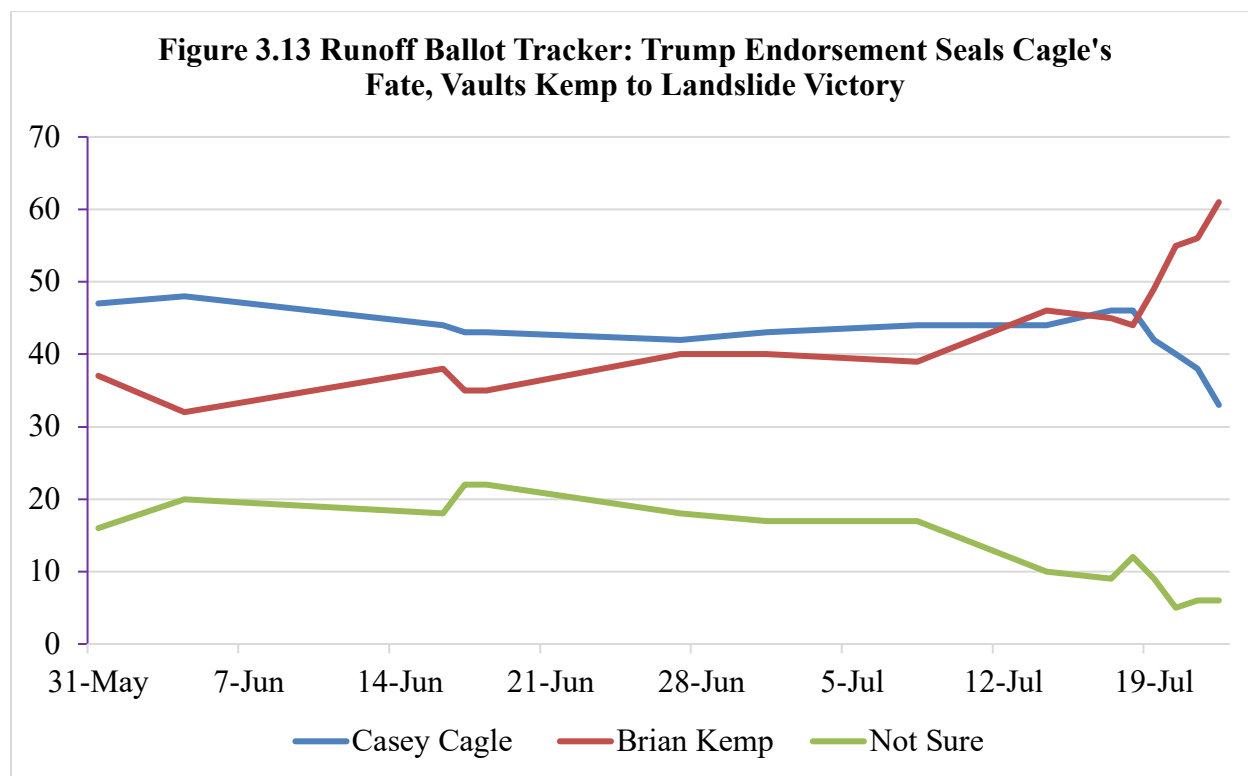
However, with opportunities to build support from the party’s Trump wing also came pitfalls that jeopardized Cagle’s existing base of support by alienating more traditionally minded Republicans. None of these moves served as more of a double-edged sword than the lieutenant governor’s rebuke of Delta airlines over the company’s decision to suspend a discount code made available to travelers attending the NRA’s annual convention in the wake of the Parkland school

shooting in the spring of 2018. After the airline cut ties with the NRA, Cagle led the effort to eliminate the state's tax exemption on the purchase of jet fuel—temporarily removing an incentive worth an estimated \$100 million annually from the state's largest private employer. In a Tweet that immediately went viral, Cagle made clear: “I will kill any tax legislation that benefits @Delta unless the company changes its position and fully reinstates its relationship with @NRA. Corporations cannot attack conservatives and expect us not to fight back” (*Associated Press*, 2018). Although the stunt earned the lieutenant governor prized appearances on *Fox News* and ubiquity across conservative media channels for a brief period—in addition to the sought-after GOP primary endorsement from the NRA—it created space for other candidates to court moderates and business-friendly conservatives who were part of the base of support that Cagle had spent years cultivating.

On the campaign trail, Cagle frequently spoke of growing up in poverty and living in a single-wide trailer with a single mother to explain why education and workforce training were at the bedrock of his policy agenda. As lieutenant governor, Cagle built his legislative agenda around the issue of public education, successfully launching a program to allow students to pursue expanded college credit and career certifications in high school, in addition to creating more flexible models of governance for school districts that were widely adopted across the state. As president of the state Senate between 2007 to 2019, he also opposed efforts to redirect funding from public to private schools with limited-to-no oversight from the state. However, prior to the 2018 GOP primary, the lieutenant governor moderated in this respect by lending his support to a tax credit program to fund scholarships to private schools in an effort to compromise with school choice proponents.

In leaked audio of a post-election conversation surreptitiously recorded by fourth-place finisher Clay Tippins, who won about 12% of the vote in the first round of voting to Cagle's 39% and Kemp's 26%, Cagle explained that his efforts were, in part, intended to thwart the candidacy of state Senator Hunter Hill who was seeking to court champions of private school vouchers (Bluestein, 2018C). After the audio was released, Cagle's long-time ally and Tippins' cousin, state Senator Lindsey Tippins, resigned his post as the Chairman of the Senate Education Committee in protest of Cagle's statements.

With Tippins leaking out piecemeal portions of the recording during the period after the first round of voting and before the July runoff with Kemp, the lieutenant governor began to bleed support as the media narrative confirmed suspicions about his candidacy among the GOP base. About one week before the runoff, Cagle finally secured the endorsement of Governor Nathan Deal, whom he had served alongside for eight-years and shared a political base with as a native of Gainesville. However, the endorsement came during the Q-and-A portion of an unrelated economic development press conference at the state Capitol and was delivered late in the race, limiting its utility to bolster his candidacy (Bluestein, 2018D). Two days later, reportedly at the urging of then U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue and Senator David Perdue, Donald Trump tweeted his surprise endorsement of Brian Kemp, catching both candidates off-guard and helping to drive Kemp's margin over Cagle to a landslide margin (Bluestein, 2022A). Figure 3.13 demonstrates how the endorsement—issued on July 18 ahead of the July 24 runoff contest—affected Cagle's candidate image in the eyes of voters and cratered his support.



Source: Casey Cagle for Governor 2018, data via Battleground Connect.

Ultimately, Kemp defeated Cagle with nearly 70% of the vote, claiming 157 of 159 counties, a margin of victory that extended even into the lieutenant governor's home-turf of Gainesville, where he was raised and built his political career over the decades between 1994 and 2018. Although the contest had been trending away from Cagle in the wake of the leaked audio from his meeting with Tippins, the Trump endorsement was decisive in elevating Kemp to win the runoff by a huge margin and to move on to face-off against Stacey Abrams in the 2018 general election. With Kemp's victory, Trump's decision to weigh into a competitive GOP primary for Georgia's open gubernatorial seat also reverberated around the nation. This race helped to set the tone for the changing political dynamics driving the GOP in Trump era and offers support for hypotheses H1, H1A, and H1B, with the contest revolving around attempts from candidates to align themselves with Trump and his loyalists.

That November, Kemp narrowly prevailed over the former state House minority leader by a margin of approximately 55,000 votes in a 50.2% to 48.8% victory. However, Abrams set a new watermark for Democratic success in Georgia in the contemporary era by improving on Clinton's already relatively strong margins across the Metro Atlanta region. Despite winning support from just 25% of white Georgians, Abrams came within striking distance of the governorship by turning out Black voters to comprise 29% of the electorate and building on Clinton's more diverse 2016 electorate as Asian and Hispanic voters comprised upwards of four percent of the full electorate (Georgia Secretary of State). In her book *Our Time is Now*, Abrams described the keys to her 2018 performance, writing:

We'd run an extraordinary campaign that proved our theory that increasingly diverse Georgia had become a Democratic-leaning state. *Early investments in infrequent voters?* Check. *Consistent, authentic progressive messaging?* Check. *Outreach in multiple languages?* Check. *Centering the issues of communities of color and marginalized groups typically exiled to the fringes of statewide elections?* Check.

The results of these efforts on the Democratic side of the ballot had been incredible: We had tripled Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) voters. We increased youth participation rates by 129%. Black voters, who had reached a peak in voting strength in 2008 in the Obama election, had settled back down, and the 2014 election for governor yielded roughly 1.1 million voters total. But in 2018, more than 1.2 million black voters turned out to cast ballots for me. And the fear that, by engaging these groups, my efforts would cost me white votes also proved false. Our election increased white participation for Democrats to 25 percent over-all, higher among suburban white women and college-educated whites of either gender. In contrast to previous recent elections, I received the highest percentage of white votes *in a generation* (2020, 17-18).

Abrams' approach marked a sharp departure from that of Jason Carter and Michelle Nunn in 2014, and from Georgia's Blue Dog Democrats John Barrow and Jim Marshall, who framed their campaigns with conservative messaging on issues like gun rights by distinguishing themselves from national Democrats. Taking the opposite path, Abrams leaned into appeals to the Democratic base and non-traditional voters that quickly gained national recognition within the party. Despite her gains among diverse segments of the electorate, as tested by hypothesis H2,

winning a statewide majority required a stronger performance among white voters than Abrams was able to secure. Kemp's campaign also leaned into Abrams' own messaging to appeal to white voters who remained 59% of the state's electorate in 2018 (Georgia Secretary of State). Kemp's advertisements clipped part of Abrams' remarks from a campaign event, in which she said: "The blue wave is African American. It's white, it's Latino, it's Asian, Pacific Islander. It is disabled. It is differently abled. It is LGBTQ... It is comprised of those who are documented and undocumented" (Sherman, 2019). Although Abrams clarified that she was not encouraging undocumented voters to cast ballots illegally, Kemp seized on the remarks and also made it a focal point of their first debate in 2018, asking: "Why are you encouraging people to break the law in this election?" (Seitz-Wald, 2018).

Furthermore, after Abrams' 2018 loss to Kemp, she made statements about the election that were later compared to Trump's efforts to deny the outcome of the 2020 presidential election. In an April 2019 speech to the National Action Network convention, Abrams remarked: "We had this little election back in 2018. And despite the final tally and the inauguration and the situation we find ourselves in, I do have one very affirmative statement to make. We won" (Kessler, 2022). A *Washington Post* analysis later found that Abrams had repeatedly cast doubt on the outcome of the 2018 election, saying the race was "stolen," "rigged," and "not a free or fair election" (Ibid). Abrams attempted to clarify that she acknowledged the outcome but was protesting Kemp's actions as secretary of state, which she said influenced the outcome in his favor. Nevertheless, these statements provided fodder against Abrams in her 2022 rematch against Kemp and diminished her standing in the Democratic Party as more attention was placed on the threat of denying electoral outcomes following the events of January 6th, 2021, and Trump's claims of a stolen election.

The greatest Democratic success in the 2018 election was when Lucy McBath flipped Georgia's 6th Congressional District into the Democratic column by prevailing over Karen Handle. Less than a year earlier, Handle had claimed victory in the first competitive special election of the Trump Era—defeating Jon Ossoff to fill the seat vacated by Tom Price after he was appointed to serve as the Trump administration's first secretary of health and human services. State Senator Josh McLaurin was initially a candidate for Congress in that 2017 special election before dropping out to clear the field for Ossoff so that Democrats would have the best possible chance of capturing the seat without a runoff. McLaurin described the state of play in that race, remarking: "It was one of the first opportunities to send a really strong message that [Trump's election] was going to fundamentally change American politics and if we got a "D" victory in Newt Gingrich's district that was going to prove that things were fundamentally changing" (McLaurin, 2024).

In the state's 7th Congressional District, incumbent Republican Rob Woodall narrowly defeated his Democratic challenger Carolyn Bourdeaux by a margin of less than 500 votes in 2018. Two years later, Woodall's retirement set the stage for Democrats to capture the 7th District with Bourdeaux again running as the party's standard bearer, elevating Democrats to six of Georgia's 14 U.S. House seats to register the party's best showing since 2008. However, two years later, Georgia's General Assembly-passed redistricting plan drew McBath and Bourdeaux into the same district, pushing the Democratic incumbents to face off in a 2022 primary that McBath easily won.

Between 2010 and 2018, changes in the electorate helped to foster a multiracial coalition statewide supporting Democratic candidates, resulting in the narrowest gubernatorial contest margin in modern state history. As white voters fell from 66% of the electorate in 2010 to just under 59% in 2018, the state saw significant increases in turnout from minority voters, with Hispanic and Asian women seeing the largest jumps, growing by upwards of 20-percentage points

(Georgia Secretary of State). Although white voters still cast ballots at the highest clip in 2018—with 62% of both men and women turning out—the significant gains in turnout among Asian and Hispanic voters helped to shape an electorate that for the first time in a mid-term cycle broke through the traditional Black-white dichotomy to reach double-digits (National Election Pool, 2018B).

Overall, the percentage of the electorate comprised of voters from neither the white nor Black community grew to comprise over 12% of the full electorate—up significantly from less than six percent in 2010 (Ibid). As this trend took hold, by 2020, turnout among women outpaced that of men among all demographic groups. These changes in the composition of Georgia’s electorate provides support for hypothesis H3 and H4, which hold that women and people of color have become a larger share of those supporting Democratic candidates.

In 2018, McLaurin was elected to represent a suburban state House district north of Atlanta before winning election to the state Senate in 2023. Assessing the seismic political shift in Metro Atlanta’s suburbs that helped to promote a resurgence in two-party competition, McLaurin reflected that:

I think as time goes by, and as Democrats form a larger and larger coalition and Republicans form a more nakedly power-hungry coalition—or a less tethered from reality, more racist coalition—as that happens, the voices that are diverse that ally themselves with the Republican Party are more and more in bad faith... Because, again, at this point in history, the vast majority of the voters and the base that people on the right are appealing to, like elected officials, don’t care for racial diversity... and are not looking at it from a critical perspective (McLaurin, 2024).

McLaurin continued, “It’s just a fear of difference, you know, deciding that they don’t want people who aren’t like them in charge. And that’s the unspoken truth among a lot of right-wing talking heads and politicians, that they can’t acknowledge—is that the plurality of their voters want an explicitly white supremacist system” (Ibid). This discussion acknowledges that even as Georgia’s

increasingly diverse electorate has made two-party competition possible in the modern era, there has also been a significant increase in polarization with respect to racial attitudes among the state's officeholders, as demonstrated by McLaurin's reflections (also see Sides & Tesler, 2024).

2020 TO 2022: ISAKSON'S RETIREMENT MARKS END OF AN ERA FOR GEORGIA'S GOP

In August 2019, Senator Johnny Isakson—one of the state's Republican pioneers who had been either on the ballot or in office during every election cycle since 1974—announced his intent to resign from the Senate at the end of the year due to challenges arising from Parkinson's disease (Everett, 2019). Isakson's announcement gave Gov. Brian Kemp the rare opportunity to appoint his successor—a candidate who, if successful in a November 2020 special election, would presumably share the ballot with Kemp in his 2022 reelection campaign. After an exhaustive process that saw the governor create an application process in which prospective candidates had to make public their interest in filling the vacancy, Kemp announced his selection of businesswoman Kelly Loeffler in December 2019.

Rather than positioning herself in the mold of her predecessor, Loeffler quickly aligned herself with the Trump wing of the GOP, through a campaign that offers support for hypothesis H1, H1A, and H1B with Loeffler's relentless focus on Trump that often took precedence over appeals to Georgia's broader electorate. Greg Bluestein reported that, in November of 2019, Kemp, Loeffler, and Georgia GOP operative Nick Ayres—who served as Vice President Mike Pence's chief of staff from 2017 to 2019—flew to meet with then-President Donald Trump to preview Loeffler's appointment. After Trump asked Kemp if he had made his mind up and the governor answered in the affirmative, “the mood soured” and Trump asked, “If you already made the decision... then why are you even here?” (Bluestein, 2022A, 141-142).

At that point, Trump “pointedly asked Kemp why he hadn’t chosen [Doug] Collins,” one of his staunchest allies in Congress and the 45th President’s lead defender in his first impeachment trial (Ibid, 142). Bluestein explained: “the Kemp folks I talked to envisioned her as a [2022] running mate... someone who would help balance the ticket... who can appeal to what was one of Governor Kemp’s biggest weaknesses: suburban women” (Bluestein, 2024A). However, “What they were not expecting was Doug Collins to get in that race and stay in that race, forcing Kelly Loeffler to go full court MAGA [Make America Great Again] the entire campaign, and meanwhile Democrats cleared the field—with Stacey Abrams’ help—for Raphael Warnock” (Ibid).

David Perdue shared the ballot with Loeffler and Trump in November of 2020, and despite winning a plurality of votes, fell just short of the 50% threshold necessary to avoid a runoff—pushing both of Georgia’s U.S. Senate seats to an unprecedented January 2021 double-header that would determine which party would obtain the Senate majority in the 117th session of Congress. Perdue’s 2020 campaign was plagued by missteps. During the runoff, Georgia’s senior senator refused to debate Jon Ossoff and was represented by an empty podium at the Atlanta Press Club’s December debate—an image that became a ubiquitous reminder of Perdue’s relatively light campaign schedule (Murphy, 2020). Making matters worse, after a scandal that revolved around Perdue’s prolific habit of trading individual stocks, the candidate ran a runoff ad centered around the Senate Ethics Committee’s dismissal of a probe into his trading. This prompted Jon Ossoff to quip: “‘Totally exonerated’ is David Perdue’s new campaign slogan? The bar should be higher for a sitting member of the US Senate” (Ossoff, 2020). After unseating Perdue in 2020, Ossoff made it one of his signature issues to sponsor bipartisan legislation banning stock trading by members of Congress (Ossoff, 2024).

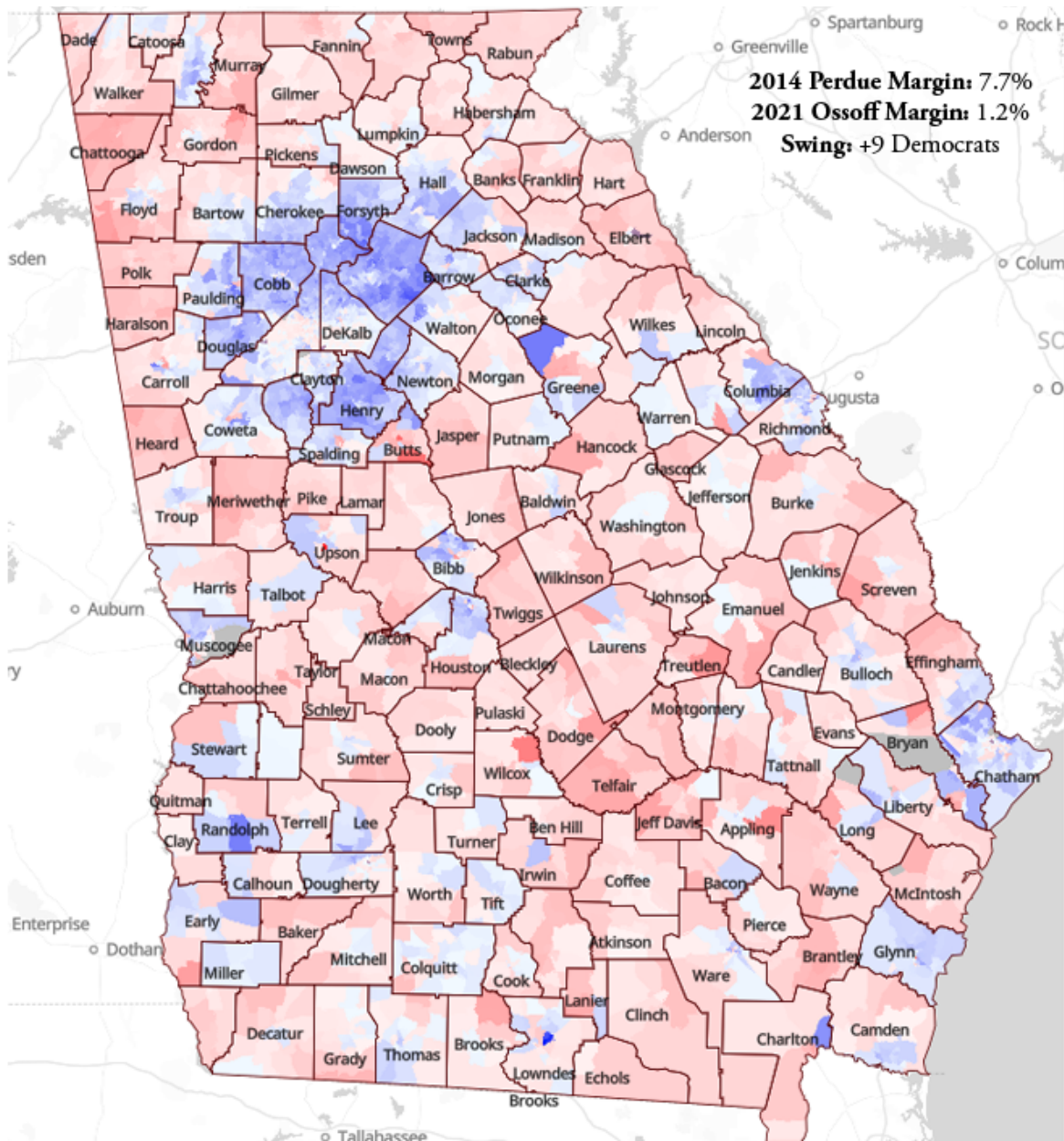
Immediately after the November election, on November 9, 2020—Loeffler and Perdue called for Secretary Raffensperger’s resignation, citing no evidence as they castigated his “failures” in administering the 2020 election. Leaked text messages show that shortly thereafter, Tricia Raffensperger, the secretary of state’s wife, confronted Loeffler by text message, expressing her disappointment and writing: “You do not deserve to be in elected office. You are not worthy of the high calling of that position” (Bluestein et al., 2022). Under tremendous pressure from Trump, both Perdue and Loeffler announced their hope that Congress would object to the certification of the 2020 election in support of the 45th President’s claims of a stolen election. These actions demonstrate the importance GOP office-seekers placed on loyalty to Trump over appeals to the broader electorate, providing support for hypothesis H1A.

Although Perdue’s term expired before the certification vote—shielding him from the same high-stakes decision faced by Loeffler—the senior senator took to *Fox News Sunday* on January 4, 2021, and pronounced: “I’m urging my colleagues to object. This is something that the American people demand right now” (Kenny, 2021). Searching for an explanation, Perdue added, “There are huge irregularities in Georgia. They need to be investigated, and they need to be corrected, in my opinion” (Ibid). At a Dalton rally that evening, Loeffler took to the stage to excitedly respond to the president’s request while standing by his side, telling the audience: “I have an announcement: Georgia. On January 6, I will object to the Electoral College vote. That’s right! Thank you. We’re going to get this done... This president fought for us, we’re fighting for him” (*11 Alive*, 2021).

Ultimately, Loeffler was defeated by two-percentage points in the runoff election, underperforming Perdue—who also lost his reelection bid—by more than 19,000 votes. Loeffler’s underwhelming performance marked a 16-percentage-point swing from Isakson’s dominant 2016 reelection, while Democrat Jon Ossoff saw a 9-percentage point swing from Perdue’s 2014 general

election victory. Once it became clear that both Perdue and Loeffler had lost the January 5 runoff election—and in the wake of the storming of the U.S. Capitol by insurrectionists inspired by Trump on January 6, 2021—Loeffler abandoned the promise she made at Trump’s Dalton rally and instead voted to certify the results of the 2020 election. This change of heart provides further support for H1A, showing that once electoral concerns were no longer at the forefront of Loeffler’s agenda, she became less concerned with following through on supporting Trump’s claims of a stolen election.

**Figure 3.14 2014 to 2021: Democrats Make Major Gains in Cities, Suburbs,
GOP's Rural Gains Not Enough for Perdue to Hold Seat**



Source: Redistricter.com, created by author.

Figure 3.14 demonstrates the swing statewide from the 2014 general election to the 2021 runoff, with Perdue losing significant support in Metro Atlanta that could not be offset by the gains he made in rural and exurban areas. For example, while some North Georgia counties such as Chattooga recorded significant increases in GOP support—with Perdue obtaining a 23-percentage

point gain from his 2014 performance to win 80% of votes cast—the much more populous Cobb County swung into the Democratic column by 25-percentage points to deliver 57% of its votes to Ossoff. As seen in Figure 3.9, these counties are emblematic of geographic trends in similarly situated areas, with Democrats recording significant inroads in population hubs and suburban areas, as less populous areas trended towards the GOP.

Before Georgia 14th District Congressman Tom Graves announced his retirement in 2019, conservative gadfly Marjorie Taylor Greene was waging a primary campaign against Handel for the 6th District. At the time, Greene was seen as a “longshot contender” who “mostly drew attention for a petition to impeach House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and provocative campaign stunts” (Bluestein, 2019). However, Greene’s prospects immediately improved when she shifted her sights to the state’s second most conservative, North Georgia district that supported Trump by a margin of 48 percentage points in 2020. Running on a platform of staunch support for Trump and a “strongly pro-gun, pro-border wall and anti-abortion message,” Greene prevailed in an August 2020 runoff to win the GOP nomination. Congratulating her after her victory, Trump tweeted that Greene was a “future Republican Star” and “a real WINNER!” (Domonoske, 2020).

On the campaign trail, Greene regularly made headlines for espousing statements questioning whether the Parkland school shooting was a “false flag hoax” and for attacks against then-House GOP Conference Chair Liz Cheney, prompting then-Senate minority whip John Thune to remark, “House Republicans are going to have to decide who they want to be... Do they want to be the party of limited government and fiscal responsibility, free markets, peace through strength and pro-life, or do they want to be the party of conspiracy theories and QAnon” (Collinson, 2021). With Cheney’s ouster and Greene’s rise to political stardom, the House Republican Conference signaled that the party had a new identity. Through her first two terms, Greene proved herself to

be one of Trump's staunchest allies in Congress and was subsequently rewarded by Speaker Mike Johnson with an appointment to chair the House Oversight subcommittee on DOGE, responsible for interfacing with the effort to cut spending and reorder government helmed by top Trump ally Elon Musk at the start of his second term (Beavers, 2024B).

Collins' decision to challenge Loeffler for U.S. Senate in 2020 opened his 9th District seat in the U.S. House to a GOP primary that would almost certainly decide his replacement. In 2020, the 9th District ranked as Georgia's most Republican, with Trump winning by a margin of 54-percentage points. Two candidates emerged from the June primary that saw nine candidates vying to succeed Collins.

The first-place finisher was Matt Gurtler, a two-term state representative who was known for voting "no" more often than any other state legislator (*AJC Politics*, 2020). Gurtler was vying against Andrew Clyde, an Athens gun dealer who framed his campaign around his experience challenging and winning a case against the IRS, in which he had almost \$950,000 seized in 2013 under civil asset forfeiture laws that were later changed, in part, because of his case. After Clyde defeated Gurtler with 56% of ballots cast, he became a staunch Trump ally and an antagonist of congressional leadership. In 2023, Clyde emerged as one of Trump's earliest high-profile supporters in Georgia for his comeback bid, endorsing him at the state GOP convention and telling the audience: "He will help save this nation from the radical left-wing wackos, from the socialists and the corrupt bureaucrats who want to eliminate our country" (Bluestein, 2023A).

Soon after Joe Biden narrowly defeated Donald Trump to put Georgia's 16-electoral votes in the Democratic column for the first time since 1992, Trump thrust the nation into chaos by proclaiming that the election was stolen and refusing to concede. As part of this effort, Trump went substantially further than candidates before him, such as Abrams, by leaning on Georgia's

secretary of state Brad Raffensperger in a January 2021 phone call, asking him to “find 11,780 votes” so that the 2020 election could be overturned in his favor (Dale, 2023). This phone call, which Raffensperger’s office recorded and provided to *The Washington Post*, served as the foundation of a criminal investigation by Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis that resulted in Trump being indicted on 13 felony charges (Ibid). After the indictment of Trump and those who worked alongside him in Georgia, former Vice President Mike Pence commented that “the American people deserve to know that President Trump and his advisors didn’t just ask me to pause. They asked me to reject votes, return votes, essentially to overturn the election” (Haberman, 2023). Years later, Trump was still referring to his conversation with Raffensperger as “a perfect phone call” as he geared up for a 2024 comeback bid (CNN, 2023).

As part of Trump’s efforts, 16-Georgians volunteered to act as GOP presidential electors, several of whom were included as part of a group of 18-indicted co-conspirators who served key roles in assisting Trump’s attempts to overturn the results of the 2020 election in Georgia. Those involved included sitting Lieutenant Governor Burt Jones, state Senator Shawn Still, and then-state Republican Party Chairman David Shafer. Under the leadership of Shafer (2019-2023) and his chosen successor, Josh McKoon, the state party apparatus reported spending over \$1.5 million on legal fees between 2022-2023 to defend those involved in Trump’s effort against criminal charges (Salzer, 2024). Rewarding his loyalty, McKoon was reelected for a second two-year term atop the state GOP with Trump’s endorsement in June 2025.

Prior to his election as speaker of the House, Louisiana Congressman Mike Johnson led an effort with 125 co-signers from the House GOP Conference to file an *amicus curiae* brief in support of *State of Texas v. Common Wealth of Pennsylvania, et al.*, in which the State of Texas sued to ask the U.S. Supreme Court to block the certification of Electoral College votes from

Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. Seven of nine members of Georgia's congressional delegation signed on to the effort, including Rick Allen (12th), Buddy Carter (1st), Doug Collins (9th), Drew Ferguson (3rd), Jody Hice (10th), Barry Loudermilk (11th), and Austin Scott (8th). Absent from the list of Republicans representing Georgia were retiring House members Rob Woodall (7th) and Tom Graves (14th).

When it came time to vote on the certification of the Electoral College, six Georgia members of the U.S. House voted to sustain objections to Biden's election. These members included: Buddy Carter, Andrew Clyde, Marjorie Taylor Greene, Jody Hice, and Barry Loudermilk. The fact that Georgia's two newly elected members joined the effort in support of Trump offers support for hypothesis H1B. Further, votes from Austin Scott and Drew Ferguson as the lone Georgia Republicans voting to certify Biden's Electoral College victory offers support for hypotheses H1 and H1A, as both Republicans supported the amicus brief before the Supreme Court to demonstrate some support for Trump but fell short of fully endorsing his effort to contest the election outcome.

After the 2020 election cycle and Trump's claims of a stolen election in Georgia, state Republican leaders went into the 2021 legislative session walking the line between satisfying Trump and working to maintain the fabric of democracy. With Governor Kemp's support, Pro-Trump and establishment Republicans compromised and came together to enact Senate Bill 202. Among other provisions, the 98-page omnibus legislation made significant changes to absentee voting, added limited expansions by requiring Saturday early voting hours and making Sunday voting optional for counties, while reconfiguring the State Election Board. Under the changes, the secretary of state was removed as the board's chair to become a non-voting, ex-officio member, serving alongside five voting members comprised of a chair selected by the governor, two

members appointed by the General Assembly, and one member picked each by the Democratic and Republican parties.

When state House Speaker Jon Burnes selected GOP media personality Janelle King to replace attorney and former Republican state Representative Ed Lindsey on the State Election Board, Georgia GOP chairman Josh McKoon declared victory. With “the party... lobbying for Lindsey to be replaced” McKoon remarked, “I believe when we look back on November 5, 2024, we’re going to say getting to that 3-2 election integrity minded majority on the State Election Board made sure that we had the level playing field to win this election” (Brumback, 2024). The other two members of the pro-Trump majority included former state Senator Rick Jeffares, who was appointed by the state Senate. Jeffares attracted controversy shortly after joining the Board when he told a reporter for the *Guardian* that had asked members of Trump’s team for a position in the administration, with the former state senator quoted saying: “if y’all can’t figure out who you want to be the EPA director for the southeast, I’d like to have it” (Richards, 2024). The final member of the GOP majority trio was Janice Johnson, who was appointed by the state GOP and praised by Trump at an Atlanta rally ahead of the 2024 election, when he told the crowd: “They’re on fire. Three members. Janice Johnson. Rick Jeffares and Janelle King” (Ibid). The two members on the outside of the majority were Sara Tindall Ghazal, appointed by the state Democratic Party, and John Fervier, appointed by Governor Brian Kemp.

After the appointments were made, the Georgia Republican Party issued a press release offering rare praise to Governor Brian Kemp for supporting the election changes in SB 202 “despite strong opposition from the Democratic Party and Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger” (Bluestein, 2024B). Shortly after receiving Trump’s encouragement at his Atlanta rally, the Georgia Election Board voted 3-2 to certify a rule to allow county election boards to delay

certifying election results, a measure opposed by the Kemp-appointed chair who said the process didn't have "any guardrails" (Niese, 2024). The next month, in September of 2024, the board attempted to reignite inquiries into the 2020 election results, in addition to passing rules requiring poll workers to hand count paper ballots on election night and creating confusion over whether local elections officials have discretionary power to interfere in the certification of state elections (Brumback, 2024).

Raffensperger criticized the potential changes, saying "Georgia voters reject this 11th hour chaos, and so should the unelected members of the State Election Board" (Bluestein et al., 2024A). Soon after, Attorney General Chris Carr issued an official opinion that invalidated the Board's attempt to compel his office to reopen an inquiry into the results of the 2020 presidential election, as a federal judge set up an October 2024 court ruling preventing the election certification rules adopted by the State Election Board from going into effect. Fervier, the Board chair, characterized these actions as "activist," and admonished his colleagues, saying: "This hyperpartisanship doesn't serve anybody, and it certainly doesn't serve this board" (Niese, 2024B).

The series of events at the backdrop of these potential changes to state election law demonstrate the consequences of recent political history and the increasing stakes for political combat with a new generation of Republicans in positions of power. From Trump's refusal to accept defeat in the 2020 cycle to the General Assembly's actions to install Trump loyalists in control of Georgia's election apparatus, the consequences of Trump's 2020 loss were uniquely felt in Georgia. Further down the chain of command, the Georgia GOP was marred by internal turmoil, as it elevated figures at the far political extremes to positions of authority.

In one such example, Kandiss Taylor, the chair of the Georgia GOP's 1st district (2023-2025) made national headlines by saying she doesn't believe the Earth is round, before going on

to make a series of antisemitic remarks (Haidenberg, 2024). Although the Georgia GOP state chairman Josh McKoon issued a public condemnation of Taylor's remarks, her actions fall in line with a broader pattern of behavior that has generated currency within some quarters of the GOP political ecosystem. Another top state GOP leader elevated in 2023, First Vice Chairman Brian Prichard, was removed from office in 2024 after a court ruled that he voted illegally numerous times.

2022 TO 2024: GEORGIA TESTS TRUMP'S GRIP ON THE REPUBLICAN PARTY

With both of Georgia's U.S. Senate seats held by Democrats for the first time since the turn of the 21st Century, Republicans prepared for another bite of the apple in the 2022 election cycle—this time against now-incumbent Senator Raphael Warnock who was vying for a full six-year term. At Trump's urging, in August of 2021, former UGA running back, and 1982 Heisman Trophy winner, Herschel Walker announced his intention to challenge Warnock. Walker left no subtlety as he explained his reason for running with a football metaphor, saying he couldn't "sit on the sidelines anymore" (Amy, 2021).

With Trump's unqualified support, Walker cruised to the nomination, winning 68% of the vote to the 13% won by his closest challenger, longtime-state agriculture commissioner Gary Black. On the other hand, Kemp and four other statewide Republican elected officials faced the former president's ire after failing to support his efforts to contest the 2020 election and were confronted with Trump-endorsed primary challengers. Perhaps no Republicans in the country were higher on Trump's target list than Gov. Brian Kemp, who he called a "turncoat" and "RINO" (Republican in name only), and Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, who Trump called "crazy" and promised to campaign equally hard against (Barrow & Colvin, 2021; Fowler, 2022A).

Trump recruited former Senator David Perdue to challenge Kemp, with the recently defeated Perdue carrying forward his message of a stolen election into 2022, remarking: “Let’s get one thing straight, let me be very clear—very clear: In the state of Georgia, thanks to Brian Kemp, our elections in 2020 were absolutely stolen” (Fowler, 2022A). Down ballot, four-term 10th District Congressman Jody Hice was handpicked to challenge Raffensperger for the Secretary of State post, with Trump promising in his 2021 endorsement that, “Unlike the current Georgia Secretary of State, Jody leads out front with integrity. I have 100% confidence in Jody to fight for Free, Fair, and Secure Elections in Georgia, in line with our beloved U.S. Constitution” (Barrow & Colvin, 2021).

Rather than competing against Trump-endorsed state Senator Burt Jones, then-lieutenant governor Geoff Duncan opted to retire after one term. In endorsing Jones, the former president sought to elevate one of his staunchest supporters. Trump also supported challenges to incumbent GOP attorney general Chris Carr and insurance commissioner John King. Long-time GOP strategist Ed Lindsey noted that the endorsements were part of Trump’s efforts “to recreate the Republican Party in Georgia in his own image, and quite frankly, show fealty to him on bended knee, as opposed to conservative Republicans who think independently, and who judge people based on their policy” (Peebles, 2022).

Despite early momentum for Perdue and Hice, only two of seven Trump-endorsed GOP challengers were successful in the 2022 primary: Herschel Walker and Burt Jones. As Perdue faltered, then-lieutenant governor Geoff Duncan remarked, “At the end of the day, Donald Trump doesn’t care about David Perdue winning. He just cared about Brian Kemp losing” (Caputo et al., 2022). By the closing stretch, Perdue’s campaign had \$0 in advertising planned for the campaign’s final week and the former senator was widely perceived as having run a deeply flawed race (Ibid).

By a margin of nearly 52-percentage points, Kemp defeated Perdue to claim the right to a rematch with Stacey Abrams for a second term, while Hice fell short of Raffensperger by a margin of 19-percentage points in the first round of voting.

Evaluating the power of Trump's endorsement, Hood and McKee (2023) find a paradoxical effect, in which "where it mattered most it exhibited the least actual impact" including in 2022 races for secretary of state and insurance commissioner (390). In this vein, Hood and McKee submit that: "Our evidence suggests that if only more Georgia GOP primary voters were made aware of the Trump endorsement, then the outcome would have worked out in the former president's favor" (Ibid). In the closer race for secretary of state where Hood and McKee posit that stronger efforts to elevate Trump's endorsement may have made a difference in the outcome, media reports noted that "Hice ran an abysmal campaign... and hoarded his cash expecting a runoff" (Murphy & Mitchell, 2022). Weak campaigns by Trump's chosen candidates for attorney general, insurance commissioner, and secretary of state helped to diminish any chance of breaking-through to elevate the saliency of the low-profile down ballot contests against otherwise popular incumbents.

As Trump was attempting to reorder Georgia's slate of statewide constitutional officers, he also issued endorsements that failed to produce his desired outcomes in the state's 6th and 10th congressional districts. To improve Perdue's chances of defeating Kemp, Trump endorsed former Democrat Vernon Jones in the race to succeed Jody Hice in Georgia's 10th Congressional District. Jones received the coveted endorsement two days after dropping his bid to challenge Kemp, with Trump recording a video on his behalf and hailing him as an "America First" patriot. Although the endorsement vaulted Jones into second place to battle Mike Collins—son of former six term Congressman Mac Collins—in a runoff, Jones lost that race badly in a 75%-to-25% rout. Despite

not having Trump's support, Collins ran on a heavily pro-Trump platform and credited that strategy for his victory, remarking: "I think we got the Trump supporters... Because they knew from the beginning that I was on the Trump team way before he was the nominee" (Nolin, 2022). Collins also commented on Trump's strategy to endorse Jones, saying the quid pro quo fell flat and that "Everybody knew that the endorsement was not to run for Congress, but to get out of the governor's race. So, he could have run for dog catcher, and he'd have got that endorsement" (Ibid).

In the race for Georgia's 6th District to represent the newly redistricted map that Lucy McBath fled for the safer 7th District, Trump lent his support to Jake Evans, the 35-year-old son of his ambassador to Luxembourg, Randy Evans, who Trump appointed to represent the U.S. from 2018 to 2021. Aside from tweeting his endorsement—saying "Jake Evans is a young man rapidly on the rise"—Trump did little to aid his fledgling campaign (Gournell, 2022). McCormick, then running his second congressional campaign after coming within striking distance of Bourdeaux in 2020, led in polling and fundraising throughout the contest.

Despite running without Trump's direct support, McCormick nevertheless borrowed key planks of his platform from Trump's playbook, casting himself as "a fighter [who] will do whatever it takes to stop Joe Biden, Nancy Pelosi, and the radical Democrats" and instead touting an endorsement from "President Trump's Doctor" Ronny Jackson (McCormick, 2022). He also promised to "champion America First policies" and on the night of his victory struck a conciliatory tone, saying: "I expect Donald Trump to call us... because we're going to be friends and we're going to win this together" (Ibid; Nolin, 2022). Moreover, McCormick joined Trump in casting doubt on the outcome of the 2020 election. In a debate with Evans, McCormick "reiterated that he never conceded" the 2020 election, explaining that, in his view, "no one was hurt by voter fraud more than myself... at the end of the night at the end of the election in 2020, I was told I won the

election, that we were 5,000 votes up. And then we were eventually told we lost the election” (Fowler, 2022B). This statement offers support for hypothesis H1, which categorizes McCormick as a MAGA Republican.

The results of the 2022 primaries show that Trump’s endorsement is not sufficient to supersede all other political variables. However, these results do not disconfirm H1, H1A, and H1B. While Trump could not defeat popular incumbents up for renomination, he was successful in helping to propel Jones—and in recruiting Walker—successfully influencing GOP primaries for the two open statewide offices on the ballot.

With respect to this study’s hypotheses, and in particular, H1, Kemp’s dissent from Trump during the 2020 election was a catalyst that shifted Georgia’s governor from almost always supporting Trump to surviving a Trump-backed challenger by re-branding himself as a Republican who sometimes supported Trump. On the other hand, the state GOP—first under Shafer and then led by McKoon—became firmly entrenched as part of Trump’s MAGA base. In the face of direct attacks from Trump during the 2022 primary campaign, Kemp described that he “never said a bad word” about Trump and explained, “I’m not mad at him. I think he’s just mad at me. And that’s something I can’t control” (Bluestein, 2022B). Kemp’s approach serves to support hypothesis H1A. Despite Trump’s best efforts to antagonize Kemp, the governor refrained from directly criticizing him in return, recognizing the potential downside to making the 2022 campaign a referendum on support for Trump.

Although Kemp shared the general election ballot with Walker, the two candidates ran anything but a coordinated campaign, with Kemp refusing to commit to campaigning with Walker all the way through October of 2022 after the novice candidate was accused of paying for a former girlfriend’s abortion (Bluestein, 2022C). Even Walker’s son, Christian, denounced his father as “a

liar and charlatan” (Ibid). Notwithstanding these developments, the lion’s share of Trump-oriented, conservative pundits remained in the former football player’s camp. This line of thinking was exemplified by NRA-TV personality Dana Loesch, who crudely remarked to her audience, “I don’t care if Herschel Walker paid to abort endangered baby eagles. I want control of the Senate... If the Daily Beast story is true, you’re telling me Walker used his money to reportedly pay some skank for an abortion and Warnock wants to use all of our monies to pay a whole bunch of skanks for abortions” (PatriotTakes, 2022).

When Georgia voters cast their ballots in November of 2022, the state reelected Kemp by a substantial margin of nearly 300,000 votes or about 7.5 percentage points. While Abrams’ 2022 numbers were less than remarkable, the results still represented an eight-percentage point swing from Jason Carter’s 2014 performance in the 29-county Metro Atlanta region. The rest of the state’s 130 counties recorded a nearly 11-percentage point swing toward Kemp from Deal’s 2014 vote share. Without exception, in all 159 counties, Kemp’s vote share exceeded Walker’s.

In the U.S. Senate race, Warnock outperformed Walker by about 38,000 votes, or about one percentage point, but fell just short of the 50% threshold needed to avoid a runoff. Kemp outperformed Walker by four points among white voters—equivalent to 2.4 percentage points statewide—and by six points among non-white voters overall, equivalent to 2.5 percentage points. When the final votes of the 2022 cycle were tallied in December’s runoff, Warnock was reelected to serve in the Senate through 2028.

With Shafer helming the state GOP from 2019 to 2023, followed by McKoon, the state party’s influence was considerably weakened. As a result, Gov. Kemp and his aides stepped in to fill the gap by creating a rival apparatus in support of state Republicans (Murphy et al., 2024). In 2021, Kemp supported passage of a state law that led to the creation of leadership committees

permitted to raise unlimited funds, while bypassing most restrictions placed on traditional campaign accounts for state officials and lawmakers. Kemp explained his turn away from the Georgia GOP as essential to helping mainstream Republicans win competitive elections, offering a clear contrast with the activities of the Trump-centric Georgia GOP.

Media reports noted that “Kemp’s leadership committee has quickly morphed into a parallel fundraising and voter turnout structure that has filled a void left by the GOP” after its “clout waned considerably under now-former Chair David Shafer, who infuriated key leaders and activists by openly siding with Donald Trump-backed challengers to Kemp and other Republican incumbents” in 2022 (Bluestein, 2023B). However, Kemp’s most pointed criticism for the state party was reserved for after his 2022 reelection campaign, when he told a group of donors that the midterm was proof that “we can no longer rely on the traditional party infrastructure to win in the future” (Bluestein, 2023C). Although Kemp’s brand of Republicanism is less distinct from Trump’s than Isakson’s, his efforts to create the Georgians First Leadership Committee to circumvent the state GOP and support down ballot Republicans offers further support for H1.

By the time the 2024 presidential primary was held in Georgia, Nikki Haley had already suspended her campaign, and Trump was gearing up for a rematch against Joe Biden. Ahead of the March contest, Trump had secured early endorsements from eight members of Georgia’s congressional delegation, winning support from every GOP member aside from retiring 3rd District Representative Drew Ferguson. Although he initially endorsed Florida governor Ron DeSantis, 7th District Representative Rich McCormick flipped his support to Trump in January of 2024 as Trump’s momentum grew after easily winning the Iowa Caucuses.

As Georgia’s GOP coalesced behind Trump, Kemp was a conspicuous outlier. However, despite not initially backing Trump, Kemp did not endorse another candidate. Kemp even refrained

from responding in-kind when Trump attacked his wife in a *Truth Social* post to his followers, writing: “Now she says she won’t Endorse me, and is going to ‘write in Brian Kemp’s name... Well, I don’t want her Endorsement, and I don’t want his” (Blake 2024). Prior to Trump’s missive, Kemp had said he left his March primary ballot blank, and that he “voted, but I didn’t vote for anybody” because “the race was already over when the primary got here” (Rose, 2024). Nevertheless, Kemp’s social media response to Trump made clear that he still planned to vote for Trump that November, saying “My focus is on winning this November and saving our country from Kamala Harris and the Democrats – not engaging in petty personal insults, attacking fellow Republicans, or dwelling on the past. You should do the same, Mr. President, and leave my family out of it” (Kemp, 2024). Despite dropping out before Georgians cast their 2024 primary ballots, Haley still claimed 13.2% of votes in the GOP primary—in addition to 0.3% of Republicans like Brian Kemp who cast blank ballots—indicating that the party was not yet fully unified behind Trump.

To this end, former lieutenant governor Geoff Duncan endorsed Kamala Harris over Trump and spoke at the Democratic National Convention on her behalf. When Duncan sought the GOP nomination in 2018, and through most of his tenure as the state’s lieutenant governor, he was publicly supportive of Trump. However, he said that the deciding factor for his break in support came after Trump’s refusal to concede the 2020 election (Astor, 2024). Making clear that there was no room for dissent against Trump in the party, the Georgia GOP’s executive committee unanimously voted to expel Duncan from any future involvement with the state Republican Party. Duncan’s removal offers support for hypothesis H1 and H1A, as he situated himself as the highest-level Anti-Trump Republican in Georgia. The resolution expelling him declared: “We have

demanded that Duncan cease calling himself a ‘Republican’ and using his false credential as a ‘Republican’ to undermine and sabotage the Republican Party and its candidates” (Maurer, 2025).

With 16 combined visits between Harris (seven) and Trump (nine) between the national party conventions and election day, 2024 marked the most active presidential campaign in Georgia in modern history (Sabetai, 2024). Previously, in 2020, Biden and Trump visited Georgia three times each after their conventions (FairVote, 2020). In 2016, neither candidate visited the Peach State after winning their party’s respective nomination. This time around, after a June 2024 debate in Atlanta served as the catalyst for Joe Biden’s exit from the race, Georgia took center stage in the presidential race between Harris and Trump. With Harris holding a rally in Chatham County as her first stop after the Democratic National Convention, the race marked the first campaign event in Savannah since Bill Clinton campaigned there in 1992 (Payne, 2024). Trump followed that up in September with his own visit to the Savannah area as the candidates barnstormed the state.

Offering support for H1B and demonstrating a distinction between the activities of former and current Republican officeholders, during the 2024 cycle, a bipartisan group of elected officials joined together to launch the “Democracy Defense Project,” in support of “restoring trust in democracy and defending the state election system” (Nolin, 2024). The leaders of the group included Republicans Nathan Deal and Saxby Chambliss and Democrats Roy Barnes and Shirley Franklin. Chambliss’ involvement in the group offered a sharp contrast to the activities of his successor in the U.S. Senate, David Perdue, who became one of the lead defenders of Trump’s claims of a stolen election.

With the retirement of 3rd District Congressman Drew Ferguson, 2024 also presented another marquee GOP primary race to test the power of Trump’s endorsement. The top two

contenders included former state Senate Republican majority leader Mike Dugan and former Trump White House political director Brian Jack. Jack centered his campaign around Trump's support, describing that "In me, you have somebody who has worked by President Trump's side for the last eight years, somebody who President Trump has endorsed, somebody President Trump trusts to be an America First ally" (Amy, 2024). Jack also raised his hand at a debate in affirmation of his view that Trump was the "rightful" winner in 2020 (Bluestein & Niesse, 2024). After coming close to an outright victory in the first round of voting with a 22-percentage point lead over Dugan, Jack easily claimed victory in a July 2024 runoff with 63% of ballots cast. As evidence of the value that House GOP leadership saw in Jack's close relationship with Trump, he was appointed to the House Rules Committee as a freshman lawmaker, gaining a spot on the powerful committee that decides which legislation advances to the floor for consideration (Jack, 2025).

With Trump's nomination of several prominent Georgia allies to key posts, including Doug Collins as Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Kelly Loeffler to lead the Small Business Administration (SBA), and David Perdue as Ambassador to China, Burt Jones is positioned as Trump's chief ally at the state-level ahead of the state's 2026 cycle. After attending Trump's 2025 inauguration, Jones was invited to attend Trump's signing of the Laken Riley Act in January of 2025. Recognizing Jones' status as one of Trump's closest supporters, the president called him out by name at the bill signing, saying "Burt is your lieutenant governor, and he was on this like you wouldn't believe" (*Roll Call*, 2025). Further, in preparation for an all but certain campaign for governor in 2026, Jones made it a 2025 legislative priority to propose creating a state-level "Department of Government Efficiency" (DOGE). Through this proposal, Jones associated himself as a supporter of the controversial Elon Musk-led "DOGE," which he described as "President Donald Trump's

plan to create efficiency while paring down unnecessary spending and eliminating bureaucratic red tape at the federal level” (Groves, 2025).

After the 2024 election, Trump also appointed state Senator Brandon Beach as his second term administration’s treasurer, elevating one of his staunchest supporters who claimed that the 2020 election in Georgia was stolen. Setting the stage for 2026, Beach offered his opinion that Attorney General Chris Carr, the first major GOP candidate to declare his candidacy for governor, faces long odds against Burt Jones, who appears likely to run with Trump’s endorsement. Beach surmised: “It’s laughable to say Chris Carr is a MAGA Republican. He’s a Johnny Isakson Republican. I love Johnny, but the Republican Party has changed. Now it’s Trump’s party” (Bluestein, 2025A). Beach’s comments reenforce the validity of the distinction between elected Republicans offered by hypothesis H1.

On the Democratic side, after a relative boom period that saw the explosive growth of organizations orbiting Stacey Abrams, those groups saw funding dry up and internal disfunction rise after Abrams’ disappointing 2022 performance. In 2024, Fair Fight laid off 75% of its staff despite raising more than \$100 million during its first four years of operations, when it was founded after Abrams’ 2018 loss to Kemp. The year prior, in 2023, the New Georgia Project, which was founded by Abrams in 2014, fired its leadership amidst claims of financial irregularities and misused resources (Bluestein, 2024C; Gibson, 2023). In January of 2025, the New Georgia Project and the affiliated New Georgia Project Action Fund “admitted to 16 instances of illegal activity in a consent decree” and were fined \$300,000 for illegally completing “election work for Abrams and others without disclosing their campaign contributions and spending” (Amy, 2025). This penalty represented the largest campaign finance fine in Georgia history and coincided with the end of an era of Democratic campaigns centered around Abrams and her allied political groups.

From 2019 to 2025, Congresswoman Nikema Williams served as chairwoman of the state Democratic Party. While Williams was reelected to the chairmanship in 2023, a disappointing Democratic performance in 2024 led to calls for her resignation from Democratic officials. Most notably, Georgia's state's senior U.S. senator, Jon Ossoff, led the charge to push for Williams' resignation, with the *AJC* reporting that Ossoff told Williams, "I don't want you leading the party with me at the top of the ticket" (Bluestein, 2024D).

Ossoff's standoff with Williams was met with pushback from other party leaders. For example, state House Democratic Leader Carolyn Hugely criticized Ossoff's approach, saying that "to try and demean and harass and embarrass someone who's done a good job in the capacity as chair of the party is very distasteful to me and I'm very disappointed that the senator would take us down this road" (Bluestein et al., 2024B). Nevertheless, the saga ended with Georgia Democrats changing the party's rules in March 2025 to make the chair full-time position—a change Williams endorsed before stepping down from her role that April to make room for a successor ahead of the 2026 cycle (Bluestein, 2025B). By May of 2025, with Ossoff's endorsement, Charlie Bailey, the former Democratic nominee for attorney general (2018) and lieutenant governor (2022), was elected as chair of the Georgia Democratic Party (Baruchman & Bluestein, 2025).

CONCLUSION

Between 2008 and 2024, Georgia experienced a sea change in the state's elected leadership. In this respect, Georgia generally confirms the first set of hypotheses tested by this study through H1, H1A, and H1B. Among the 21 Republican officeholders considered over the 16-year period covered by this study, 12 are categorized as MAGA Republicans under hypothesis H1, whereas nine are categorized as Sometimes Trump Republicans, and none are anti-Trump Republicans (Table 3.5). Although Trump's 2022 attempt at revenge largely fell flat, formalizing the rift

between the GOP's Trump wing and Kemp's brand of conservatism, the governor's strategy of ignoring rather than confronting Trump's attacks offers some support for hypothesis H1A. While it may have been political suicide to set up the race as an open repudiation of Trump's hold on the GOP, Kemp, along with down ballot statewide constitutional officers Chris Carr, Brad Raffensperger, and John King found success by depriving their opponents of political oxygen and leaning into their status as better-known incumbents (Hood & McKee, 2023).

Since 2018, Georgia has been home to seven GOP primary races to fill open seats for governor, U.S. Senate, and U.S. House. In five of these races, the candidate aligned most closely with Trump prevailed, including Brian Kemp (2018), Marjorie Taylor Greene (2020), Andrew Clyde (2020), Herschel Walker (2022), and Brian Jack (2024). In one of two instances where this was not the case, Rich McCormick defeated Trump-endorsed candidate Jake Evans in 2022. However, Trump did not speak on Evans' behalf during the campaign and did little to boost his candidacy, whereas McCormick's campaign out-raised Evans' by a two-to-one margin (Williams, 2022). In the other race, also in 2022, Mike Collins defeated former Democrat Vernon Jones who was endorsed by Trump. However, Collins did so while running on an explicitly pro-Trump platform, and Jones carried significant political baggage as a long-time elected Democrat with a penchant for attracting controversy. These races demonstrate mixed results but offer support for the notion that the GOP base has shifted to demand appeals from Republican politicians that more closely mirror Trump's rhetoric and ideology than Johnny Isakson's or that of more traditional conservatives.

Governor Brian Kemp won the 2018 GOP primary on an insurgent conservative platform with Trump's endorsement before first crossing the president by appointing Kelly Loeffler over Doug Collins to the U.S. Senate in 2019 and then defending the results of the 2020 presidential

election in Georgia. These actions opened a rift between Kemp and Trump, in addition to dividing the governor's political operation from that of the state GOP, which has been led by Trump loyalists David Shafer (2019-2023) and Josh McKoon (2023-2025). In 2022, Herschel Walker and Burt Jones finished as the lone Trump-backed candidates to win the GOP nomination in their respective races. However, these were also the only two statewide contests without an incumbent Republican on the ballot. Similarly, in the 2024 Republican primary race for Georgia's 3rd Congressional District, Trump showed that he still held power in open seat primary contests by helping to elevate his former staffer Brian Jack over former state Senate majority leader Mike Dugan in the runoff race to replace outgoing House GOP Chief Deputy Whip Drew Ferguson.

Since the beginning of the Trump era, the majority of Republican candidates examined by this study have mirrored themes championed by Trump, generally casting themselves as "America First" or "Georgia First" conservatives. This trend offers support for hypotheses H1A and H1B, as expressing support for Trump or his agenda has generally become a requirement for office-seeking Republicans. Comparing state Republicans who led their tickets during the Trump era, including Brian Kemp, David Perdue, Kelly Loeffler, Herschel Walker, and Burt Jones, to those whose elections preceded Trump also offers a sharp contrast. Republicans such as Johnny Isakson, Saxby Chambliss, and Nathan Deal would all stand out in the contemporary GOP as uniquely moderate and insufficiently pro-Trump.

Although both Chambliss and Deal have kept relatively low profiles in the Trump era, both leaders attached themselves to the 2024 "Democracy Defense Project," as part of the effort to instill confidence in Georgia's elections. During one of the group's events, Deal asked of the state's GOP: "Are we allowing them to be talking about things that they can't prove? ... Neither party should be going into any election with the idea that they're going to explain away the reason they

lose by setting it up in advance” (Dunlap, 2024). At a later event, Deal seemed to offer his own confirmation for hypothesis H1B in a conversation with his Democracy Defense Project partner and formal political rival, Roy Barnes, with the *AJC* quoting Deal as saying that he “for sure” “wouldn’t make the cut in today’s MAGA-dominated GOP” (Bluestein et al., 2025). Deal, who took a stand against permit-less carry legislation that his successor Brian Kemp later signed, and who vetoed a version of “campus carry” gun legislation, criticized changes in the political discourse, saying that, now, Republican candidates would “rather talk about AR-15s or other things that to the average voter do not make any sense at all, but that’s what they have to put up with. That’s what they have to listen to. And it’s not a very pretty picture.” Barnes added, “The Democrats think I’m too conservative and you were too liberal. The truth of the matter is, there’s not much difference between us because we all have common goals” (Ibid).

With Donald Trump’s rise as the state’s most prominent Republican standard-bearer, followed a flood of controversy over the 45th President’s denial of the outcome of the 2020 presidential election that divided elected Republicans and GOP voters alike. Trump found strong support from most Georgia Republicans in Congress for his effort to challenge the 2020 election results. Moreover, Republicans elected to the 3rd (Jack) and 14th (Greene) congressional districts offered stronger levels of support for Trump’s efforts than their predecessors who did not support measures to contest the certification of Biden’s 2020 Electoral College victory (H1B). Furthermore, retiring Republicans (including Rob Woodall, Tom Graves, Drew Ferguson, and Kelly Loeffler) represented four of five GOP members of the House and Senate from Georgia who either (1) did not vote to object to the 2020 Electoral College certification or (2) sign on to Mike Johnson’s amicus brief to the U.S. Supreme Court.¹¹ This point offers additional support for

¹¹ Ferguson signed on to the 2020 U.S. Supreme Court amicus brief in *Texas v. Pennsylvania* but voted to certify Biden’s 2020 Electoral College victory.

hypothesis H1B. As shown in Table 3.5, there appears to be a clear difference, in which members seeking re-election almost all supported Trump's claims of a stolen election, in comparison to those leaving office, who for the most part did not.

Georgia's story is emblematic of larger developments occurring across the Growth South—a region in transformation, where electoral coalitions increasingly reflect the demographics of each party's base. Along with generally conforming to the structure of the 30-30 (H2) for Democratic victories, changes in Georgia's electoral environment resulted in Black leaders (H5) and women (H6) becoming a larger share of Georgia Democratic elected officials—contributing to increasing racial and gender polarization in the ranks of the state's General Assembly and Congressional delegation (H9 and H10). Moreover, due in no small part to Trump's intervention into Georgia politics, state Democrats notched their first major statewide victories in a generation by defeating the former president's favored candidates. Ahead of Jon Ossoff's 2026 reelection bid, Georgia remains the posterchild for Democratic gains influenced by Trump's involvement.

Beyond intra-party skirmishes, the identity of Georgia's state and federally elected officials strongly supports hypotheses H5, H6, H9, and H10. As of 2025, Democrats hold both of the state's U.S. Senate seats, five of 14 House districts, 103 of 236 seats in the General Assembly, and none of the state's eight constitutional executive offices. Among the Democratic members of the General Assembly, 76 (74%) are Black, eight are Asian (8%), five are Hispanic (5%), and 60 are women (58%). On the Republican side, among 135 members of the General Assembly 21 are women (16%), three are Hispanic (1%), and two are Asian (1%). Of the eight Republicans elected statewide to executive offices in 2022, all are men and one, Insurance Commissioner John King, is Hispanic. Aside from the state's senior Senator Jon Ossoff, all of Georgia's Democratic federal elected officials are Black and two of five House members are women. On the Republican side,

eight of nine members of Congress are white men, with Marjorie Taylor Greene serving as the lone white women in the delegation.

With respect to H5 and H6, statistical significance is found to support the notion that, between 2008 and 2024, Black elected officials and women became a larger share of Democratic elected officials in Georgia's state Senate, state House, and General Assembly as a whole. Furthermore, with respect to racial and gender polarization between Democrats and Republicans, statistical tests generally offer strong support for hypotheses H9 and H10 (see Table 3.18 and Table 3.20). Looking under the hood, however, reveals an electorate that is less polarized by race and gender than in years past, disconfirming H3, H4, H7, and H8.

As the most recent example of racial depolarization, Trump's 2024 victory was enabled—in part—by a decrease in support Democratic support from Asian, Hispanic, and white Georgians, as support from Black voters for Kamala Harris remained flat from the level of support won by Biden. As charted in Table 3.15, gender polarization has also decreased in recent cycles, as Democratic candidates have become more competitive with male voters. In Chapter Six, further analysis of hypotheses H1 through H10 is presented to evaluate where Georgia stands in comparison to Louisiana, South Carolina, and the region of the South. Chapter Six also tests hypotheses H11, H12, and H13, which compare trends in the Growth South and the Stagnant States.

Changes in Georgia's political environment over the past 16-years have set the stage for the 2026 cycle to test the strength of Trump's influence in the Republican primary as well as the general election. On the other side of the aisle, 2026 will test the ability of state Democrats to mount competitive campaigns for the state's governorship, legislative seats, and to hold Jon Ossoff's U.S. Senate seat. Although it remains unclear whether Democrats can win statewide if

Trump—or candidates closely-aligned with 45th president—are not on the ballot, Republican primary voters have also hewed closely to Trump’s preferences in selecting non-incumbent candidates in the Trump era. Going forward, all signs point to the continuation of genuine two-party competition in Georgia in 2026, along with lasting influence derived from Trump’s decade-long grip over the state’s Republican Party and a generation of political leaders shaped by his leadership firmly entrenched atop the GOP. Beyond Trump’s influence, with a political ecosystem that has been jolted awake by recent election cycles, Georgia is at the leading edge of the Growth South and is strongly positioned to remain in the top tier of political battlegrounds nationally in 2026 and 2028.

CHAPTER 4: SOUTH CAROLINA CASE STUDY: 2008 TO 2024

INTRODUCTION

As Donald Trump surged following his 2016 victory in the New Hampshire GOP primary, South Carolina’s winner-take-most contest stood as a defining battleground that would signal the direction for the future of the Republican Party. At a February rally in Greenville, Cuban American presidential hopeful and Florida U.S. Senator Marco Rubio stood side-by-side with South Carolina’s Indian American female governor, Nikki Haley, Tim Scott, the South’s first African American senator since Reconstruction, and Trey Gowdy, the prosecutor-turned congressman who led the investigation into the Benghazi attack that occurred under Hillary Clinton’s tenure as secretary of state. To observers, the rally “was the stuff GOP dreams are made of,” and offered a glimpse into what a new, more diverse Republican Party could look like, while building on its existing base (Taylor, 2016). The scene gave hope to the notion that the GOP was poised to seize on the findings of the 2013 autopsy commissioned by the Republican National Committee (RNC)—which was chaired by South Carolina’s own Glenn McCall—that concluded the party needed to open itself up to include people from backgrounds outside of the traditional, white conservatives who have long dominated its base. Eight years later—well after Trump steamrolled his way to the nomination by vanquishing Rubio and sweeping 10-out-of-11 Southern states, including South Carolina—the scene at Rubio’s rally is still wistfully regarded as a high-watermark of the effort to expand the GOP coalition.

Between 2008 and 2024, South Carolina has followed the mold of the Growth South—adding nearly 950,000 residents (+17%)—while its state Republican Party remained on the ascent,

growing beyond those who helped build out its ranks after being first-elected as Democrats to closely resemble its national counterpart in the Trump era (U.S. Census). During this period, numerous South Carolina Republicans, from Lindsey Graham to Nikki Haley, have also carved out profiles that extend well beyond the Palmetto State and onto the national political scene. From the rise of the Tea Party to the elevation of Donald Trump as the leader of the Republican Party, South Carolina's politics are uniquely representative of trends mirrored by the national GOP during the contemporary era. This research is informed by personal interviews conducted with individuals involved in South Carolina and national politics, public polling, election returns, and a comprehensive analysis of social media activity, media reports, and campaign materials.

This chapter traces out the partisan outcomes of presidential, gubernatorial, and congressional elections—along with the balance of control over state government—between 2008 and 2024, while testing twelve hypotheses (H1 to H10). Prior to the Trump era, South Carolina Republicans divided into two primary factions: establishment Republicans such as former state Senate leader Hugh Leatherman and former governor David Beasley, and insurgent Tea Party Republicans such as former U.S. Senator Jim DeMint and former governor Nikki Haley. In more recent years, South Carolina Republicans have largely coalesced behind Donald Trump as the Palmetto State helped to cement his claim to the GOP nomination in 2016 and 2024, and with leaders like Governor Henry McMaster and U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham emerging as two of Trump's staunchest allies. In 2024, when Haley challenged Trump as his chief rival for the GOP nomination, she emerged as the highest profile Republican leader offering an alternative to Trump since he assumed the presidency in 2017.

As part of testing hypotheses H1, H1A, and H1B, this chapter tracks how the dominant ideological and political factions of South Carolina's Republican Party evolved between 2008 and

2024. Hypothesis H2 assesses if Democrats can win statewide by meeting the criteria of a 30-30 election where Black voters comprise 30% of the electorate and 30% of white voters support Democratic candidates. The next set of hypotheses evaluate if Black South Carolinians (H3) and women (H4) have become a larger share of the state's Democratic coalition of voters, as well as a larger share of elected officials (H5 and H6).

In 2024, South Carolina ranked 4th among the 50 states in both its level of racial polarization and in the percentage of the state's white voters casting ballots for Donald Trump (*Fox News*, 2024). Within its General Assembly, as of 2025, South Carolina ranked second to last nationally as the state with the lowest level of female representation at just 13% of its lawmakers (22 of 170) (CAWP, 2025; South Carolina General Assembly). In the Senate, the GOP supermajority of 34 senators included no women, while women made up two of twelve Democrats (17%). In the House, the Republican Caucus included 12 women among 88 members (14%) and the Democratic Caucus had eight women out of 35 members (23%). These statistics are interrogated further as part of testing whether racial polarization has increased in the electorate (H7) and among officeholders (H9), in addition to measuring changes in gender polarization across the same election cycles (H8 and H10).

CHARTING SOUTH CAROLINA'S GROWTH THROUGH ELECTORAL OUTCOMES

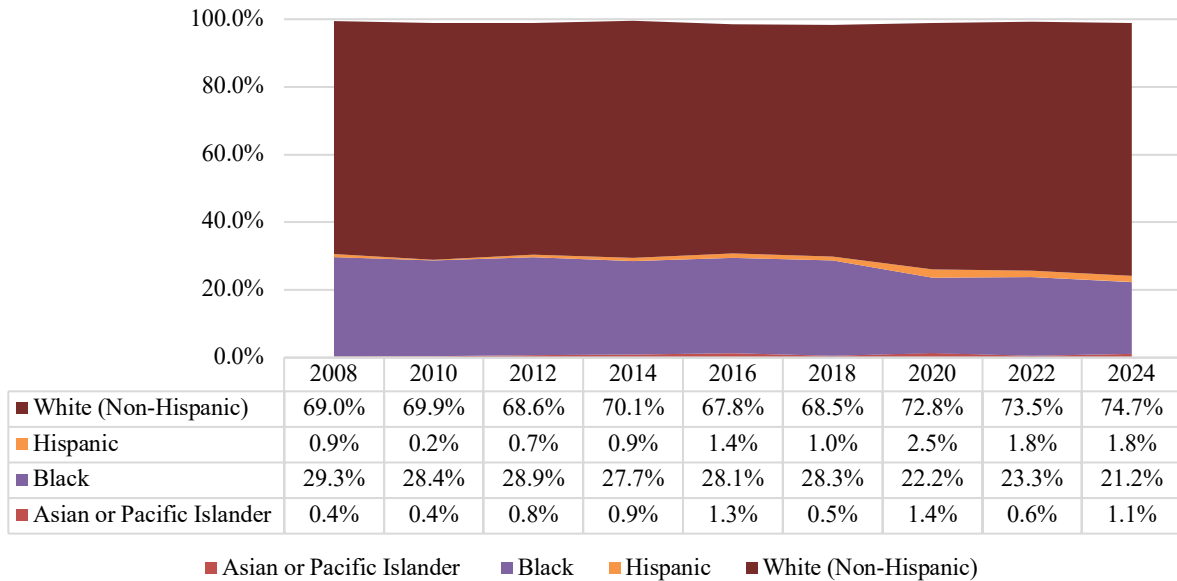
While South Carolina became the nation's fastest growing state by percentage change in population (2022-2023), developments in its political landscape manifested in ways that strengthened the political standing of Republicans (South Carolina Revenue and Fiscal Affairs Office). This contrasts South Carolina with states like Georgia, where demographic change and other hallmarks of growth have been an important part of setting the playing field for two-party

competition. Table 4.1 demonstrates that even as educational attainment and in-state migration have led national trends, the state’s Black population has decreased and its white population has remained steady, as a flood of white retirees have flocked to areas like Myrtle Beach and Hilton Head. As South Carolina’s congressional delegation grew from six to seven representatives between 2008 and 2024, the GOP Caucus has added two members, and statewide electoral contests have reliably favored Republicans.

Table 4.1 South Carolina's Growth Leads National Trends		
	2010	2022
Total Population	4,635,649	5,282,955
Congressional Representation	6	7
Republican House Members (after general election)	5	6
High School or Less (population 25 years and over)	48%	37%
Share of Population Born in State	59%	53%
Percentage of Population that is Black or African American	28%	27%
Percentage of Population that is White (not Hispanic or Latino)	64%	63%
<i>Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin for South Carolina: April 1, 2010, to July 1, 2019, and April 1, 2020, to July 1, 2023; U.S. Census Bureau: 2010 ACS 1-Year Estimates; 2022 ACS 1-Year Estimates.</i>		

As shown in Figure 4.1, in nearly every presidential and midterm election cycle from 2008 to 2022, the share of the electorate comprised of white voters has ticked up, as the share made up of non-white voters has decreased. In presidential elections, the share of non-white voters fell from approximately 31% in 2008 down to 25% in 2024. While, in midterms, the share fell from 29% in 2010 to 23% in 2022.

Figure 4.1 Racial Proportions of South Carolina's Electorate: 2008 to 2022



Source: U.S. Census, Current Population Survey (2008-2022); South Carolina Election Commission, Voter History Results (2024).

Hood and McKee (2022) demonstrate that rural and exurban voters have become a central component of the GOP coalition, now registering strong support for Republican candidates up and down the ballot. South Carolina stands out uniquely, however, in the fact that in 2016, urban voters identified more with Republicans than Democrats by seven percentage points (Ibid, 169). Indeed, in both 2016 and 2020, “South Carolina was the only Southern state in which the GOP presidential vote in urban counties exceeded that found in [small-town South] counties” (Ibid, 227). Figure 4.2 demonstrates the county-level results in presidential elections from 2008 to 2020, in which GOP candidates expanded their geographical footprint to comprise most of South Carolina’s territory outside of Richland County, the Black belt, and Charleston. Overall, during this period, the margin of defeat for Democratic candidates improved by just under three percentage points statewide. However, between 2008 and 2020, Republican presidential candidates improved their margins in 36-out-of-56 counties, including longtime strongholds like Horry and Spartanburg counties.

Applying the 30-30 standard to recent election cycles reveals that Democrats have consistently fallen short of assembling a sufficiently strong bi-racial coalition. Although Democrats did not win any statewide races during the period examined by this study, the closest contest came in the gubernatorial race in 2010, in which Nikki Haley won with 51% to Vincent Sheheen's 47%. The Democratic state senator won 29% of white voters, the strongest performance registered by a statewide Palmetto State candidate for president, governor, or U.S. Senate during the 16-year period measured during this study. The next weakest GOP performance came in 2016, when Trump won just 70% of white voters to Clinton's 24%, a margin he improved on by three percentage points in both 2020 and 2024.

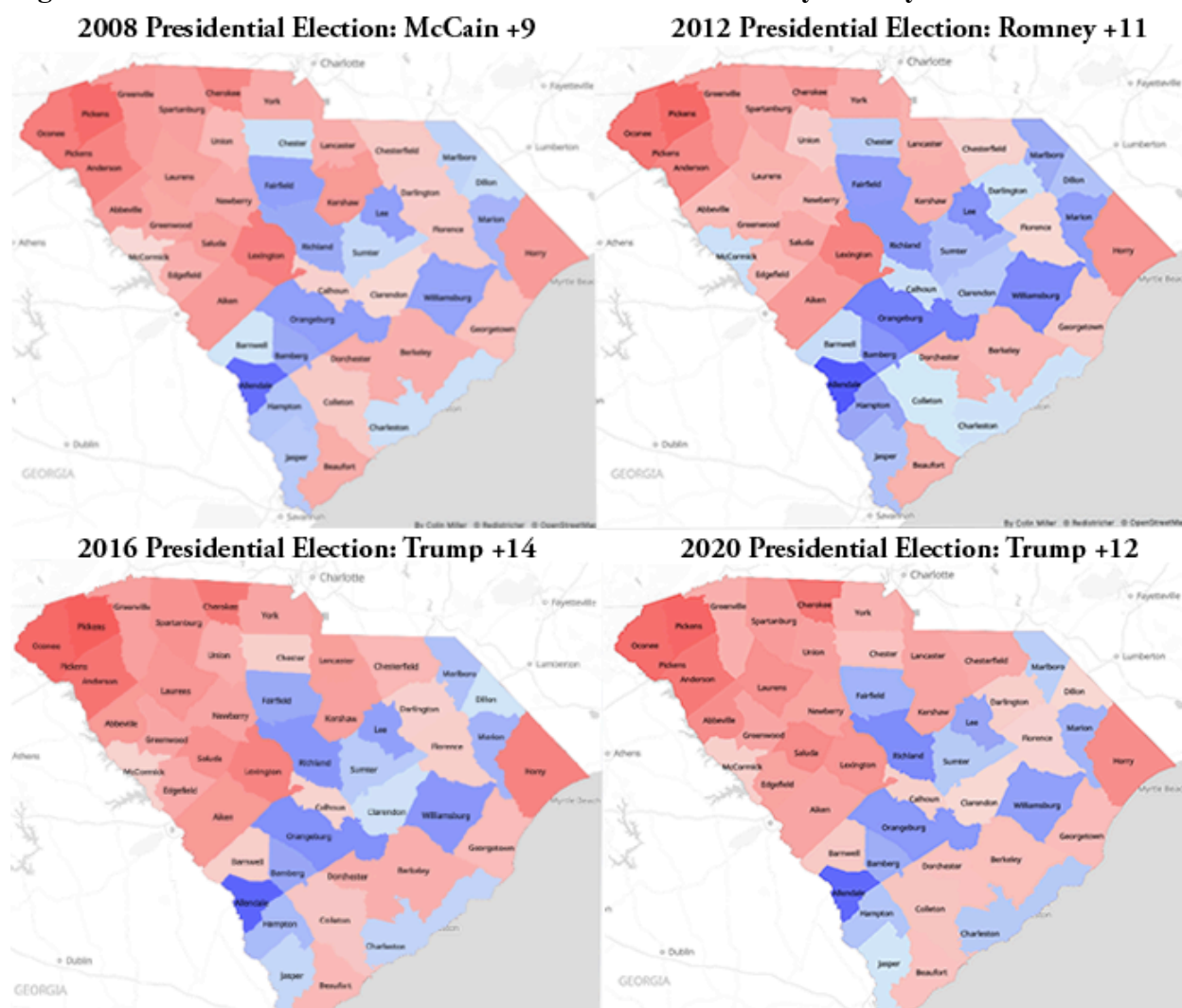
In 2010, 28.5% of the electorate was comprised of non-white voters, the vast majority of whom were Black. If Sheheen improved his performance slightly from 29% to win 30% of white voters, he would need approximately 30% of the electorate to be comprised of non-white South Carolinians to have a chance of victory. At a 30-30 ratio, assuming that 95% of non-white voters cast their ballots for the Democrat, Sheheen would have won 49.6% of the vote, just enough to edge past Haley if the Green Party candidate Morgan Reeves maintained his 1.5% vote share.

In addition to analyzing exit polls, this study relies on data from the South Carolina Election Commission—which prior to 2024 categorized voters as either white or non-white (and has since included designations for Asians, Black/African Americans, Hispanics, and voters of other races)—in addition to the U.S. Census, which has long disaggregated turnout by race and includes figures for Asian, Black, Hispanic, and white voters. These data present a similar picture that helps to answer why Democrats have fallen short statewide in South Carolina based on racial demographics alone. As Republican candidates for major statewide offices have consistently generated levels of support among white voters in the range of 70% to 82%, non-white voters have

comprised less than 30% of the electorate in every election cycle outside of 2008 (30.6%) and 2012 (31.4%). In most of these cycles, Democrats garnered about a quarter of white voters, enough to cobble together 44% to 45% of the vote but not enough to come within striking distance of an outright win.

Census data reveal that after 2012, Black voters registered significant reductions in turnout levels, which were only partially offset by increases in electoral representation among Asian and Hispanic voters. However, in terms of the prospects for Democratic candidates, these demographic shifts saw Black turnout drop by five percentage points between 2018 and 2022 cycles, falling from about 28% to 23%. These shifts weakened Democratic margins, even as the party saw some in-roads among white voters due to in-migration and growth in more populous areas, as well as small gains in turnout from Asian and Hispanic voters. From the perspective of Democrats, the party has fallen short of achieving sufficient support from white voters, in addition to seeing turnout numbers among white and non-white voters diverging in ways that have consistently benefitted Republicans. These findings set the Palmetto State apart from Georgia and are not in line with hypothesis H3, as Black South Carolinians and other voters of color have become a smaller share of the electorate and largely fallen short of reaching the 30% marker outside of the Obama era.

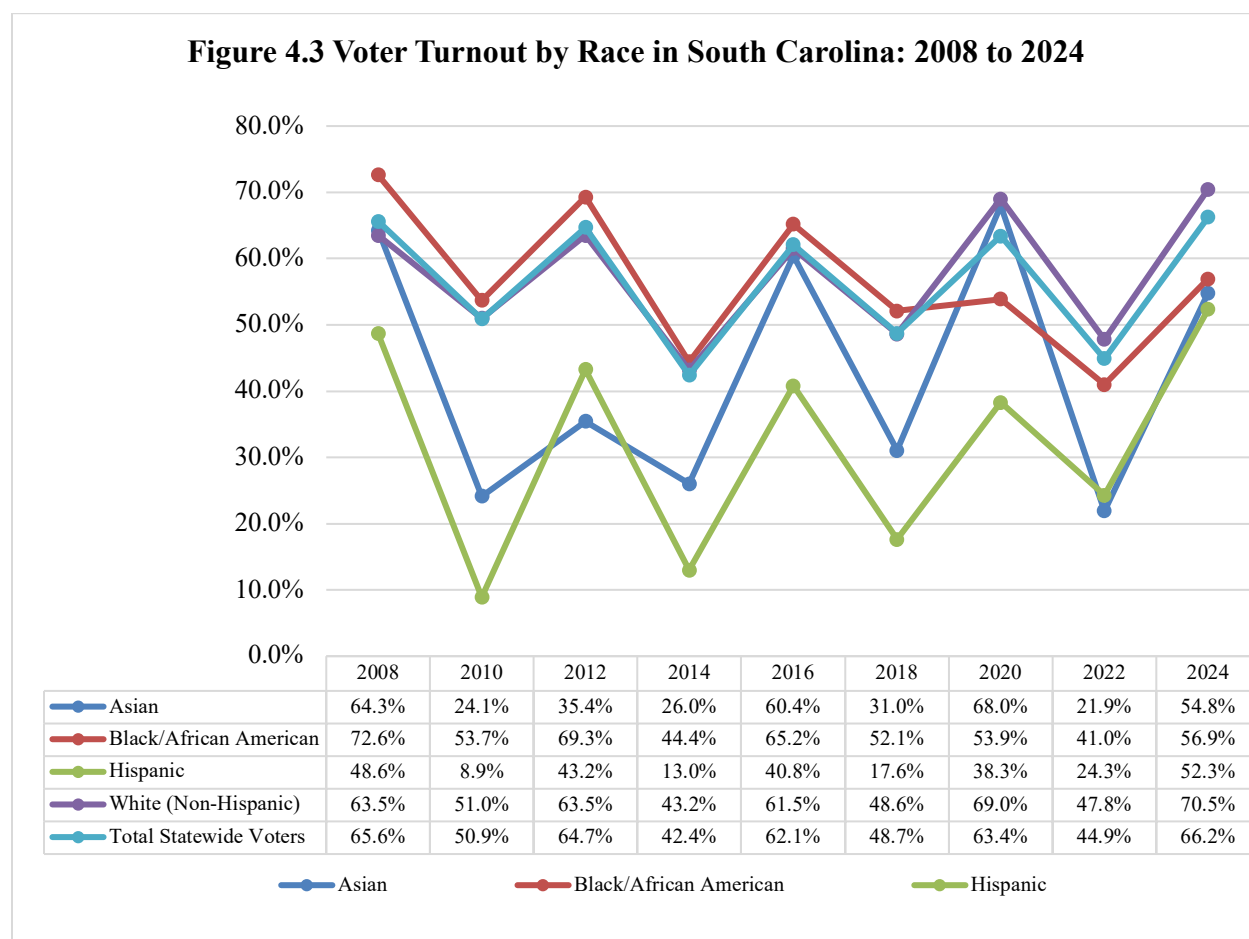
Figure 4.2 South Carolina Shift in Presidential Vote Choice by County: 2008 to 2020



Source: Redistricter.com, created by author.

In recent cycles, white South Carolinians have become increasingly politically active, overtaking Black voters in 2020, 2022, and 2024 to become the demographic group turning out at the highest rates. This trend is demonstrated in Figure 4.3. In 2008 and 2012, Black voters in South Carolina turned out at rates that significantly exceeded that of white residents, likely owing to the fact that the nation's first Black president, Barack Obama, was on the ballot. Although Black voters continued to exceed white turnout between 2014-2018, the margins tightened, from a differential

of 9.1 percentage points in 2008 and 5.8 percentage points in 2012, down to just 1.2 percentage points in 2014, 3.7 percentage points in 2016, and 3.5 percentage points in 2018.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2008 - November 2022; Compiled by author; South Carolina Election Commission, Voter History Results (2024).

Meanwhile, turnout among Asian voters—who have comprised less than one percent of the electorate in all cycles outside of 2016 (1.3%), 2020 (1.4%), and 2024 (1.1%)—has remained in line with the statewide average in presidential elections, but far below average in midterm cycles. Turnout among Hispanic voters has ranked toward the bottom among all demographic groups in most election cycles during this period. However, in 2020, Hispanic voters grew to represent 2.5% of the electorate—up from less than one percent between 2008 to 2014—and 1.8% of the electorate in 2022 and 2024. As demonstrated in Figure 4.3, these groups have also become

more reliable voters—albeit generally turning out at lower rates than Black or white citizens. These shifts signal an upward trend for Asian and Hispanic demographic groups among a statewide electorate that is just beginning to break outside of the traditional Black-white dichotomy long-observed.

Furthermore, in 2024, the South Carolina Election Commission started disaggregating voter registration and turnout data by race (beyond simply white or non-white), helping to provide a more complete picture of the trends identified through earlier data from the U.S. Census. In the 2024 cycle, white voters turned out at a rate of 71%, as compared to 57% for Black South Carolinians, 55% for Asians, and 52% for Hispanics. As a result, white voters comprised 75% of the electorate, up from 72% in 2020 and 69% in 2008 (South Carolina Election Commission, 2024).

MAPPING THE PALMETTO STATE’S POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY

Describing South Carolina’s political geography, pollster Whit Ayres paraphrased John Berendt’s *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, saying “in Greenville they ask you, ‘where do you go to church?’ In Columbia, they ask you, ‘what do you do for a living?’ And in Charleston, they ask you, ‘what will you have to drink?’” (Ayres 2014). As South Carolina’s population has swelled with a wave of in-migration to areas like Horry County’s Myrtle Beach—stretching down the coast to Hilton Head—a fourth cultural and geographic zone has emerged centered around an influx of retirees. Driven by these migration patterns, in recent years, Horry County has grown to become the area delivering the largest net margins to GOP office seekers. Table 4.2 demonstrates margins of victory for Republican candidates in the five counties that have consistently ranked among the top contributors to vote totals for Republicans from 2008 to 2022. Between 2012 and 2024, in all contests for the state’s governorship, U.S. Senate seats, and presidential elections, the

same five counties have produced the largest GOP margins over Democratic candidates: Horry, Greenville, Lexington, Spartanburg, and Anderson. All five of these areas also rank among the state's 10 most populous counties.

Table 4.2 GOP Path to Victory in South Carolina Runs Through Most Populous Counties						
Republican Candidate	Margin in Greenville County	Margin in Spartanburg County	Margin in Lexington County	Margin in Horry County	Margin in Anderson County	Statewide Margin
John McCain (2008)	45,477	23,410	41,657	25,730	24,558	172,447
Lindsey Graham (2008)	40,317	17,151	49,000	32,537	24,564	285,913
Nikki Haley (2010)	25,859	10,519	18,380	21,223	8,728	59,991
Jim DeMint (2010)	66,228	34,115	50,776	34,290	26,274	446,173
Mitt Romney (2012)	53,615	25,508	42,514	33,242	26,304	205,704
Nikki Haley (2014)	45,370	21,541	24,274	28,050	19,804	180,479
Lindsey Graham (2014)	40,568	19,027	30,135	25,521	19,438	192,008
Tim Scott (2014)	58,322	28,411	37,623	31,647	24,233	297,632
Donald Trump (2016)	53,349	36,280	44,796	49,878	35,135	300,016
Tim Scott (2016)	82,719	47,316	58,475	58,953	41,137	537,069
Henry McMaster (2018)	28,188	22,178	25,690	33,411	24,026	137,160
Donald Trump (2020)	46,991	40,634	43,516	59,641	40,396	293,562
Lindsey Graham (2020)	45,011	37,119	41,688	55,982	38,580	258,309
Henry McMaster (2022)	41,279	31,867	30,583	52,895	29,603	295,810
Tim Scott (2022)	58,865	39,349	41,229	60,743	34,410	438,658
Donald Trump (2024)	58,467	52,322	49,150	79,394	46,547	455,295
<i>Source: South Carolina Election Commission, 2008 to 2024, compiled by Author.</i>						

As demonstrated in Table 4.2, Republicans have remained remarkably strong in South Carolina’s more newly urbanized Upstate, Midlands, and in coastal retirement communities, as Democrats have struggled to find enough votes to stem the losses also suffered among rural and exurban voters. Overall, the Metro Columbia area includes about 870,000 residents, spread across six counties: Richland, Calhoun, Fairfield, Kershaw, Lexington, and Saluda, representing about 16% of the state’s 5.5 million resident population (U.S. Census, 2024B). In Richland County, which includes the city of Columbia, Democrats have improved their net margins from about 47,700 votes in the 2008 presidential election to 63,100 in 2024, while winning by 42,500 in the 2010 gubernatorial race and 43,500 in the 2022 cycle. Charleston has trended further towards Democratic candidates, moving from providing a margin of 12,900 votes to Obama in 2008 to 28,200 to Biden in 2020, and from a 3,000-vote margin for Sheheen in 2010 to a 19,000 margin for Joe Cunningham in 2022. Harris’ relatively abysmal 2024 performance in Charleston, winning by just 12,200 votes is a unique exception to this trend. Meanwhile, most other areas have steadily advanced towards the GOP.

Early GOP gains in South Carolina were built out from Lexington County—part of Metro Columbia—which elected Republican Floyd Spence to the state Senate in 1966. With experience previously serving in the state House as a Democrat, Spence immediately became the minority leader of the six-member GOP Senate caucus in 1967 before succeeding Albert Watson as South Carolina’s only Republican member of the U.S. House in 1970, representing a district that included both Lexington and Richland counties. Since 2001, Spence’s protégé and former chief of staff, Joe Wilson, has represented South Carolina’s 2nd District, which now stretches from Columbia through Lexington and down to the state border with Georgia. In 1970, Shelly Shealy Martschink was elected as the youngest member of the state House to represent Lexington County as part of a

multimember district, while still completing her undergraduate degree at the University of South Carolina in Columbia. Martschink reflected that, at that time, “the Republican Party wasn’t a sure thing in Lexington County. It was strong, I mean, as strong as it was anywhere [...] but] it was anybody’s game” (Martschink, 2014).

Of his first campaign for state Senate in 1976, in which he ran in a multimember district that included several counties in the Midlands region, Joe Wilson recalls: “I won Lexington and Aiken, but I lost the rural counties because they were traditionally Democrat” (Wilson, 2014). This experience prompted Wilson to work with then-GOP executive director “Warren Tompkins and with Republican leadership to promote single member districts” (Ibid). South Carolina’s state Senate, which elects members to serve four-year terms, was the last legislative chamber in the South to institute single member districts in 1984, inspired by legal challenges under the Voting Rights Act (VRA) and an alliance between Republicans and Black legislative Democrats who found a common interest in eliminating multimember maps that diluted their representation (Bullock & Gaddie, 1993).

In the years since, and in election cycles between 2008 to 2024, Lexington County has reliably ranked among the top five counties contributing the largest margins statewide to Republican candidates, while also serving as the launching pad for Nikki Haley’s successful campaigns for state House and South Carolina’s governorship. Demonstrating the stronghold’s consistency in delivering large margins to GOP standard bearers, in 2008 Lexington County delivered the greatest margin of any county statewide to Lindsey Graham’s reelection campaign, netting the state’s senior senator 49,000 votes (see Table 4.2). In 2022, it ranked third for Tim Scott’s dominant reelection campaign, netting him just over 41,200 votes.

One of the oldest, longstanding divides in South Carolina politics is the contrast between Charleston’s political culture and the rest of the state. State Senator Sean Bennett (2012-present), who represents Charleston County along with its bordering counties of Berkeley and Dorchester, which together comprise a significant share of the Low Country’s voting base (18% of the statewide total in the 2024 presidential election) described the ideology of the region, channeling Mike Pence’s often cited turn of phrase, “I’m conservative, but I’m not angry about it” (Slodysko, 2016). Bennett expounded, “Charleston County, I think is much more moderate... I think a lot of it would be purple... yeah, ‘I’m conservative, but I’m not angry about it.’ And I think that’s probably a good description of most of Dorchester County, most of Berkeley County probably, and then you move to the Upstate, and then you probably have much more—using that terminology—more angry conservatives, more inflexible is probably a better word. But the 1st Congressional District, I think, is not nearly the most conservative district in the state by any stretch” (Bennett, 2014).

Including the bordering counties of Georgetown and Colleton, the five-county region that comprises the Low Country delivered 52% of 464,800 votes cast in the 2024 presidential election to Trump. This marks a slight improvement from McCain’s 2008 performance, in which the Arizona senator won just over 50% of 271,600 votes cast in the five counties. Even as the total number of voters in the region cumulatively increased by 46% between 2008 and 2024, major electoral contests have remained highly competitive.

Further down the coast, the counties of Jasper and Beaufort that comprise the Hilton Head metro area have also attracted significant growth in recent years, while reliably supporting GOP candidates. In 2008, the two county Hilton Head metro area voted in support of McCain’s presidential campaign with 53% of 77,700 votes cast. As the number of voters grew by 59% in

2024 to reach 123,800 residents casting ballots, Trump slightly improved upon this margin, capturing 56% of support.

In every major statewide race since the 2018 campaign for South Carolina’s governorship, Horry County has risen to overtake Greenville as the number one contributor to the margin of victory for Republican candidates, producing upwards of 50,000 net votes for GOP candidates for president, U.S. Senate, and the governorship in 2020, 2022, and 2024. Of the county’s rapid growth, state Senator Greg Hembree (2013-present) warned, “You better stay current. Because if you don’t, you’ll get eat up. Because there’s so much transition in our area—new people coming in and people leaving” (Hembree, 2014). As Horry County’s population has grown from 269,300 in 2010 to just over 351,000 in 2020 (+30%), the percentage of the population age 65 and older has increased by nearly 55%, up from 17.1% to 26.5%. This figure significantly exceeds the statewide average of residents 65 years of age and older, which stood at 19.3% in 2020—up from 14.7% in 2010—as seniors have become the largest age bracket residing in the county (U.S. Census). During this period, the GOP share of the vote in presidential races from Horry County has increased from 62% (64,600 votes) in 2008 to 69% (141,700 votes) in 2024.

Bordering Greenville to the east is Spartanburg County and to the southwest is Anderson County, which have both ranked among the top five vote contributors to Republican candidates in recent years. Nearby Pickens and Oconee counties have also consistently produced margins that are among the top 10 bastions of GOP support, reflecting an important part of the coalition that helped elevate Republican officeholders such as Lindsey Graham and Jim DeMint. Of the complementary role that the region plays in concert with coastal areas, DeMint suggested, “I think it was hard for [people in Charleston] to vote for me because there was already an Upstate Senator with Lindsey Graham, and they’d always had a Low Country Senator with Fritz Hollings. So that

was something I really had to work to diminish... I imagine you'll always have a little bit of regionalism, but Charleston is becoming international just like Greenville has, so it's not just tourism in Charleston now and business in the Upstate, it's business everywhere" (DeMint, 2014).

Since Carroll Campbell leveraged his strong base of support in Greenville County to become South Carolina's first Republican governor elected to serve two consecutive terms (1987-1995), the Upstate population center has served as a base of GOP support, propelling both statewide and down ballot campaigns. In every election cycle between 2008 and 2024, Greenville County has ranked either first or second with respect to the counties delivering the largest net margins to Republican candidates. Former GOP Chairman Matt Moore (2013-2017) opined: "The infrastructure, particularly in the 2nd District, the 3rd District, and [Greenville's] 4th District, has sort of always been there since [at least] the early 2000s and mid '90s," pointing in particular to "a lot of the conservative activity by faith groups, [and] Bob Jones [University] in the Greenville Spartanburg area" (Moore, 2014). Barry Wynn, who also previously served as chairman of the South Carolina GOP (1990-1993) and has since been involved in a variety of campaigns—including as Senator Jim DeMint's finance chair—noted that different factions of the party were sometimes at odds in the Upstate.

Greenville County was growing; the Republican Party was growing there, but it was real balkanized. It had the Bob Jones group [that] was involved in trying to get some of their people into office and that was more of a Christian fundamentalist kind of group. And then they had a kind of Pat Robertson group over there too that was more evangelical... They didn't talk to each other too much, didn't go to the same meetings... and they would always kick the other groups out of the party. Then you have the Chamber of Commerce... So the party consisted of three groups and then you also had... an anti-government crowd over there (Wynn, 2014).

Describing recent changes in Greenville's political leanings, Fourth District Congressman William Timmons (2019-present) and former state senator (2016-2018) reflected,

Guns and babies are very important. Taxes are very important... And there's a huge difference between downtown Greenville and kind of Northern Greenville County. So, the further you get away from the city—and this is an interesting thing, [in] South Carolina, I see this a lot more—it's more urban versus rural than it is Republican versus Democrat. The battle lines that we would draw in the [state] Senate on any given issue were more often urban versus rural than they were Republican versus Democrat.

So, you know, another [question] that is something I often think about is, do Democrats move to cities or do cities create Democrats? So, if you really think about it, it has to do with what is your view of the role of government. In a city, people expect the government to provide electricity, running water, sewer, public transportation, law enforcement—you name it—clean streets, sidewalks, lighting on the streets, all that stuff. I mean, it's just city living. And then if you go to the more rural areas, they literally don't want anything. They don't expect law enforcement to come immediately when they call, they don't have sewer... a lot of places have water that is well-fed. So, you know, you don't want the government to do anything. You want the government to... stay out of your life. (Timmons, 2022).

Timmons' question recalls the argument made by Irwin Morris in *Movers and Stayers* (2021), where Morris makes the case that urban areas are becoming more Democratic and rural areas are becoming more Republican. Morris charts a trend, in which migrants to Southern states were once more likely to be more Republican than the average resident of the solidly Democratic South but in more recent years have tended to tilt more Democratic than the state's electorate, especially as racial and ethnic minorities grew to comprise a larger share of those relocating. Movers are a distinctive group who have a political effect on both the communities they join and those they exit, while generally exhibiting traits of being “younger, more educated, more liberal, and more likely to align with the Democratic Party than non-movers” (Morris, 2021, 176-77).

However, in terms of demographic trendlines, South Carolina's population—in unique ways that mirror Florida—looks more like the Stagnant South than the Growth South. In fact, in South Carolina's case, much of the growth in the state's population is attributable to adding residents over 65 years of age. Approximately 412,000 of 754,000 new residents (55%) added to the state's population between 2008 to 2022 were over 65, bringing the total population of residents

65 and older to just over one million South Carolinians, a ratio of about one-in-five (South Carolina Revenue and Fiscal Affairs Office.; U.S. Census, 2008, 2022). This increase pushed South Carolina's share of seniors to rank in the top 10 nationally, and second to Florida (21.7%) in the South at 19.3% of its population.

Exit polls report that voters over 65 have increased their presence, as a percentage of the electorate, from 13% in 2008—when they cast 66% of ballots for McCain and 67% for Graham—to 28% in 2020, when they cast 60% of support for Trump and 58% for Graham (National Election Pool, 2008C, 2020C). At the same time, percentage of the electorate between 25-39 dropped from 26% in the 2008 presidential cycle to 18% of all voters in 2020 (Ibid). Taken together, the aging nature of South Carolina's electorate, which has simultaneously served as a major factor in propelling the Palmetto's status as a Growth State in general, is among the most clear explanations of how South Carolina's voter base has changed in ways that are distinct from states like Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia—which have served to advantage Republicans rather than Democrats, in contrast to the patterns of growth in the latter three states. These patterns of demographic change explain why South Carolina is unique among the Growth South states in trending further toward Republicans and Trump despite exhibiting other characteristics of population and economic expansion.

CHANGES IN 21ST CENTURY POLITICAL COMPETITION

In 2002, after Strom Thurmond's retirement created a race for an open U.S. Senate seat in South Carolina for the first time in 56-years, seven candidates chose to compete in the GOP primary to take on incumbent Democratic governor Jim Hodges, but not a single Republican opted to challenge then-congressman Lindsey Graham who won the Senate nomination by acclamation before easily dispatching Democratic candidate Alex Sanders in the general election. In terms of

the origins of Lindsey Graham's political strength, long-time observer of South Carolina politics and former aide to Strom Thurmond, Hastings Wyman, reflected that Graham "said [the Clinton impeachment] is what launched him," referencing his role as a House manager during Clinton's 1999 impeachment trial (Wyman, 2014). The longevity of Graham's political career serves to narrate trends in both national and South Carolina politics as part of a baseline for testing the first series of hypotheses (H1, H1A, and H1B). This vantage point extends from the eight years Graham represented the state's 3rd Congressional District (1995-2003) to his emergence as one of Trump's closest allies in 2020 and 2024.

POLITICO national columnist Jonathan Martin explained how Graham shifted his political behavior to align with changes in the political environment driven by Trump and the reordering of the GOP base:

Lindsey Graham is a political lifer. He lives, eats, sleeps, and breathes politics. He understands politics and policy and he wants to be at the highest level of American politics... He was doing that with John McCain for a while and that was sort of his entrée and now it's Trump. Trump's a vehicle for him to stay involved in national politics, and he and Trump have developed a relationship because they're both kind of jokesters, and there's a wink and a nod to both of them, and there's kind of no permanent enemies or permanent friends with them... I don't think it's complicated with Lindsey: he wants to stay in office.

He can't survive a primary in the Republican Party in South Carolina in the Trump era if he's not with Trump. And, so, that's that. I mean it might not be the answer most folks like, but, to me, it's a pretty obvious answer, and I have known the guy for 20-years. He's a very talented politician and he wants to stay in office, and so, like, that's what politicians do, right? They find where the party is and they get there (Martin, 2024).

Martin's assessment of Graham offers strong support for hypothesis H1 and H1A by making explicit that incumbent Republican officeholders whose tenure precedes Trump face pressure to align themselves with him to satisfy potential GOP primary voters. Whit Ayres, who worked as a pollster for Graham's campaigns before splitting with him after the Trump era began,

called Graham “a very savvy political operator” (Ayres, 2024B). Continuing, Ayres offered his view, that:

The reason there was no competition [in 2002] is that Lindsey set his sights on that Strom Thurmond seat several years before it became vacant. And he started lining people up in a very sophisticated way. He would ask someone to be on his finance committee and once that person said yes, he would get the FEC reports and see who else that funder had given money to and if he’d given money to state Senator X, he would go to state Senator X and say, “would you be willing to be on my political advisory committee?” And if they said yes, he would get the finance reports to see who else had given to state Senator X and he would call them and say, “state Senator X has just agreed to be on my political advisory committee, would you be on my finance committee?” And he worked it back and forth like that to the point where when [then-state attorney general] Charlie Condon was trying to decide whether to be the seventh candidate for governor or the only other opponent to Lindsey Graham [in 2002], he jumped into the governor’s race...

Lindsey wants to be relevant. He saw very clearly Donald Trump’s character and approach and persona and said exactly what he thought during the 2016 campaign. After Trump won, Lindsey decided that in order to be relevant, he had to change his whole approach and his whole attitude, and he did. And he has become relevant. And he still is relevant. And he advises Trump and Trump relies on his smart, savvy political brain. But for those of us who find it difficult to make that 180-degree turn, it creates some issues (Ibid).

This commentary demonstrates that, among individuals who worked for Graham and covered his political career closely, an observable shift was detected after Trump’s victory in 2016. This shift is chronicled further within the narrative of this chapter, as Graham’s political career presents a unique thermostatic throughline to evaluate changes in South Carolina’s Republican Party during the period of this study.

Beyond Graham’s political ascent, 2002 also marked the year in which Mark Sanford was elected to the governorship, as Republicans also assumed majorities in the state House and Senate. Throughout Sanford’s tumultuous governorship, two warring factions of the state GOP vied for power over state government (Kanso, 2016, 82). Perhaps because of Thurmond’s role in carving out an early path that made being a Republican acceptable in South Carolina ahead of other states

in the South, early GOP majorities were built in-part by attracting former Democrats to switch parties.

Among those switching to the GOP were the future leaders of the state Senate, who served in various capacities atop the state’s upper chamber under Sanford and Haley, led by Harvey Peeler and Hugh Leatherman who both became Republicans in 1995. These leaders waged conflicts with Sanford and Haley that sometimes more closely resembled the open political warfare that might have occurred between members of opposing parties in another state. At the same time, conflicts between the executive and legislative branches of government were also a consequence of the state’s uniquely Southern political fabric, which weakened the power of the governor in favor of empowering a strong state legislature under the state’s constitution of 1895.

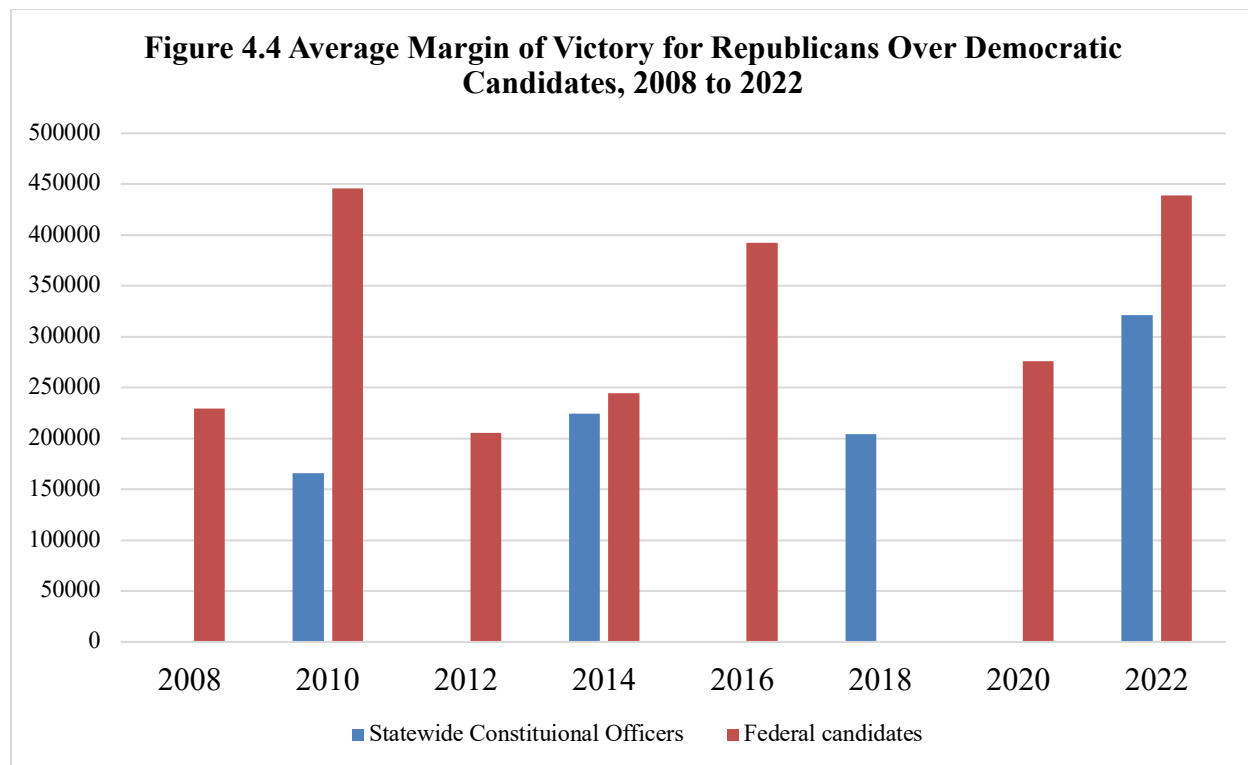
Table 4.3 Percentage of Seats Held by South Carolina Republicans After Election				
Year	U.S. House	U.S. Senate	State House	State Senate
2008	67%	100%	57%	59%
2010	83%	100%	60%	59%
2012	86%	100%	63%	61%
2014	86%	100%	62%	61%
2016	86%	100%	65%	61%
2018	71%	100%	65%	61%
2020	86%	100%	65%	65%
2022	86%	100%	71%	65%
2024	86%	100%	71%	74%
<i>Source: Ballotpedia, compiled by author</i>				

Table 4.3 reports the share of major political offices held by Republicans from 2008 to 2024. At both the state and federal levels, Republicans dominated electoral contests between 2008 to 2024. However, during Sanford’s governorship, from 2003 to 2011, the most prominent political divide was between establishment-minded Republicans, led by the powerful Senate leader Hugh Leatherman, and insurgent Tea Party minded conservatives who rallied around the state’s

executive. As the first generation of the Palmetto State’s top Republican officeholders relinquished their leadership posts, the state’s General Assembly adopted a more conservative legislative agenda. In 2024, state House Republicans achieved the peak of GOP officeholding with 88-seats (71%), as Senate Republicans won a record 34-seats (74%) in 2024 as part of the first GOP supermajority elected to both chambers since Reconstruction.

ANALYSIS: AS SOUTH CAROLINA GROWS, REPUBLICANS REMAIN ON THE ASCENT

Between 2008 and 2024, statewide elections in South Carolina took an increasingly rightward tilt, aided by demographic shifts that worked in favor of Republican campaigns. Figure 4.4 reflects the average margin of victory for Republican candidates who won every election for major statewide offices during this period, usually scoring at-least somewhat wider margins in federal races.

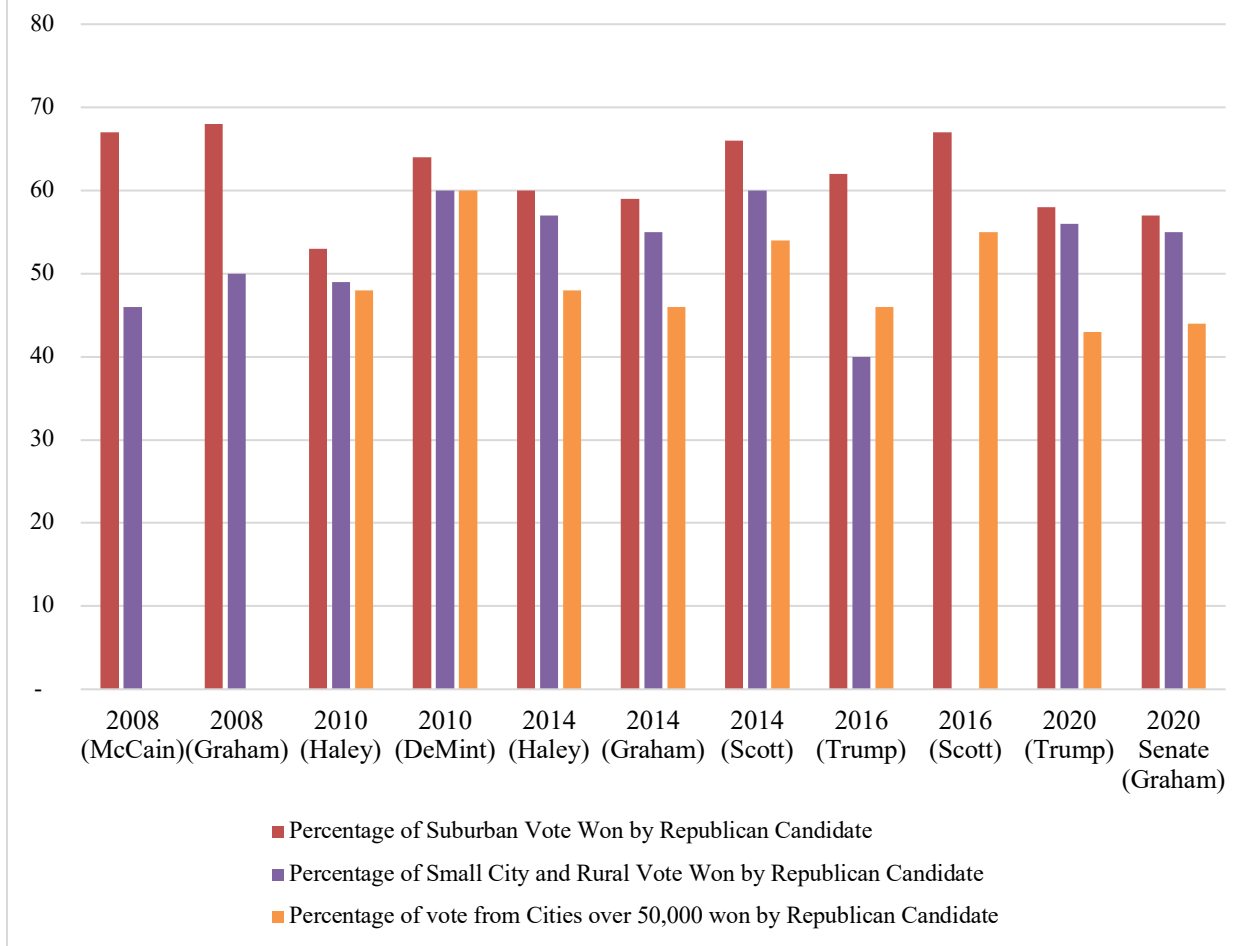


Source: South Carolina Election Commission, compiled by author.

Although uncontested races are removed from the calculations used to produce these averages, it is worth noting that as Democratic prospects worsened, the party failed to produce a full slate of candidates for statewide constitutional officers in any cycle between 2010 to 2022. By 2022, Republican candidates did not have Democratic opposition in races for secretary of agriculture, attorney general, comptroller general, or treasurer—with Democrats reaching a new low as state House Republicans also claimed a supermajority for the first time since Reconstruction (followed by Senate Republicans in 2024). The closest major contests have come at the gubernatorial level, with Haley’s 4.5 percentage point margin in 2010 representing the weakest showing for a major Republican candidate, followed by McMaster’s eight-point victory in 2018.

Geographically, over the full period of this study, the share of South Carolina voters residing in small towns and rural areas have comprised the lion’s share of the electorate in most cycles, albeit decreasing from 54% in 2008 to 46% of those casting ballots in 2024 (National Election Pool, 2008C; *Fox News*, 2024). Between the 2008 and 2024 presidential elections, the share of South Carolina’s electorate made up of suburban voters has increased from 41% to 44%. The number of voters living in large cities has also increased, going from five percent in 2008 to 10% in 2024 (Ibid). As shown in Figure 4.5, major GOP candidates have reliably won support from between 53% to 67% of suburban voters, helping Republicans remain dominant statewide.

**Figure 4.5 South Carolina Republicans Build Victories
Around Suburban Voters**

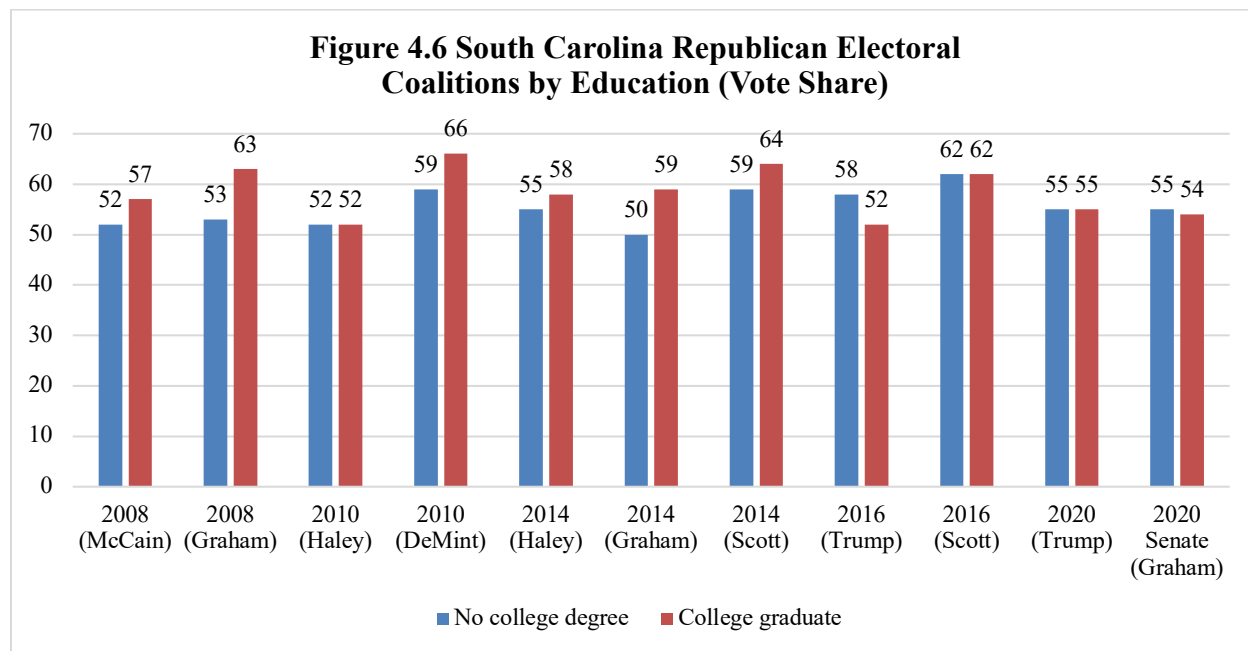


Source: National Election Pool, 2008-2020.

Once weakest among small city and rural voters, Republican candidates have consolidated support among those in exurban and rural areas as these voters became the core geographical constituency for Republicans throughout the South. South Carolina presidential candidates improved from securing 46% of support from small town and rural areas in 2008 to winning 63% in 2024 (National Election Pool, 2008C; *Fox News*, 2024). Even among urban voters—who now represent the weakest geographic group for Republican candidates nationally—South Carolina GOP candidates for state constitutional offices, president, and U.S. Senate have claimed between 60% (2010) to 39% (2024) of support from those in urban areas in recent cycles (Ibid). Taken

together, GOP candidates are uniquely dominant across South Carolina’s relatively spread-out geographic landscape.

As in other GOP-leaning states, prior to the Trump era, Palmetto State Republican candidates regularly attracted stronger levels of support from college graduates than from those without higher levels of education. Simultaneously, South Carolina’s population has become more educated, with the share of the population reporting a high school diploma as their highest level of education attainment dropping from 48% in 2010 to 37% in 2022 (U.S. Census). The percentage of South Carolinians with a bachelor’s degree or higher has increased from 25% in 2010 to 33% in 2022 (Ibid). Figure 4.6 reports this historic divide and the more recent trend emerging, in which voters without college degrees now support Republican candidates at equal or higher levels in comparison to those with degrees.



Source: National Election Pool, 2008-2020.

Although this change is not as decisive as the shift nationally, increasing support for Republican candidates among less educated voters has been accompanied by higher levels of turnout among voters without college degrees. Table 4.4 evaluates this trend in the context of race.

As demonstrated, white non-college educated South Carolina voters have consistently favored Republican candidates in larger numbers than those with college educations, with a gap in favor of the GOP between 10% to 18% during the 16-year period of this study.

Table 4.4 South Carolina GOP Gap Between White College and Non-College Voters Grows			
Type	Year	Margin (GOP) Between White Voters without College Degrees and with College Degrees	Margin (GOP) Between Non-White Voters without College Degrees and with College Degrees
Presidential	2008	10%	
Presidential	2016	11%	
Presidential	2020	11%	-5%
Presidential	2024	18%	8%
Governor	2010	11%	-5%
Governor	2014	10%	-7%
Governor	2022	18%	-1%
<i>Source: National Election Pool, 2008-2024; Fox News 2020.</i>			

As shown in Table 4.4, the share of white voters without college degrees supporting Republican candidates has ranged from 73% (2020) to 81% (2022), in comparison to the share of white voters with college degrees supporting Republicans, which ranged from 71% (2014) to 60% (2022). On the other hand, among voters of color, those with college degrees have tended to support Republicans in greater numbers than those without college degrees. Although the gap has narrowed, people of color without college degrees have supported Republicans with a vote share between seven percent (2008) to 23% (2024).

TESTING HYPOTHESES H1 TO H10 IN SOUTH CAROLINA

In the aftermath of the events on January 6, 2021, 7th District Representative Tom Rice was among 10 House Republicans to vote in favor of impeaching Trump—the only Southern state GOP Representative to cast an affirmative vote for the measure, which passed the Democratically-controlled House by a margin of 232-197. After serving five-terms as the district’s representative

since it was created in 2012, Rice became a top Trump target. The former president railed against him based on his impeachment vote, saying “He lifted up his hand and that was the end of his political career – or we hope it was” (King, 2022).

Rice did not shy away from his support of impeaching Trump, calling the then-president’s actions as the U.S. Capitol was stormed by his supporters an “inexcusable failure,” before continuing: “He watched it happen. He reveled in it. And he took no action to stop it” (Ibid). Somewhat inexplicably, Rice both signed 2020 amicus brief and voted in favor of objecting to the 2020 Electoral College certification. Later, Rice acknowledged, “In retrospect I should have voted to certify,” expounding that his decision was made out of loyalty to his voters. Rice continued, “In the wee hours of that disgraceful night, while waiting for the Capitol of our great country to be secured, I knew I should vote to certify. But because I had made a public announcement of my intent to object, I did not want to go back on my word. So yeah, I regret my vote to object” (Vakil, 2021). Because Rice expressed regret for his actions and voted to impeach Trump, he is the classified among the third group considered as part of hypothesis H1, which posits that Republican officeholders can be divided into three groups: MAGA Republicans, Sometimes Trump Republicans, and Anti-Trump Republicans.

Upon endorsing then-state Rep. Russell Fry in the Horry County based district, Trump worked to consolidate the field to improve his chances of defeating Rice, encouraging Graham Allen, a conservative media personality, to exit the race (Shoemaker, 2022). With Trump’s backing, Fry defeated Rice in the first round of voting, taking 51% to his 25%. To cheers of “fry that rice,” Fry declared, “Today, Donald Trump won” (Gomez & Smith, 2022). Trump’s successful intervention against Rice offers support for the notion that more extreme breaks with Trump can prompt strong levels of voter backlash, offering initial support for hypothesis H1.

Rice’s explanation that he followed through with his vote to object to the Electoral College certification—a decision he said he immediately regretted—out of loyalty to his voters also supports H1A, which holds that maintaining support for Trump is a requirement for office-seeking Republicans. Further, Trump’s successful endorsement of Fry serves to support H1B, which posits that, on balance, since 2016, incoming Republicans are more loyal to Trump than their predecessors, putting greater pressure on Sometimes Trump GOP members of Congress to fall in-line with their party’s leader.

Table 4.5 Hypothesis H1: Most South Carolina Republicans Loyal to Trump								
Office	Name	Class	Trump Endorsed?	Endorsed Trump in 2024 Primary?	2020 Amicus Brief? (2020 Reps.)	EC Obj. Vote? (Cong.)	Stolen 2020 claims? (If N/A for others)	Hypothesis 1:
SC-01	Nancy Mace	2020	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	No	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
SC-01	Mark Sanford	2013	No	No	No	N/A	No	Anti-Trump Republican
SC-02	Joe Wilson	2001	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	MAGA Republican
SC-03	Jeff Duncan	2010	Yes (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	MAGA Republican
SC-03	Sheri Biggs	2024	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican
SC-04	William Timmons	2018	Yes (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	MAGA Republican
SC-04	Trey Gowdy	2010	No	No	N/A	N/A	No	Sometimes Trump Republican
SC-05	Ralph Norman	2017	Yes (2022)	No	Yes	Yes	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican

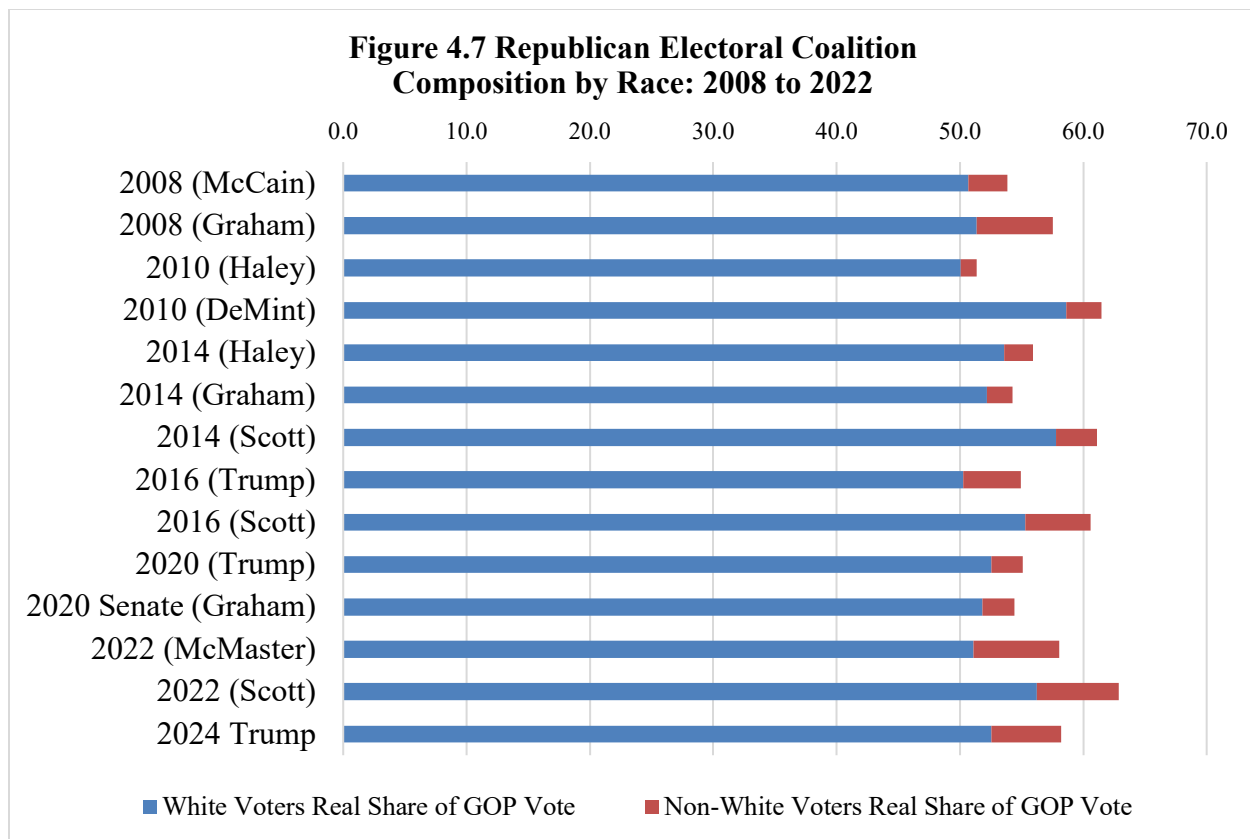
SC-05	Mick Mulvaney	2010	No	No	N/A	N/A	No	Sometimes Trump Republican
SC-07	Russell Fry	2022	Yes (2022)	Yes	N/A	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican
SC-07	Tom Rice	2012	No	No	Yes	Yes	N/A	Anti- Trump Republican
U.S. Sen.	Lindsey Graham	2002	Yes (2020)	Yes	N/A	No	No	MAGA Republican
U.S. Sen.	Tim Scott	2013	Yes (2022)	Yes	N/A	No	No	MAGA Republican
Gov.	Henry McMaster	2017	Yes (2018, 2022)	Yes	N/A	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican
Gov.	Nikki Haley	2010	No	No	N/A	N/A	No	Sometimes Trump Republican
<i>Source: Compiled by author; The Washington Post (2021); Ballotpedia.</i>								

Table 4.5 offers an initial test of hypothesis H1 between 2016 and 2024 by tracking endorsements from Trump for South Carolinians running for Congress, U.S. Senate, and governor, those issued in support of Trump ahead of the state’s 2024 primary, and how South Carolina’s officeholding Republicans responded to claims of a stolen election and the events of January 6th. Eight South Carolina officeholders are classified as MAGA Republicans, five are Sometimes Trump Republicans, and two are Anti-Trump Republicans. In addition to Fry, the group of MAGA Republicans includes Joe Wilson, Jeff Duncan, William Timmons, Sheri Biggs, Lindsey Graham, Tim Scott, and Henry McMaster.

Among the group of MAGA Republicans, four-out-of-six of the members of the House are included because they meet the criteria of signing on to Johnson’s 2020 amicus brief asking the Supreme Court to intervene in the certification of the presidential election and voting in favor of objecting to the Electoral College certification. McMaster issued statements of support for

Trump's claims and has long been one of Trump's strongest state level supporters. Although Graham did not embrace claims of a stolen 2020 election, he has remained a close Trump ally and advisor and repeatedly identified himself as a MAGA Republican. Similarly, Scott is classified as such because of the extraordinary gesture he made by endorsing Trump against Haley after suspending his own 2024 presidential primary campaign ahead of voting in the Palmetto State. Biggs was elected in 2024, running on a staunch platform of being "100 percent pro-Trump" despite vying against Trump-endorsed primary candidate and Christian nationalist Mark Burns (Atkinson, 2024). As such she is classified as a MAGA Republican.

Sometimes Trump Republicans include Nancy Mace, Ralph Norman, Trey Gowdy, Mick Mulvaney, and Nikki Haley. Although Mulvaney and Haley have been subject to Trump attacks, both served as part of Trump's first administration and supported Trump in the 2024 general election. Although Norman has generally conducted himself as a MAGA Republican and backed Trump's claims of a stolen election, he is classified as a Sometimes Trump Republican due to his decision to endorse Haley ahead of South Carolina's 2024 presidential primary. Mace mended fences with Trump after criticizing him in the wake of the 2020 election and has since positioned herself more in the mold of a MAGA Republican, as detailed in the narrative portion of this chapter. Finally, Gowdy is classified as such because he has remained generally supportive of Trump but has not positioned himself as part of Trump's movement or defended claims of a stolen 2020 election. Two Republicans are classified as Anti-Trump Republicans, including Tom Rice and Mark Sanford, who challenged Trump in a quixotic 2020 primary campaign that lasted just two months. After Sanford was defeated by a Trump-endorsed primary challenger in 2018, he embraced his identify as a leading conservative critic of Trump's policies and political rhetoric.



Source: National Election Pool, 2008-2020; Fox News 2022, 2024; South Carolina Election Commission; Author calculations.

Even as much of the Growth South became increasingly diverse from 2008 to 2024, growing in ways more like Georgia than South Carolina, the percentage of the Palmetto State's population identifying as white alone (non-Hispanic) decreased slightly from 65% to 63% (U.S. Census, 2008, 2024). During the same period, the Black percentage of the population decreased slightly from 28% to 26%, while the percentage not falling into either category increased from seven percent to 11 percent (Ibid). Of this group, the percentage of Asian residents increased from one percent to two percent and the percentage of Hispanic residents grew from five percent to nearly eight percent.

In terms of representation in the broader electorate, white South Carolinians have expanded their electoral ranks to comprise an outsized role relative to statewide residency demographics, steadily ticking up from casting 69% of all ballots in 2008 to 72% in 2020 and 77% in 2022 (South

Carolina Election Commission). Given the consistently strong performance of Republican candidates among white voters—with statewide GOP candidates reliably winning between 70% to 82%—Republicans have been able to maintain comfortable margins without diversifying the party’s coalition. As demonstrated in Figure 4.7, all fourteen GOP statewide candidates examined during the period of this study secured at least 50% statewide from white voters alone. This finding extends even to candidates who followed the recipe presented by the RNC’s 2013 autopsy, such as Tim Scott or Nikki Haley, by offering a more diverse candidate to voters.

In the case of Scott who has topped 60% statewide in each of his campaigns for U.S. Senate—serving as the top ballot performer in 2014, 2016, and 2022—exit polls demonstrate that his impressive margins have been generated more by attracting additional white voters than through persuading Black voters and other minority groups to support his candidacy. For example, in 2014, as Haley claimed 76% of ballots cast by white voters to Graham’s 74%, Scott won 82%. The following cycle, in 2016, he won support from 77% of white voters, which he matched in 2022 (National Election Pool, 2016C; *Fox News*, 2022). Scott’s strongest performance among Black voters came in 2022 when secured support from 16% of those voting (*Fox News*, 2022). The next best performance among Black voters by a Republican during the period examined was recorded by Henry McMaster, in which he won support from 14% of Black voters in 2022, followed closely behind by Donald Trump’s 13% of Black voters won in 2024 (*Fox News*, 2024, 2022).

Notwithstanding these trends, as demonstrated in Figure 4.7, Republican candidates have registered such blowout performances among white voters that singular support from this demographic was enough to lift every major GOP candidate for president, U.S. Senate, and the state’s governorship over the 50% threshold between 2008 to 2024. As these trends have taken shape, U.S. Census data reflect steady growth among Asian voters, who now consistently comprise

over one percent of the electorate in presidential cycles, as Hispanic voters have also reached a record high level of representation to reach 2.5% of the electorate in 2020 (U.S. Census). In 2024, Asian and Hispanic voters each comprised 2% of South Carolina’s electorate (Ibid). Taken together, these trends portend increasing influence for these groups in future cycles as the electorate becomes more representative of the resident population demographics.

Table 4.6 Black Turnout in South Carolina (Percentage of Electorate)									
Office	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
President	25				19		26		23
Governor		27		27				22	
U.S. Senator	25	25		26	19		26	22	
<i>Source: National Election Pool (2008-2010, 2014-2020); Fox News (2022-2024).</i>									

To lay the groundwork for testing hypothesis H2 over the 16-year period of this study, which holds that Democrats can win statewide by garnering support from 30% of white voters and turning out Black voters to comprise 30% of the electorate, Table 4.6 shows the level of Black turnout recorded in each election cycle. In contrast to Georgia, South Carolina Democrats failed to reach 30% turnout among Black voters in any of the 13 elections examined as part of this study. The closest candidate to reaching this marker was Vincent Sheheen who hit 27% in both 2010 and 2014. Other races that saw Black voters comprise 26% include the 2020 presidential election, in addition to the 2014 and 2020 U.S. Senate campaigns. Outside of 2016, the lowest levels of turnout recorded during this study were observed during the 2022 and 2024 recent election cycles, when Black turnout receded to 22% and 23% of the overall electorate.

Table 4.7 White Vote Share for Democratic Candidate in South Carolina									
Office	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
President	26%				24%		26%		26%
Governor		29%		22%				28%	
U.S. Senator	26%	9%		19%	22%		27%	23%	
<i>Source: National Election Pool (2008-2010, 2014-2020); Fox News (2022-2024).</i>									

Table 4.7 shows the level of support that statewide Democratic campaigns have won from white South Carolinians. In contrast to the other component of a 30-30 election, Democrats have registered stronger performances with white voters in recent cycles. Although no Democratic candidate crossed the 30% threshold, Sheheen secured 29% in the 2010 gubernatorial campaign and Cunningham won 28% of white voters in his 2022 bid. Likewise, Harrison took 27% of white support in 2020, and Harris, Biden, and Obama each received 26% of white support in their presidential campaigns.

Table 4.8 Other Vote Share for Democratic Candidate in South Carolina									
Office	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
President	61%				67%		36%		42%
Governor		38%		35%				35%	
U.S. Senator	59%	27%		34%	51%		27%	39%	
<i>Source: National Election Pool (2008-2010, 2014-2020); Fox News (2022-2024).</i>									

With an electorate that has continued to largely conform to the traditional Black-white dichotomy, the share of voters in South Carolina who are not white or Black has varied between three percent (2008) to eight percent (2020) of those casting ballots. In the 2008 presidential race, just three percent of voters were from other demographic backgrounds, a figure that increased slightly to five percent in 2024. In gubernatorial cycles, the share of voters of other races stood at four percent in 2010 and five percent in 2022. Similarly, in U.S. Senate races, voters of other demographics made up three percent of the electorate in 2008 and five percent in 2022. As shown in Table 4.8, voters of other races have tended to favor Republican candidates.

Table 4.9 Democratic Vote Share from Black Voters in South Carolina									
Office	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
President	53%				44%		54%		48%
Governor		54%		60%				45%	
U.S. Senator	51%	72%		61%	46%		55%	49%	
<i>Source: National Election Pool (2008-2010, 2014-2020); Fox News (2022-2024).</i>									

Table 4.10 Democratic Vote Share from White Voters in South Carolina									
Office	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
President	41%				44%		40%		46%
Governor		43%		37%				50%	
U.S. Senator	44%	23%		35%	44%		40%	45%	
<i>Source: National Election Pool (2008-2010, 2014-2020); Fox News (2022-2024).</i>									

Table 4.11 Democratic Vote Share from Voters of Other Races in South Carolina									
Office	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
President	5%				12%		7%		5%
Governor		3%		3%				4%	
U.S. Senator	4%	5%		4%	10%		5%	5%	
<i>Source: National Election Pool (2008-2010, 2014-2020); Fox News (2022-2024).</i>									

To more deeply assess how Democratic demographic coalitions shifted during the period of this study, Tables 4.9, 4.10, and 4.11 report the share of votes for Democratic candidates generated from Black voters, in comparison to white voters, and voters of other races. Hypothesis H3 posits that, between 2008 and 2024, Black voters have become a larger share of those supporting Democrats in the electorate. However, across the each of the three officeholding categories examined, the margin of Democratic support produced by Black voters has declined. As shown in Table 4.9, the share of votes for Democratic candidates provided by Black voters decreased from 53% to 48% in presidential races, from 54% to 45% in gubernatorial races, and from 51% to 49% in U.S. Senate elections. Taken together, these data disconfirm hypothesis H3.

Drilling into the consequences of this shift, in 2008, Obama claimed a net margin of 24 percentage points from Black voters, which was reduced to 20 percentage points for Harris in 2024. In gubernatorial cycles, Sheheen secured the equivalent of 25 percentage points in support from Black voters in 2010 and 2014, which decreased to just 18 percentage points in 2022. In U.S. Senate contests, the Democratic vote share generated from Black South Carolinians decreased

from 22 percentage points in 2008 to 18 percentage points in 2022. Driving this change is both, a decreasing vote share for Democrats among Black voters—which falls from 96% to 85% in presidential races (2008 to 2024), from 94% to 85% in gubernatorial contests (2010 to 2022), and from 87% to 83% for U.S. Senate (2008 to 2022)—and a decrease in proportion of Black voters represented in the electorate (see Table 4.6).

Alternatively, as shown in Table 4.10, the share of support generated from white voters for statewide Democratic candidates has generally increased during the period of this study. In 2008, Democrats won 41% of their support from white voters in the presidential race and 44% in the U.S. Senate race, followed by 43% in the 2010 gubernatorial race. In 2024, Harris received 46% of her support from white voters and, the 2022 Democratic candidate for U.S. Senate vying against Tim Scott, Krystle Matthews, received 45% of her overall vote share from white voters. At the gubernatorial level, in 2022, Joe Cunningham received 50% of his vote share from white voters—emerging as the only Democratic candidate observed who generated most of his support from white South Carolinians.

Table 4.11 demonstrates that voters of other races have remained flat in terms of contributing to the share of the vote won by Democratic candidates statewide. Echoing the figures shown in Table 4.8, voters of other races have generally comprised a relatively small share of the Democratic coalition. Between 2022 and 2024, this has equated to between two to three percentage points added to the vote share won by Democratic candidates for president, U.S. Senate, and governor, as voters of other comprised about five percent of the overall electorate.

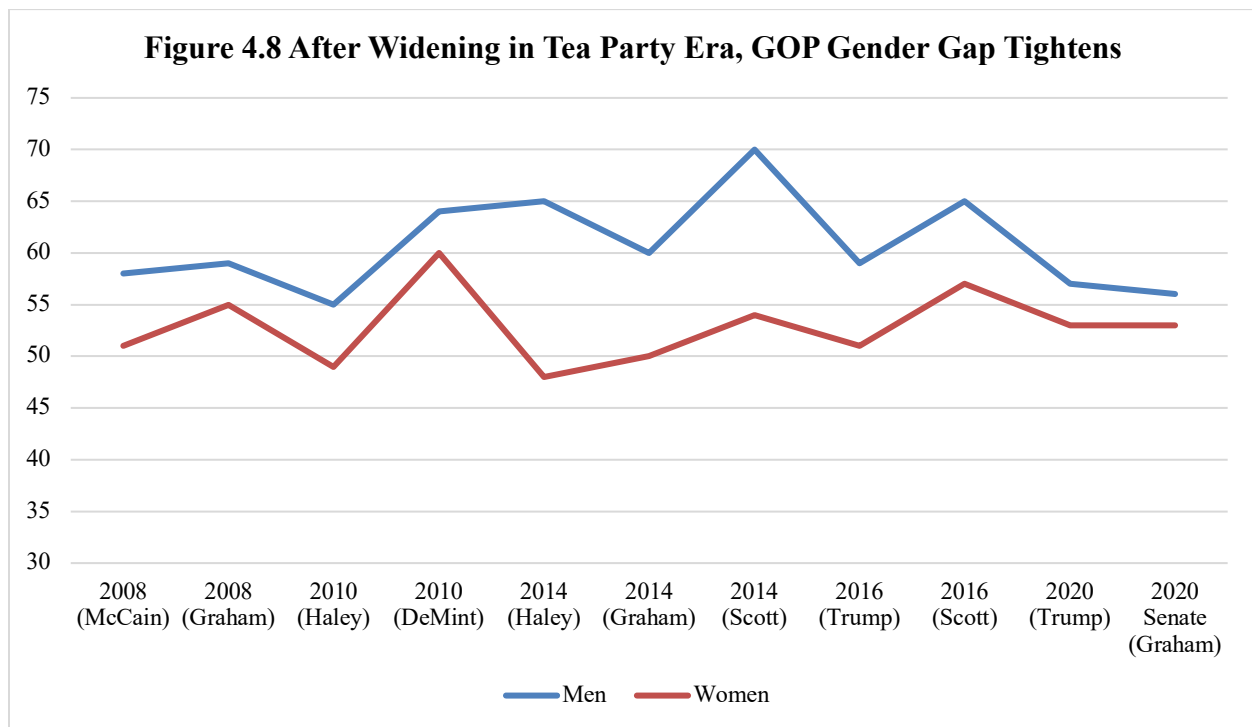
Table 4.12 Testing Hypothesis H2 by adjusting Black Turnout to 30% and White Democratic Support to 30%									
Office	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
President	51.0%				51.4%		48.4%		47.0%
Governor		49.5%		48.8%				46.4%	
U.S. Senator	47.9%	44.9%		47.9%	49.3%		48.7%	46.3%	
<i>Source: National Election Pool (2008-2010, 2014-2020); Fox News (2022-2024).</i>									

Table 4.12 applies a test of hypothesis H2 across thirteen elections for president, governor, and U.S. senator by modeling a 30% turnout rate among Black voters and a 30% vote share for Democrats from white voters. As is the case in chapter three, projecting these figures with an increased level of turnout among Black voters requires pro-rating down the vote share represented by white voters and those of other races so that the total electorate does not total more than 100%. With this caveat, Table 4.12 demonstrates that, in the case of a 30-30 election, Democrats would have won at least a plurality statewide in seven out of 13 elections, including the 2008 presidential, 2010 gubernatorial, 2014 gubernatorial, 2014 U.S. Senate, 2016 presidential, 2016 U.S. Senate, and 2020 U.S. Senate races. This analysis offers mixed results with general support for hypothesis H2, as even under the criteria of a 30-30 election, Democrats would have still fallen short in six of 13 contests.

One explanation for this disconfirmation is the relatively weak performance among Black voters produced by Democratic candidates for governor and U.S. Senate in 2022 and for president in 2024. In all three instances, Democrats won between 83% to 85% of Black South Carolinians. This is in contrast to between 89% to 96% of Black support in the seven contests that Democrats would have won outright, as recorded in Table 4.12. Exit polls suggest that in 2020 Democratic weakness among the eight percent of the electorate comprised voters who were neither white nor Black is the strongest factor holding back Biden and Harris under a 30-30 scenario. Had they split

voters of other races evenly with Graham and Trump, these two Democratic candidates would have prevailed—elevating the number of victories to nine of 13. It is also worth noting that in the seven contests where Democratic candidates would have won, several of the elections would depend on third party candidates continuing to generate a sufficient vote share to keep the threshold for victory below 50%. In a more competitive political environment, this assumption could prove to create room for error in the accuracy of some projections, casting doubt on Democratic prospects even under highly favorable demographic conditions.

From 2008 to 2022, the gender composition of South Carolina’s electorate has strongly tilted female, ranging between 55% to 57% statewide. As women have gone to the polls with greater frequency than their male counterparts, a clear gender gap has also emerged. As reflected in Figure 4.8, the gap in support for Republican candidates between men and women has registered between three to 17 percentage points.



Source: National Election Pool, 2008-2020.

In more recent cycles, this gap has narrowed somewhat as 57% of South Carolina men supported Trump’s 2020 reelection in comparison to 53% of women. The only GOP candidate to receive less than a majority of support from women during the period examined is Nikki Haley, who won 49% of female voters in 2010 and 48% in 2014. Haley’s 2014 race holds the record for the largest gap in support for a Republican candidate among men and women in contemporary South Carolina history, in which exit polls recorded 65% of men supporting her—outpolling her support among women by 17-percentage points.

Table 4.13 Democratic Vote Share from Women in South Carolina									
Office	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
President	58%				60%		57%		64%
Governor		59%		65%				57%	
U.S. Senator	56%	61%		64%	61%		57%	59%	
<i>Source: National Election Pool (2008-2010, 2014-2020); Fox News (2022-2024). Figures show the percentage of the Democratic candidate’s vote total contributed by women.</i>									

To evaluate hypothesis H4, which posits that women have become a larger share of those supporting Democratic candidates between 2008 and 2024, Table 4.13 shows the share of each Democratic candidate’s vote total obtained from women. As recorded, Democratic presidential candidates have steadily shifted to generate a greater share of their overall support from women, moving from 58% of the overall level of support won by Obama (45%) statewide to 64% of the ballots won by Harris (40%) in 2024. However, in terms of real vote share in presidential races, women remained consistently responsible for 26% of the overall electoral support won by Democrats in 2008 and 2024, despite dropping to 24% in 2016 and 25% in 2020.

Overall, the results for H4 are mixed in South Carolina, with women shifting to become a larger share of those supporting Democratic candidates in presidential and U.S. Senate races but dropping from 59% to 57% of those casting Democratic ballots between the 2010 and 2022

gubernatorial contests. However, the real percentage of the vote generated from women decreased from 28 percentage points in the 2010 gubernatorial election to 23 percentage points in 2022, and from 24 percentage points in the 2008 U.S. Senate race to 22 percentage points in 2022. These data generally serve to disconfirm hypothesis H4. Part of the problem for Democratic candidates is that they have only won a narrow majority of support from women in two out of 13 elections, when Vincent Sheheen won the same 50% share in 2010 and 2014. Rather, Democratic candidates tend to split or narrowly lose women voters, while trailing significantly behind with men. For Democrats, the best performances among South Carolina men were to register a vote share of 43%, coming from both Sheheen in 2010 and Harrison's 2020 U.S. Senate campaign. Between 2022 to 2024, Democrats secured between 32% (Harris) to 38% (Cunningham) of male support statewide.

Table 4.14 Racial Polarization in South Carolina's Electorate									
Office	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
President	69%				66%		66%		60%
Governor		66%		70%				56%	
U.S. Senator	61%	73%		70%	69%		66%	61%	
<i>Source: National Election Pool (2008-2010, 2014-2020); Fox News (2022-2024). Figures show the GOP's gap between the share of support won from Black voters subtracted from the share won from white voters.</i>									

Table 4.14 builds on the line of inquiry established in testing hypotheses H2 and H3 using exit poll data to determine if racial polarization has increased in South Carolina's electorate, as put forward by hypothesis H7. As shown between 2008 and 2024, the GOP's gap in support between white and Black voters decreased in presidential elections from 69% in 2008 to 60% in 2024 and from 66% in the 2010 gubernatorial election to 56% in 2022, while remaining flat at 61% between the 2008 and 2022 U.S. Senate contests. For all three categories of officeholders, Democrats remained flat or lost ground among both white voters and Black voters between the first and last observation. In presidential races, Democratic candidates saw their margin among Black voters

shrink by nine percentage points as their support remained flat among white voters, while gubernatorial candidates lost 10 percentage points from Black voters and one percentage point in support from white voters and U.S. Senate candidates saw a deficit of four percent of Black voters and three percent of white voters. Across all of these dimensions, exit poll data disconfirms hypothesis H7 and the notion that South Carolina’s electorate has become more racially polarized in races for president, governor, and U.S. senator.

Table 4.15 Gender Polarization in South Carolina's Electorate									
Office	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
President	7%				8%		4%		14%
Governor		6%		17%				7%	
U.S. Senator	4%	-4%		13%	8%		3%	8%	
<i>Source: South Carolina General Assembly, compiled by author.</i>									
<i>Source: National Election Pool (2008-2010, 2014-2020); Fox News (2022-2024). Figures show the GOP gap in the share of support won from male voters subtracted from female voters.</i>									

To evaluate whether gender polarization has increased in the electorate, as described by hypothesis H8, Table 4.15 tracks gender gap for GOP candidates in the share of support won from men and women. The data show a slight uptick in the size of the GOP’s gender gap in gubernatorial races, going from six percentage points in 2010 to seven percentage points in 2022, and expanding in presidential races from percentage points in 2008 to 14 percentage points in 2024. For U.S. Senate races, the gap increased from four percentage points in 2008 to eight percentage points in 2022. However, in all three areas of officeholding, support for Republicans has increased among both men and women. In presidential races, GOP support from men increased from 58% (2008) to 66% (2024), and from 51% to 52% among women. This compares to an increase in support among men for GOP gubernatorial candidates from 55% (2010) to 61% (2022) and among women from 49% to 54%. In Senate contests, GOP support from men increased from 59% (2008) to 67% (2022), and from 55% to 59% among women. These data offer support for hypothesis H8.

Table 4.16 Percent Black among Democratic Officeholders in South Carolina After Election									
Office	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
Statewide (U.S. Sen., Gov., Constitutional Officers)	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Congress	50%	100%	100%	100%	100%	50%	100%	100%	100%
St. Senate	47%	47%	61%	61%	67%	67%	75%	75%	67%
St. House	55%	60%	61%	60%	70%	73%	79%	75%	71%
General Assembly	53%	57%	61%	60%	69%	71%	78%	75%	70%
<i>Source: South Carolina General Assembly, compiled by author.</i>									

Table 4.16 tests hypothesis H5 by charting the representation of Black elected officials in statewide elected offices, Congress, state Senate, and state House. For the first two categories, the number of officeholders is relatively sparse, with Democrats electing no statewide constitutional officers and a total of three members of Congress over 16-years (James Clyburn, Joe Cunningham, and John Spratt). For seven cycles, including the last instance tested (2024), Clyburn was the only Democrat serving alongside six white Republican House members. In 2008, as well as 2018, Clyburn elected to serve as part of a 50/50 delegation with a white male Democrat.

Applying a difference of proportions test to the share of Black Democrats in the state senate does not meet the 95% threshold applied throughout this study (Z score of -1.05 and a p value of 0.15). Along these same lines, the change the proportion of Black House members between 2008 and 2024 also falls outside of this study's confidence interval, with a Z score of -1.57 and a p value of 0.06. However, assessing the change in the proportion of Black members in the General Assembly as a whole between 2008 and 2024 produces a significant result, with a Z score of -1.9 and a p value that is well within the confidence interval applied at 0.029.

In the South Carolina state Senate, nine Black Democrats were serving after the 2008 elections (47%) as part of a 19-member minority caucus. Although Table 4.16 shows the share of

Black Senate Democrats increasing to 67% in 2024, the number of Black members was reduced by one to eight legislators over four election cycles. In the state House, 29 Black members represented 55% of the 53-member Democratic Caucus after the 2008 elections. By 2024, the House Democratic Caucus had dwindled down to a total of 35 members, including 25 Black members (71%).

These state-level shifts can be partly explained by redistricting, led by the GOP majority in South Carolina's General Assembly. After the 2020 Census, South Carolina's legislature increased the number of majority-minority districts from 32 to 34, while maintaining 11 majority-minority Senate districts. However, even as the number of majority-minority districts increased by two, the number of majority Black state House districts decreased from 30 to 17 and from nine to three in the state Senate (Dave's Redistricting, 2020C, 2020D, 2024E, 2024F). While the composition of South Carolina's General Assembly provides support for hypothesis H5, and Black officeholders have become a larger share of the Democratic state legislators, this phenomenon has been driven by an exodus of white members that has accompanied the party's diminished status as the minority serving alongside a bicameral supermajority, rather than an actual increase in the number of Black members serving—as is the case in Georgia.

In South Carolina's Senate, the Democratic Caucus has been led by a white male in every session during the full period of this study. Among this group, Democratic leaders included Senator John Land III (1993-2012), Senator Nikki Setzler (2013-2018), and Senator Brad Hutto (2020-2025). In the House, Democrats were led by Harry Ott from 2004 through 2013. A white male, Ott was succeeded by the first Black member elected to lead one of South Carolina's legislative chambers, Todd Rutherford, who has served as the minority leader of the House Democratic Caucus since 2013. South Carolina has not yet elected a female leader of either the

Republican or Democratic Caucus, and the top leaders of the Republican Caucus have all been white men. In the House, during the period of this study, this group has included Speakers Murrell Smith (2022-2025), Jay Lucas (2014-2022), and Bobby Harrell (2005-2024). In the Senate, South Carolina Republican leaders have included Shane Massey (2016-2025) and Harvey Peeler (2005-2016).

Table 4.17 Racial Polarization among Officeholders: GOP Gap in Number of Non-White Officeholders in South Carolina After Election									
Office	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
Statewide (U.S. Sen., Gov., and Constitutional officers)		1		2		1		1	
Congress	(1)	0	0	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)
St. Senate	(9)		(11)		(12)		(12)		(7)
St. House	(27)	(29)	(28)	(27)	(30)	(31)	(32)	(25)	(22)
<i>Source: South Carolina General Assembly, compiled by author.</i>									

Although less polarized by gender and governed by a significantly larger GOP majority than Georgia, Table 4.17 demonstrates that South Carolina’s legislature is highly polarized by race, supporting hypothesis H9. In 2008, South Carolina’s GOP Caucus added two non-white Republicans: Nikki Haley and Tim Scott. While those leaders went on to make history by winning South Carolina’s governorship and serving as the state’s junior U.S. senator, non-white elected Republicans remain rare. However, in 2024, Harriet Holman defeated 20-year incumbent, Joe Jefferson, to become the first Republican Black woman elected to the state House. Jefferson’s defeat was, in part, driven by redistricting, which saw South Carolina’s 102nd House District shift from majority Black (52%) to just over 50% white, with a 41% Black population (Dave’s Redistricting, 2020C, 2024E). Two years earlier, Mike Reichenbach became the first Black Republican elected to South Carolina’s state Senate since Reconstruction, replacing Republican

Hugh Leatherman in a 61% white district. Still, as shown in Table 4.17, non-white Democrats vastly outnumber non-white Republicans.

Table 4.18 Chi Square Test: South Carolina General Assembly, Non-white and White Members by Political Party									
	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
Chi Squared	59.38	74.63	83.82	77.8	96.14	99.28	110.29	105.9	88.89
P Value	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01
Significance	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Source: South Carolina General Assembly, compiled by author.</i>									

To determine if there is a significant relationship between race and polarization by political party among officeholders, Table 4.18 applies a chi square test of independence to the composition of the South Carolina General Assembly between 2008 and 2024. Across each election cycle, significance is demonstrated within a 95% confidence interval, with a generally steady increase in the chi squared coefficient produced for each successive cycle. Applying a chi squared test to evaluate changes in the number of white members by party between 2008 and 2024 produces a Z score of 10.6 and a p value of <0.01, indicating that the South Carolina General Assembly has become more polarized by race during the period of this study.

After the 2008 elections, South Carolina Democrats elected 34 white Democrats to the General Assembly, alongside 38 non-white Democrats, 96 white Republicans, and two non-white Republicans. The number of non-white Democrats continued to steadily increase until it peaked at 46 members in 2020. However, by the 2022 cycle, Democrats began to lose more non-white members, with five Black Democrats defeated by white Republicans and three losing their seats due to seat mergers from redistricting. Three out of five Black Democrats who were defeated that cycle, including House members Anne Parks (Greenwood), Kimberly Johnson (Sumter), and Shedron Williams (Hampton) lost marginal races of less-than 10 points.

In 2024, three additional Black Democrats lost their campaigns for re-election, including state Senator Gerald Malloy (Darlington), Senator Kevin Johnson (Clarendon), and Senator Vernon Stephens (Orangeburg). This time, the defeats were even closer, with Democrats losing all three senate races by less than 1,000 votes, including in areas that span parts of South Carolina's Black belt (Adcox & Kenmore, 2024). As a result, the number of non-white Democrats dwindled down to 33, and the number of white Democrats was reduced to 13 members, serving alongside 118 white Republicans and four non-white GOP legislators.

In down ballot GOP primary elections, a new gender divide emerged in 2024. Republican primary voters handed down defeats to three female state senators who were instrumental during the previous legislative session in defeating a near-total abortion ban, which did not include exemptions for pregnancies caused by rape or incest. As state senators Penry Gustafson, Sandy Senn, and Katrina Shealy all lost their races for reelection to male challengers, GOP primary voters purged the only three women members of the state Senate Republican Caucus so that the chamber's GOP supermajority was comprised of only men in 2025. Commenting on the backlash to the extreme abortion measure, Shealy reflected on the message primary voters were sending to women across the state, saying: "You can't tell me that's not a slap in the face of women... Republican women lose like this over one issue when we fought so hard for other things" (Collins, 2024A).

In her departure speech to the legislative chamber, Senn directed her remarks to a larger audience than her predominantly male colleagues, saying, "Women, somebody else is going to have to stand up... Somebody else is going to have to come and make things right" (Collins, 2024B). Indeed, recent polling (May 2024) showed that 84% of South Carolina's registered voters support allowing women to obtain legal abortions "if the pregnancy threatens the woman's life or

health,” while 81% are in favor of legal abortion for cases involving rape, and 60% support abortion “if the baby is likely to be born with severe disabilities or health problems” (Huffmon, 2024). None of these exceptions were included in the legislation adopted by the General Assembly in 2024.

Exemplifying the ramifications that legislative primary elections can have statewide, the 2024 defeats set back the representation of women within the 46-member body, which now has just two Democratic women or a total of four percent of the state Senate in 2025. The 2024 Republican primary election saw a statewide turnout of 11.3%, slightly higher than the low of 8.1% recorded during 2018, but lower than the 12.2% recorded in 2008 (South Carolina Election Commission). This continues a historic pattern of underrepresentation for women in South Carolina’s General Assembly. Already, just 15% (25) of the 170 members of the South Carolina General Assembly serving in 2022 were women, divided between 10 Democrats and 15 Republicans. This ranked the Palmetto State at the very bottom of the South, and 49 out of 50, in terms of the proportion of women serving in the state legislature in 2025 (CAWP, 2025). As further evidence of the state’s historically hostile political environment towards women, South Carolina has never elected more than 29 female legislators (17%) to serve at one time in its General Assembly, a record reached in 2020.

Table 4.19 Percent Women among Democratic Officeholders in South Carolina After Election									
Office	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
Statewide (U.S. Sen., Gov., and Constitutional officers)	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Congress	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
St. Senate	0%	0%	0%	0%	11%	11%	13%	13%	17%
St. House	17%	17%	24%	26%	25%	27%	30%	22%	23%
General Assembly	13%	12%	17%	18%	21%	23%	25%	19%	21%
<i>Source: South Carolina General Assembly, compiled by author.</i>									

Table 4.19 tracks the share of Democratic women represented in statewide, in Congress, and in South Carolina's General Assembly to test H6 by measuring if women have become a larger share of party officeholders. Democrats have only elected one female statewide officeholder in history, former lieutenant governor Nancy Stevenson (1979-1983), and just one out of three women ever elected to Congress from South Carolina has belonged to the Democratic Party (Liz Patterson, 1987-1993). As such, the testing of H4 and H6 in the Palmetto State are limited to examining changes in the membership of the state House and Senate.

In 2008, South Carolina General Assembly Democrats elected nine women (13%) and 59 men, comprising 17% of the state House caucus with no state senators. In 2024, the party elected 10 female members (21%) and 37 males—including 23% of state House members (eight) and 17% of state senators (two)—increasing the share of women legislators but leaving the overall number of women serving essentially unchanged. In 2008, South Carolina's state House included eight Republican women (11% of the GOP caucus) and the state Senate included no female Republicans, as overall female representation among Republicans stood at eight percent in the General Assembly. After the 2024 elections, with 12 female Republicans elected to the state House and none elected to the state Senate, women represented 14% of House Republicans and 10% of General Assembly Republicans overall.

In this vein, both Republicans and Democrats have maintained relative parity in recent cycles, with respect to the low frequency by which women are elected. These points serve to provide mixed results in response to notions of gender polarization tested as part of H10, as women are underrepresented in both parties. However, as in the example demonstrated above through the recent legislative debate over abortion, a gender divide emerged that crossed party lines with men and women highly polarized by gender. Although gender polarization in policy matters is more

difficult to track and encounters the challenge of accounting for relatively low levels of female representation in comparison to high levels of male over-representation among state legislators, South Carolina offers an important example of how gender polarization can affect policymaking.

Table 4.20 Chi Square Test: South Carolina General Assembly, Men and Women Elected by Political Party									
	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
Chi Squared	0.87	0.79	1.64	2.18	3.77	2.64	4.469	1.22	3.92
P Value	0.35	0.37	0.2	0.14	0.052	0.10	0.035	0.27	0.047
Significance	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Source: South Carolina General Assembly, compiled by author.</i>									

Table 4.20 applies a chi square test for each election cycle between 2008 and 2024 to determine if gender polarization has increased among public officeholders. Gender polarization is defined as the gap between the share of elected Republicans and Democrats who are women. Using this method, only two results are significant within a 95% confidence interval: 2020 and 2024. This suggests that South Carolina's General Assembly has become increasingly polarized by gender, with the probability improving at a relatively consistent pace throughout the 16-year period observed. Applying a chi squared test to evaluate the change in female representation between political parties over the full 16-year period produces a Z score of 0.2 and a p value of 0.32, indicating that the change is not statistically significant. Because female representation in the Democratic Caucus has remained relatively flat, and male representation declined alongside the overall share of Democrats serving in the General Assembly, the effects of gender polarization observed in South Carolina are more muted than those seen in Georgia. However, the share of Democratic Caucus comprised by women has remained significantly larger than the share of female GOP legislators after every election cycle considered for the full General Assembly. Alternatively, as of 2024, two female GOP members of Congress served as part of the state's delegation, giving Republicans the edge at the federal level.

2008 TO 2012: PALMETTO STATE REPUBLICANS

BATTLE AS THE TEA PARTY RISES

Once considered a top potential GOP contender for the 2012 presidential nomination, Mark Sanford's political career captured the zeitgeist of the Tea Party as the political movement was still in its infancy. Sanford rose to the governorship by campaigning as a new kind of Republican. The charismatic politician alienated a wide swath of state legislators, even as he won fans on both sides of the aisle, spanning the ideological spectrum from the environmentally focused Sierra Club, which endorsed him in 2006, to the fiscally conservative Club for Growth, which aided in campaigns against incumbent Republicans who opposed Sanford's agenda. Sanford built his political base among libertarian-leaning coastal Republicans, first representing the Charleston-based 1st Congressional District and then ascending to serve two terms as the state's chief executive, by centering his campaigns on issues of debt, deficits, and a pledge to eliminate South Carolina's income tax before such issues were commonplace in the GOP. After he became governor, Sanford's battles with the GOP-run legislature over budgetary issues became legendary, with the governor issuing hundreds of line item vetoes each year—only for the vast majority to be quickly overridden by both chambers of the General Assembly with little debate (Kanso, 2016).

In 2009, the Palmetto State's governor attracted national attention when he attempted to veto appropriations for \$700 million in federal stimulus aid, aiming to make South Carolina the only state in the nation to reject the funding despite facing significant budgetary shortfalls. The gambit failed in terms of achieving the governor's policy goals, with South Carolina's state Supreme Court ruling 5-0 against Sanford, finding that, "Under the Constitution and laws of this State, the General Assembly is the sole entity with the power to appropriate funds... Therefore, the General Assembly has the authority to mandate that the Governor apply for federal funds which

it has appropriated” (Guilfoyle, 2009). However, Sanford’s battle caught the attention of national media outlets and helped attract renewed attention to the governor’s previous bouts with the General Assembly. This included an instance in 2004 when he instructed his staff to bring two pigs—nicknamed “Pork” and “Barrel”—to the state House, where the governor staged a press conference to lambast his Republican colleagues after they unceremoniously moved to override all 106-budgetary vetoes the governor issued that year with a single vote (Kanso, 2016, 18-19).

In South Carolina’s legislature, Sanford’s primary foil was Senator Hugh Leatherman, who held positions ranging from finance chairman (2001-2021) overseeing the state budget to Republican majority leader (2001-2005) to president pro-tempore (2014-2019). These leadership roles were earned after Leatherman switched parties to join the GOP in 1995 and helped engineer the Republican majority in 2001. The twenty-year veteran Senate Finance Chairman was first elected to the chamber in 1980 and served until his death in 2021, casting a long shadow for decades as one of the most powerful politicians in South Carolina’s state government.

In the House, Sanford repeatedly clashed with then-Speaker Bobby Harrell, who rose to power in 2005 to succeed the first-ever Republican to serve in that role, David Wilkins, when he was appointed U.S. Ambassador to Canada by George W. Bush. Harrell remained atop the House for nine years, until he was indicted and forced to resign the speakership in 2014 (Santaella, 2014). Exemplifying the acrimonious nature of their relationship, five months before the 2006 midterm in which Sanford was up for reelection, Harrell authored an op-ed questioning the governor’s ability to lead state government. The then-Speaker wrote in *The State*: “It is sad to see a member of my own party base his reelection campaign on running against a Legislature that is controlled by his political party... The problem is Gov. Sanford needs the same people he is attacking to support his proposals” (Harrell, 2006).

Sanford's rising national profile coincided with his election to chair the Republican Governor's Association (RGA) in 2008, further amplifying his position as the Tea Party movement—named for the acronym “Taxed Enough Already”—was starting to establish a foothold on the national stage. Alas, within months of his elevation to national stardom as a GOP fiscal darling, Sanford was caught having an extramarital affair in June of 2009. The governor's indiscretion was revealed through a bizarre sequence of events in which Sanford told his staff—who subsequently informed the media—that he was “hiking the Appalachian Trail,” which instantly became a euphemism and its own flashpoint in popular culture (Kanso, 2016).

After the press discovered that he had actually been in Argentina carrying out the affair, the governor held an infamous press conference to apologize to South Carolinians and his family for breaking their trust. Reflecting on the legacy of his governorship, Sanford reflected that the divisions of power between the executive and legislative branches were constructed under the “racist” state constitution of 1895 and designed in such a way that, “even if a Black man were elected governor it wouldn't matter because he wouldn't have any responsibility,” putting him in a weak position against an uncooperative legislature that was unwilling to buck the status quo (Sanford, 2012). Still, Sanford claimed incremental accomplishments on fiscal policy and in modernizing government, noting:

All this is not to say we didn't have any wins in the governorship. We certainly did.

Efforts to limit spending always mean war. It is much easier to get politicians lined up behind some form of tax cut in a Republican legislative body because overall they're popular. We were able to enact the largest recurring tax cut in South Carolina history. We cut the marginal income tax rate for the first time in our state's history.

Similarly firsts came in enacting Workers' Comp reform and tort reform. We brought the Employment Security Commission, DMV and Transportation into the Governor's cabinet... In fact, in 2009, despite a troubled national economy, South Carolina led the entire Southeast in jobs recruited. Operationally we were able to bring wait times at DMV

offices from 66 minutes down to 15 minutes... (Sanford, 2012).

Meanwhile, ahead of the Tea Party's rise, Senator Lindsey Graham's 2008 reelection campaign flashed early warnings that the issues animating the GOP base extended beyond fiscal matters to include cultural issues like immigration. After entering the U.S. Senate in 2003, Graham quickly gravitated towards the issue of immigration, eventually becoming the Republican senator most closely associated with the concept of a comprehensive immigration bill that could address both border security and a path to citizenship for the millions of undocumented immigrants already in the country. When the effort failed in June of 2007 on a Senate vote of 50-45, Graham released a statement praising President Bush's leadership on the issue and remarking, "The legislation is far from perfect, but it is a realistic approach to dealing with the very serious immigration problems facing our nation" (Graham, 2007). Graham's reward was a primary challenge in 2008 from former RNC national committeeman Buddy Witherspoon, who was running on the "sole issue [of] immigration" (Lizza, 2007).

Witherspoon summed up his campaign message, saying "Immigration is the No. 1 issue, no question there. We're concerned about illegal immigrants coming in here and—well, under the Bush Administration, it's now seven years into his term, and he hasn't done a lot about it... The big tent is great. But that doesn't mean 'cause it's a big tent you should include everything under the tent" (Ibid). Ultimately Witherspoon lost 67-33 after being outspent by \$3.2 million to just \$211,000. Pollster Dan Judy, whose firm worked for the 2008 Graham campaign, described that "The energy on the right was not to the point where—you could get a primary challenger that could come in and they might get a quarter of the vote, but you weren't really going to lose. But that started to change, especially as you got into the Trump years" (Judy, 2024). However, even after the challenge, Graham was not deterred from the issue of immigration. Channeling Graham's

philosophy, Judy said: “Lindsey always said... as long as I win my people on God, guns, and gays, I can do whatever I want on the other stuff” (Ibid). After winning the 2008 primary, Graham easily defeated Democratic gadfly Bob Conley by 15-percentage points in the general election.

After Sanford’s fall from grace, with just eighteen months left before his second term expired, he turned his focus to the GOP campaign that would determine his likely successor. Although he later called the decision, “a huge mistake,” Sanford used the funds remaining in his campaign account to inject \$400,000 in support of Nikki Haley’s long-shot gubernatorial campaign as she was facing off against a four-person GOP field that included future governor Henry McMaster, 3rd District congressman Gresham Barrett, and then-lieutenant governor André Bauer (O’Connor, 2010; Sanford, 2016). In 2008, Haley—along with allied state Representative Nathan Ballentine—publicly clashed with Speaker Harrell, claiming that “Harrell ousted them from committees in reprisal for their push to increase on-the-record voting and open criticism of practices in the lower chamber” (Davenport, 2008). After initially being appointed to serve on the powerful House Labor, Commerce, and Industry Committee—which is regularly assigned legislation relevant to major business interests—Haley was stripped of the appointment just hours later. Commenting at a subsequent press conference with Ballentine who similarly lost his post on the Education Committee, Haley remarked, “I went against the speaker on something he was publicly against: votes on the record. And I was not just demoted, but he attempted to embarrass me and humiliate me in the process” (Ibid).

Prior to lending his support to Haley in 2010 gubernatorial campaign, Sanford said he did not have much of a relationship with her. However, in Sanford’s words:

What I knew then was, none of these other guys—it’s the enemy of my enemy is my friend phenomenon. So, she had gone against Bobby Harrell... and been punished for it. That impressed me because I knew Bobby wasn’t good with me and if she’s not good with Bobby, then deductive reasoning, you know, we’re more in the same camp... My world

was just collapsing, you're [feeling] incredibly guilty, you just want to do the right thing. [Advisors] are saying, 'look, you're politics is over but, you know, any chance of preserving your legacy, of carrying it on, this person represents it. She's going to push what you push for (Sanford, 2016).

Sanford said that when Haley first approached him, he encouraged her to seek the state's top office and promised his full support of her campaign, noting that no one else in the race was seeking to occupy a similar lane of conservatism to his own. Sanford recalled:

I put it in writing, told her I would do these four things that were nominal: I would, you know, go to two public events with her; I would put my name in one fundraising appeal letter; I would be a part of one commercial; and there was something else.

And then, shortly thereafter, I completely blew myself up. Then she came back in every week—week in, week out—and apparently at that time, obviously I was too busy to be watching her social media, but basically it was, "I'm Mark Sanford in a skirt." ...But she still came back in every single week, once a week, [to] sit in that red sofa at the edge of the governor's mansion, [... saying] "I need your help."

I said, "look I'll do everything that was on the list, I'll completely honor that piece of paper."

"No, no, no. You know, what you are gonna do is worth way more than \$400,000, but will you give us \$400,000?" [...]

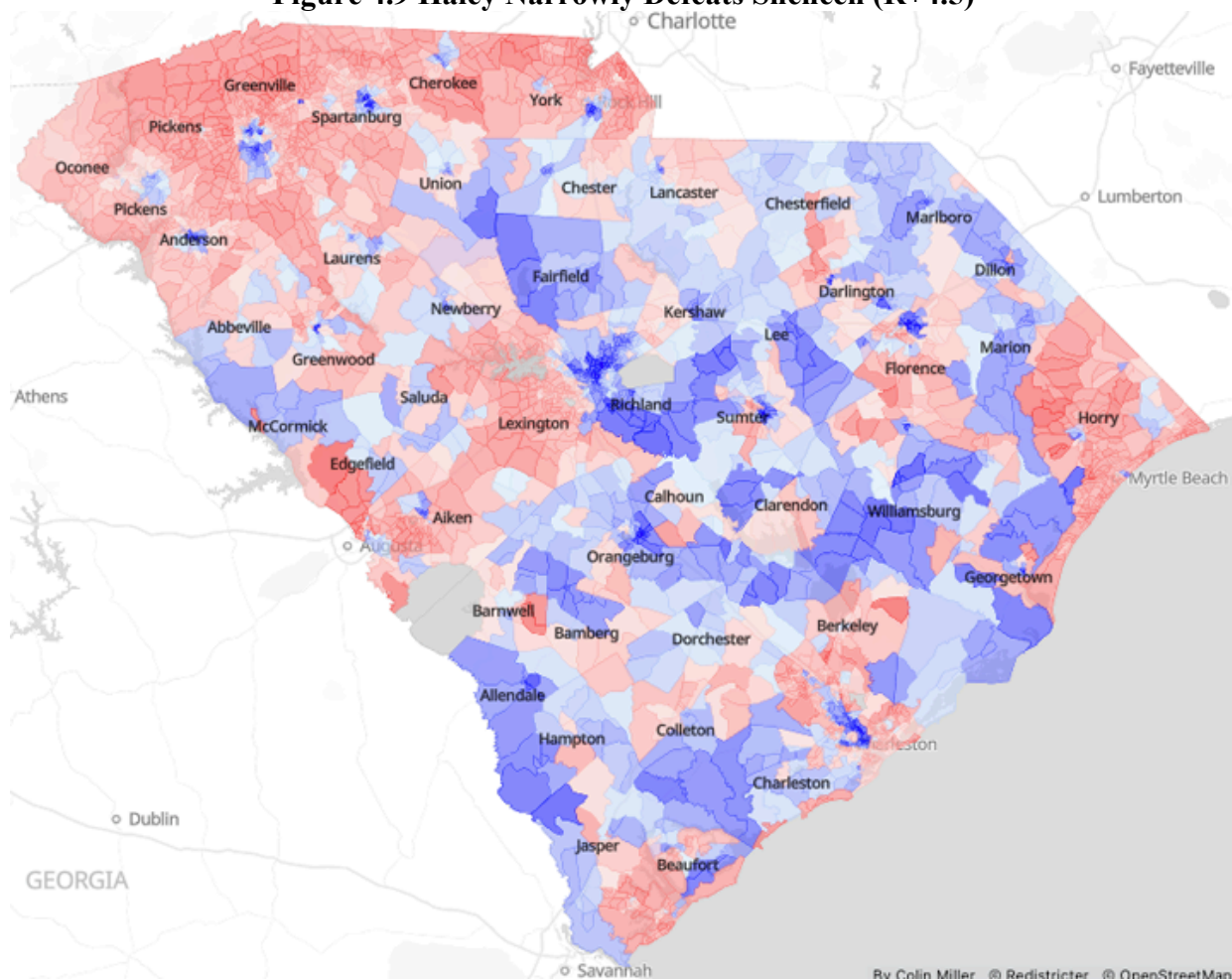
It was certainly my suggestion [for her to run]. She didn't come in wanting to run for governor, she came in wanting to run for treasurer. So, I've suggested that and then I've blown myself up, you know, how do I do right by that? ...And it's what's my last act? And so, you knew Henry [McMaster] would represent more of the establishment. It was not an uninformed decision—it was a decision certainly in desperation and it was ill advised in retrospect—but given my state of mind at the time, my desire for some level of atonement, I said "give her the money" (Sanford, 2016).

Sanford channeled the funds through a group called Reform SC, and by May 10, 2010, the group was on air with its first ad promoting Haley's campaign. At the time, media reports noted, that the ads were "a shot in the arm for Haley's cash-strapped campaign. The \$530,000 she had in cash at the end of the March [reporting period] was a third or less than any of her three GOP primary opponents" (*Associated Press*, 2010).

Barrett, who finished second to Haley in the first round of voting by a margin of 49% to 22% before losing the June runoff 65% to 35%, said that another “seismic” move also helped to upend the 2010 race. That came in the form of Sarah Palin’s endorsement of Haley’s campaign, in which she held a rally in downtown Columbia and proclaimed the state legislator as her fellow “mama grizzly” (Parker & Wells, 2024). Prior to Palin’s endorsement and the effect of Sanford’s ads, Barrett said his campaign “had just gotten polling results that second Wednesday in May, which showed him leading a trio of rivals” with Haley “still mired in single digits” (Ibid). Over the next few weeks, “Nikki had gone from single digits to the 20s—and she never came back down” (Ibid).

During the primary campaign, Haley also faced a series of attacks on her character, including claims of an extramarital affair from conservative political blogger and former Sanford staffer Will Folks as well as lobbyist Larry Marchant, who worked for rival contender André Bauer during the 2010 cycle, in addition to racist attacks from firebrand state Senator Jake Knotts, who called her a “raghead” (Ibid). Haley, riding a wave of earned media through the Palin endorsement, and with the financial resources to promote her own message through paid media from Sanford, rocketed to claim the 2010 GOP gubernatorial nomination and earned the right to face off against Democratic nominee and then-state Senator Vincent Sheheen.

Figure 4.9 Haley Narrowly Defeats Sheheen (R+4.5)



Source: Redistricter.com, created by author.

Figure 4.9 demonstrates the significant inroads made by the Kershaw County Democrat, who managed to win 25-out-of-56 counties—significantly improving on the 20-counties won by Obama in 2008 and the 15-counties won by Graham’s 2008 general election opponent Bob Conley—a high watermark for statewide Democratic candidates in the contemporary era. Counties flipped by Sheheen included Abbeville, Chesterfield, Darlington, Florence, and Union, reflecting his strong popularity in the Midlands and PeeDee regions that feature most of the state’s Black Belt counties. During the campaign, a series of questions about Haley’s finances and lingering accusations raised during the primary dogged her campaign, while Sheheen attempted to tie her to Sanford, airing ads in which the narrator asks, “Can we afford another governor who says one

thing and does another?” (*ABC News*, 2010). Decided by just under 60,000 votes—with Haley defeating Sheheen by a margin of 51.4% to 46.9%—the 2010 governor’s race ranks as the most competitive general election contest for governor, U.S. senator, or president in South Carolina during the period from 2008 to 2024.

Notwithstanding Sheheen’s hard fought gubernatorial campaign, 2010 marked a series of painful defeats for Democrats up and down the ballot. The most glaring of these losses was the U.S. Senate campaign of Alvin Greene, an unemployed 32-year-old veteran who upset retired judge Vic Rawn in the Democratic primary to vie against Jim DeMint in his first bid for reelection. Ahead of his reelection campaign, DeMint described his ideology to the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), remarking: “I’ve been criticized by some of my Republican colleagues for saying I’d rather have 30 Republicans in the Senate who believe in the principles of freedom than 60 who don’t believe in anything” (Thrush, 2010). Doubling down, he continued: “Let me make myself even clearer: I’d rather have 30 Marco Rubios in the Senate than 60 Arlen Specters” (Ibid). This statement encapsulates the intra-GOP divide that emerged prior to Trump’s rise.

After DeMint carried 36 counties and won 63% in the general election, Greene faced accusations of being a Republican plant. However, subsequent analysis revealed that his victory was powered by attracting “46.8% of the white vote along with 67.1% of the Black vote” in the Democratic primary and was more representative of “the weakness of the South Carolina Democratic Party” than any attempts at GOP interference (Bullock & Buchanan, 2011). With scant evidence of much genuine campaign activity, Greene’s failed campaign even lost Richland County to DeMint by 11,600 votes, which is traditionally the area where Democrats perform best—and where Sheheen won by a margin of 42,400 votes—representing the worst statewide performance of a Democratic candidate in the contemporary era.

In terms of the South Carolina’s representation in the U.S. House, the 2010 cycle saw the single greatest level of turnover in decades, with Mick Mulvaney defeating 28-year Democratic incumbent John Spratt in the 5th district—which draws its population center from the Charlotte suburbs—and Tim Scott (1st District), Jeff Duncan (3rd District), and Trey Gowdy (4th District) all rising up from the state’s General Assembly to join the freshman class of the 112th Congress. Reflecting on his 2010 campaign, Mulvaney recalled that he was “fully expecting to lose” because “the [Republican] party had always offered up a sacrificial lamb” and that “no one else wanted to run, [so] we didn’t have a primary” (Mulvaney, 2014). Mulvaney cast his campaign around the central issue of Spratt’s support for the Affordable Care Act, saying: “I knew that if I challenged him, at least I would have two or three chances to debate him. And I could push back and get the other side of the Obamacare argument” (Ibid). After he defeated Spratt by 23,500 votes—a margin of nearly 10-points—Mulvaney said it became “readily apparent at that time that the four of us [who were elected to the House in 2010] were going to be good friends. We had enough experience with each other—especially Jeff and Tim and I—to know that politically we were pretty much aligned” (Ibid).

The 2010 cycle of congressional contests also represented a breakthrough for insurgent conservatives, with Trey Gowdy becoming the first GOP primary challenger in modern South Carolina history to defeat an incumbent member of Congress who was seeking reelection. In the first round of voting for the 4th Congressional District—which included the counties of Greenville, Spartanburg, Union, and part of Laurens—Gowdy finished first, taking 39% to 27% for the incumbent. Two weeks later, Gowdy easily defeated Bob Inglis in a landslide runoff victory, winning 73% of support from primary voters. With Tim Scott’s victory in the same cycle over the scions of two long-revered South Carolina Republicans, Carroll Campbell, III, and Paul

Thurmond, media reports called the upsets “a sign of anti-Washington anger roiling the country” (Rosen, 2010). For his part, Inglis said he could feel the political headwinds changing between his first stint in Congress (1993-1999) and his second (2005-2011). Describing the transition after his return to Congress in 2005, when a health scare prompted him to rethink his political philosophy through his primary defeat, Inglis remembers:

I pretty much announced a very different approach, and it was okay with the [4th] District. I mean, they thought I was a little bit weird on about this energy stuff, but the economy’s great, so sure. [I’m] hitting 85% of the vote [in 2004], and then it got, it’s still okay in ‘06, okay in ‘08, it wasn’t okay after the Great Recession because [...] at that point, adherence to tribal orthodoxy becomes very important with the tribes under pressure. And so, I was off of the orthodoxy and so my unorthodoxy was okay when the economy was good, in my view. Once the economy turned south, the tribe’s under pressure. We insist on you being true to the tribe... I think there’s a number of heresies that I committed, which cannot be forgiven by the Tea Party.

I voted against a troop surge because I had conservative concerns about what George W. Bush was doing in Iraq—nation building. Amazing, isn’t it, how orthodoxies seem fixed—but they’re actually quite fluid... And so it was, “this is George W. Bush, our man. And Bob, you voted against it. He’s your friend and you were just treacherous.” But then, once he’s out and we’ve got the secret, Muslim, non-American socialist in the White House, and then Ron Paul gets 25% of the vote. [...] So my party went from interventionist to sort of isolation being quite okay with wide swaths of the party, then we had six or eight barbaric beheadings, [and it] swings back to intervention, and now it’s sort of mixed, it’s intervention with Lindsey...

It was TARP, it was voting against the troop surge, it was being for comprehensive immigration reform. Even though we never used that term, that people could tell that I didn’t share their problem with their immigrants. But the most enduring heresy was just saying climate change is real because that one became a real marker that I had gone to the other tribe. Not only had I shared bread with the neighbor rather than the cousin, but I had gone over and taken part in their rituals over there and become an Al Gore believer (Inglis, 2015).

Duncan called the newly elected group “the four horsemen,” and described that, “we were four freshmen congressmen, all from South Carolina, [and] that really had an impact in Washington right off the bat, just because we were four people that were very like-minded, that voted alike, that consulted each other,” and that “were very close” (Duncan, 2014A). Expounding

on the areas of agreement they found in public policy—along with other members of the 85-member GOP freshman class—Duncan continued, “We’ve had an impact, we’ve actually started making Congress question raising the debt ceiling... questioning spending, you know, questioning the growth of government, and it’s really had an impact on Republicans in general in the House” (Duncan 2014B). Duncan credited “Mick Mulvaney [for being] very impactful on the budget” and said that “he came up with—he and [Mike Lee]—came up with ‘Cut, Cap, and Balance,’ which was an alternative to raising the debt ceiling” (Ibid). Chapter Six charts issues regarding government spending further and examines how Southern Republicans have been at the forefront of opposing increases to the debt ceiling and spending bills from 2011 forward.

Following significant turnover at the highest levels of its political ranks in 2010, South Carolina turned its attention toward the increasingly contentious race for the 2012 presidential nomination. After coming up short in his 2008 bid, Mitt Romney was “viewed with deep skepticism by grass-roots conservatives and the path to his [2012] nomination was much longer than anticipated, marked with the booms and busts of almost all his rivals” (Gibson, 2012). Among nine GOP candidates on the ballot in South Carolina, Newt Gingrich rose to claim the Palmetto State’s 25-delegates after finishing fourth in Iowa and a distant fifth in New Hampshire. Gingrich won the state by more than 12-percentage points, sweeping all but the three populous counties of Richland, Charleston, and Beaufort. Gingrich dominated his rivals by winning strong support from the groups in which Romney was weakest, claiming a plurality of votes in South Carolina from white evangelicals (44%), Tea Party supporters (45%), and those identifying as very conservative (48%) (National Election Pool, 2012B).

Centering his campaign on attacks against the “Republican establishment,” Gingrich peppered his stump speeches with appeals to the party’s base that preceded those of Donald Trump,

labeling Obama as the “food-stamp president” and warning, “I am convinced that if we do not decisively win the struggle over the nature of America, by the time [my grandchildren] are my age they will be in a secular atheist country, potentially one dominated by radical Islamists and with no understanding of what it once meant to be an American” (Salzer, 2012). Despite these appeals, Gingrich departed with Trump on the issue of Obama’s place of birth saying that the Republican Party should not be “distracted” by the then-reality TV star’s outlandish claims, and that “We believe this is an American born, job killing president” (Friedman, 2012).

Until Gingrich’s victory, the winner of South Carolina’s GOP presidential primary had gone on to win the Republican nomination in every contest between 1980 and 2008. After abandoning the campaign once it became clear Romney would win the nomination, Gingrich lamented that he had “broken their tradition of always picking the nominee” and will feel “slightly guilty” when visiting South Carolina (*ABC News*, 2012). Despite Romney’s weakness in the primary, South Carolina was not competitive in the 2012 general election. Although Obama performed relatively well in the Midlands around Columbia, in the PeeDee, extending across the Black Belt and into Florence County, and in Charleston—while generating strong levels of support among Black voters which exceeded white turnout by nearly six-percentage points—Romney carried the state by a margin of nearly 11-percentage points or 205,700 votes.

Owing to the state’s growth, in 2012, South Carolina also added Tom Rice as the inaugural congressman to serve in the newly created 7th District, built around fast-growing Horry County and the PeeDee region. Rice defeated former lieutenant governor, André Bauer in the runoff by 12-percentage points, before winning the general election with a vote share of 56% over Democratic candidate Gloria Tinubu, who state GOP chair Chad Connelly called: “a radical, left-wing candidate with strong ties to the Green Party and AFL-CIO union bosses” (Connelly, 2012).

Tinubu was an Atlanta transplant, who previously served on the Atlanta City Council and in the Georgia state House.

The GOP's loss of the 2012 presidential election marked the fifth time in six cycles—dating back to 1992—that the Republican presidential standard bearer had lost the national popular vote to his Democratic opponent, prompting a wave of soul searching within the party's political ranks. This culminated in the production of an autopsy report by the RNC, named the “Growth and Opportunity Project” (*ABC News*, 2013). South Carolina's national committeeman, Glenn McCall, was selected to helm the effort.

McCall, who is Black, said that as “the co-chair of the Growth and Opportunity Project,” he concluded that the party needed to be “bringing more youth to the polls, and reaching out to people that we haven't in the past, especially African Americans [and] Hispanics, taking our message to the community. They may not join the party, but they may take a second look at our candidates” (McCall, 2014). McCall continued, “So, as we kind of rebrand the party, I see the [RNC] as being... I enjoy it much more so than when I first came on [in 2008,] because it was stuffy, it was, you know, it was almost like entitlement and they—really, before you could get any significant committee assignment... you had to have seniority if you will, and move up from the seniority chart on the committee, and that's not the case now” (Ibid).

Following the 2012 general election, South Carolina's junior U.S. senator, Jim DeMint, resigned to accept a position as president of The Heritage Foundation, a leading conservative think tank based in Washington, DC. Explaining his decision, DeMint said: “I honestly believe I can do a lot more on the outside than I can do on the inside” (Raju, 2012). At the time of his abrupt resignation, DeMint was considered the leading Tea Party voice in the U.S. Senate (Ibid). Expounding on his misgivings about serving in the Senate, DeMint explained:

Two years after I got in the Senate, we lost the majority. Obama was elected and we lost more seats. But the Republicans were still of the mind of, “Let’s compromise. As long as we can get spending and earmarks,” so I really became frustrated with the party and started the Senate Conservatives Fund, which was kind of unprecedented in the Senate for a member to actually fund challengers to sitting senators. And I was kind of fanning the flames of the initial Tea Party element. And I worked that around South Carolina a lot... And that’s when I think we really began to change the party back home.

When people like Governor Haley could get elected. I mean, it was just totally a Tea Party [victory]... The grassroots element of the Republican Party and the conservative element, I think, began to have a lot more sway in the state and that still is a work in progress and always will be...

So, I’m not so much pro-Republican as I am pro-conservative, and I want to make sure that there’s a party in this country that represents the Constitution, that represents “we the people.” And so, you’ll see that I’m as much of a critic sometimes of Republicans as I am of Democrats. Democrats are kind of a lost cause, in my mind, but Republicans need to be true to their platform, and that’s—that’s where we keep pushing (DeMint, 2014).

Within days of DeMint’s resignation, Haley appointed then-1st District Congressman Tim Scott to fill the vacated U.S. Senate seat, with a 2014 special election scheduled to give voters the opportunity to weigh in before the term expired in 2016. Pundits noted that Scott’s “selection is little surprise,” and “made sense for the appointment for a whole host of reasons, including his close relationships with Haley and DeMint and his ties to both the conservative base and the party establishment” (Blake & Cillizza, 2012). Early in his political career, Scott pointedly declared that “The Republican Party by and large has been a racist organization and still to this day exists as a racist organization to a large extent,” however, “Being a Republican shouldn’t mean being a racist. I don’t think it should be an oxymoron for a Black to be a Republican. It should mean that you are pro-business, pro-family and that you are anti-tax” (Bade et al., 2023).

Scott’s appointment subsequently triggered a 2013 U.S. House special election to fill his unexpired term representing South Carolina’s 1st District. Ultimately, the vacancy gave Mark Sanford an opportunity for political redemption. In a May 2013 special election, Sanford defeated

a 16-candidate GOP field before claiming victory over first-time Democratic candidate Elizabeth Colbert Busch.

2014 TO 2018: SOUTH CAROLINA USHERS IN THE TRUMP ERA

After the previous two cycles saw considerable turnover at the state and federal levels, South Carolina's 2014 primary and general elections resulted in most major officeholders holding onto their elected positions. With Governor Haley as well as U.S. Senators Lindsey Graham and Tim Scott all on the ballot, the 2014 election cycle serves as a key inflection point that demonstrates, both, the changing identity of the South Carolina Republican Party and the rising importance of party primaries over general elections as two-party competition continued to diminish. Among the most notable changes at the state level was the resignation of long-time state House Speaker Bobby Harrell, who abandoned his post in October of 2014, after being indicted on charges that he misused hundreds of thousands of dollars in campaign funds.

Just two years earlier, in 2012, the state's independently elected lieutenant governor Ken Ard who shared the ballot with Haley in 2010, was indicted and forced to resign after he was cited with 107 ethics violations for authorizing and reimbursing illegal campaign expenditures. These instances of public corruption helped to tilt the dynamic of state politics further toward already-strong anti-establishment headwinds that had been brewing. As these trends took hold, South Carolina's political environment became an ideal launching pad for Trump's political movement and anti-immigrant rhetoric.

Between Graham's first reelection campaign in 2008 and his campaign for a third term in 2014, South Carolina's senior senator continued undeterred in his advocacy for comprehensive immigration reform. Despite the objections of loyalists like South Carolina's RNC committeewoman Cindy Costa, who called the attempts "foolish," Graham was repeatedly

censured by county parties across the state “for not being Republican enough” (*Associated Press*, 2014). Graham’s strong standing and political savvy enabled the state’s senior senator to endure an extended period of tension with South Carolina GOP political activists, as the party’s right flank expressed displeasure with Graham’s moderate approach on issues like comprehensive immigration reform but came up short in efforts to defeat him.

The local GOP organizations voting to censure Graham between 2008 and 2014 included: Anderson County (2013), Charleston County (2009 and 2014), Chesterfield County (2014), Fairfield County (2014), Greenville County (2014), Lexington County (2010), and Pickens County (2014). In 2014, the censorship resolution used by most of the participating counties decried that Graham had committed “a long series of actions that we strongly disapprove of and hold to be fundamentally inconsistent with the principles of the South Carolina Republican Party” (*FITSNews*, 2014). Then-Horry County GOP Chairman Robert Rabon described that he was strongly opposed to censuring Graham at the time, despite an effort from local activists to join the efforts led by other counties across the state. Rabon explained:

I said, “look folks, I’m opposed to that because it accomplishes nothing. You get to censure him in June, you can vote for [or against] him in the primary, that’s what we have a primary for.” But anyway, they pressed upon it and pressed upon it, and then they were bringing it up to a vote. And so, I polled the people, and tried to find who the people were, and we defeated them 43 to 27.

And Lindsey comes to me and told me, he said “you really helped me. You saved my butt.” But one of the things that I did, I went to our [General Assembly] delegation, House and Senate members, and I got a resolution done and got them to sign it opposing the censure because I said, “This is not about Lindsey Graham. This has nothing to do with Lindsey Graham. It’s about the idea of dividing the party” (Rabon, 2014).

No longer viewed with the same untouchable aura of previous cycles, Graham attracted six challengers in the 2014 primary, led by then-state Senator Lee Bright. Ultimately, Graham emerged victorious, clearing the majority threshold to avoid a runoff with 57% of the vote.

Although Graham far surpassed his nearest challenger by a margin of 42-points, the race against the field was the closest contest of his career. Running in the same cycle for his first full six-year term, Tim Scott declined to publicly endorse Graham ahead of the primary, saying that his focus was on his own race, which he won by a massive margin of 90% to 10% (Raju, 2014).

During his campaign, Graham castigated the earlier notion promoted by his former colleague Jim DeMint, saying, “You know who wants 30 pure Republicans? [Democratic Senate leader] Harry Reid” (Ibid). He continued: “What I want is a party that can grow... What’s my big sin: 1-in-10 [votes defecting from the party line]? If we’re going to build the party around universal agreement, we become a club” (Ibid). The argument resonated with his financial supporters, and Graham outraised his closest primary opponent by a margin greater than 29-1, offering advice for his opponents that, “Ideological people don’t give you a whole lot of money” (Open Secrets, 2014; Raju, 2014).

In the 2014 general election, Graham easily defeated long-time state Senator Brad Hutto (1996-present) by 55% to 39%. At the time, former South Carolina party chair (1971-80) and national Democratic Party chairman (1995-1997) Don Fowler remarked: “Lindsey Graham is the very best senator you could possibly elect in South Carolina right now. Anybody more moderate or liberal than he is couldn’t get elected. I mean [that] literally. And, you know, he’s trying to act conservative in the last year or two to put him in a position to win [in 2014...] I mean you sort of get that flavor by how many Republicans are running against him this year” (Fowler, 2014).

That same cycle, Scott was elected to complete DeMint’s unexpired term by a margin of 24-percentage points, outrunning Graham by 105,600 votes. Scott improved on Graham’s margins statewide, winning 17,800 more votes in conservative bulwarks like Greenville, while also

narrowing Democratic margins from Graham's performance in more traditionally liberal areas such as Richland (+5,100) and Orangeburg (+1,900).

In 2014, just as in 2010, Nikki Haley ranked as the statewide GOP candidate registering the lowest margin of victory over her Democratic opponent, Vincent Sheheen. Although Haley's 15-percentage point margin marked a dramatic improvement from her 2010 performance, she underperformed all other Republicans on the statewide ballot. Haley's 180,500 margin of victory even trailed that of non-incumbent statewide candidates, including McMaster and Spearman. Running in 2014 to serve as the independently elected lieutenant governor, McMaster reflected on some of the weaknesses that Haley had in her 2010 campaign, which remained areas of concern in 2014. "After I was out in 2010, in the runoff I sided with her because I knew that a lot of the more moderate Republicans were going to desert her. And so, a lot of those were my people, so I endorsed her and that kept them from moving away from her... A lot of the business leaders, and a lot of those were Gresham [Barrett's] people, but a lot of them were mine as well... so I tried to jump in to hold them in. And I think—I'm told—it worked. I think it did, but you've got to have a unified party. If your party splits, you lose" (McMaster, 2014).

Continuing in Sanford's tradition of governing to the right of the General Assembly, Haley regularly clashed with legislative leaders. Just before the general election—in October of 2014—then-Speaker of the state House, Bobby Harrell resigned and pleaded guilty to charges of embezzling nearly \$300,000 in campaign funds (McCue, 2014). Harrell was once described as holding "perhaps the most concentrated amount of power of any state lawmaker in the country," and strongly clashed with Haley over issues ranging from ethics reform to the state budget (Hutchins, 2014).

Following Harrell's resignation, he was succeeded by Jay Lucas, the 15-year veteran lawmaker and then-House Speaker Pro Tempore, who served in that role through 2022. Detailing the differences in leadership style between the legislative leaders, *Associated Press* reporter Jeffrey Collins wrote, "Harrell played favorites, ignored Democrats and wasn't very receptive to different opinions. The House's relationship with the governor suffered, but in no small part because of Gov. Nikki Haley, who was occupying the mansion at the time. Lucas had a different approach. He ran a kinder, gentler House and seemed to know the families, likes, dislikes and proclivities of each of the other 123 members" (2022).

Meanwhile, throughout the duration of Haley's governorship and until he died at age 90 while serving in his 41st year as a member of South Carolina's upper chamber, the state Senate was led by Hugh Leatherman. In 2016, Haley attempted to oust Leatherman, endorsing his opponent in the Republican primary, saying "Florence deserves new leadership that fixes our roads and delivers tax relief; instead of funding legislative pay raises and pet projects" (Brown, 2016). After easily vanquishing his Haley-endorsed primary opponent by a 13-percentage point margin, Leatherman was reelected without opposition in the 2016 general election and in 2020. Notably, McMaster—serving at the time as lieutenant governor—departed from Haley and endorsed the powerful state senator in the 2016 primary race.

Like Sanford, Haley regularly alienated Republican members of the General Assembly. These skirmishes with the General Assembly contributed to a lack of enthusiasm for Haley's 2024 presidential campaign, as a number of Haley critics remained active in state politics. South Carolina state Representative Bruce Banner called Haley's governorship "very frustrating," remarking that, "When she was governor, she adopted the Sanford style of being governor, which

was to be an absolutist on her policy positions, and she was unwilling to negotiate or compromise even when that would move the ball forward on an issue” (Bustos, 2023).

One of the lone unifying points of Haley’s governorship came after the horrific massacre perpetrated by white supremacist Dylann Roof, who killed nine members of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, called “Mother Emanuel,” including state senator and reverend Clementa Pinckney. Fifty-four years earlier, in 1961, South Carolina’s leaders had placed the Confederate Battle Flag atop the state House dome to commemorate the centennial anniversary of the Civil War, where it remained for decades. After the racially motivated mass shooting, Haley made headlines nationally by calling for and leading the effort to remove the Confederate symbol from the grounds of the Capitol. Media reports noted that, “Haley supported the flag before the shooting, but the Republican had a change of heart in the days after the killings, urging legislators to pass a bill before the end of the summer” of 2015 (Collins & Kinnard, 2015). Prior to the removal, Congressman James Clyburn noted that, “The Republican Party used the Confederate battle flag to organize around. They put questions in their primary on that fight to draw people into the primary... and that whole flag issue taught me a lot about the prevailing political thought in South Carolina” (Clyburn, 2014).

Indeed, in 1994, GOP primary voters were asked to weigh in on a ballot question asking whether the flag “is a racist symbol...[or] is representative of Southern history and heritage” (Scoppe 2015). Approximately 76% of GOP primary voters expressed support for continuing to flag the Confederate flag as a symbol of heritage in that non-binding referendum. Four years later, in 1996, then-GOP governor David Beasley lost his bid for reelection after asking the South Carolina legislature to remove the flag from the statehouse. In the 1998 cycle, internal division

among Republicans, in part because of Beasley's advocacy against the Confederate flag, was blamed for playing a role in the governor's loss to Democrat Jim Hodges (Beasley, 2015).

In 2000, under Hodges and with the General Assembly's cooperation, the flag was moved from atop the Capitol dome to a tall brass pole on the statehouse grounds. Senator Vincent Sheheen echoed other critics in describing the change as "moved from the top to in your face," as the flag became a distinctive feature of the Palmetto State's Capitol complex (Sheheen, 2015). Fifteen years later, Haley's leadership was seen as integral to the removal of the battle flag altogether. In the wake of the mass shooting, she cast her position on the issue as one of empathy, saying "No one should ever drive by the Statehouse and feel pain. No one should ever drive by the Statehouse and feel like they don't belong" (Scoppe, 2015). With the Palmetto State's debate over the Confederate flag still echoing through the national political discourse, the 2016 presidential primary race began in earnest.

Through a campaign that spanned a duration of less than six-months, Lindsey Graham became the first South Carolinian since Carroll Campbell to seek his party's presidential nomination. After a disappointing effort, Graham concluded, "At the end of the day, I'm not going to be competitive in my state... [and] I'm not going to be competitive outside my state" (Bolduan, 2015). Much of the attention that his campaign did attract centered on his criticism of Donald Trump, whom he called "a race-baiting xenophobic bigot," who "doesn't represent my party" (Thrush, 2021).

Early on in the 2016 race, former Florida governor Jeb Bush was considered the race's frontrunner, raising over \$100 million through his Right to Rise super PAC, as he aimed to repeat the strategy employed by his father, George H.W. Bush, who—with the help of Lee Atwater—made South Carolina his campaign's firewall (Hohmann, 2015). One of Trump's earliest, highest

profile supporters in the nation was then-lieutenant governor, Henry McMaster, who endorsed his presidential bid at a February 2016 rally, saying “He speaks the truth as he sees it in words everybody understands. And, ladies and gentlemen, that’s something unusual in politics” (Kinnard, 2016). After the endorsement, longtime McMaster aide, Trey Walker, tweeted: “No one in SC politics is more disappointed than me” (Ibid).

Beating up on Jeb Bush in the lead up to the South Carolina presidential primary was a core part of the contrast Trump presented with the traditional GOP establishment. At a debate in Greenville just before South Carolinians cast their ballots, Trump said of Bush, whom he dubbed “low energy Jeb,” that “The weakest person on this stage by far on illegal immigration is Jeb Bush... he’s so weak on illegal immigration it’s laughable” (CBS, 2016). Trump piled on by later attacking his brother’s presidency, saying that George W. Bush’s decision to wage wars in Iraq and Afghanistan was “a disgrace and an embarrassment” (Ibid). Ed McMullen, Trump’s 2016 South Carolina campaign chairman, called the campaign’s rallies the centerpiece of its strategy and claimed that the average attendance for each event was between 7,000 to 10,000 people (Dawsey & Bauerlein, 2016).

Another unconventional aspect of Trump’s strategy was avoiding appeals to the evangelical community that were previously a hallmark of successful campaigns, including his decision to skip a forum at Bob Jones University that the other major candidates attended (Ibid). That year, 67% of the state’s GOP voters identified as white evangelicals (National Election Pool, 2016C). Ultimately, Trump emerged victorious, claiming South Carolina’s winner-take-all presidential primary with 32.5% of the vote, compared to 22.5% for Marco Rubio, 22.3% for Ted Cruz, and Jeb Bush finishing a distant fourth at just 7.8%. Immediately following the disappointing finish, Bush exited the race.

Trump's vote share was largest in Horry County, where he won 49.2%, as he swept 44-of-46 counties, while narrowly coming in second to Rubio only in Richland and Charleston. Fourth district Congressman William Timmons referenced Trump's decision to release a list of potential appointments to the Supreme Court as a decisive move that helped the GOP to coalesce around him. Timmons said that beforehand, "inevitably, they're just like, 'well, he's not conservative. He's not pro-life. He's been back and forth. But then he released his names of justices that he would consider and that was a core issue for evangelicals, and they were quick to forgive'" (Timmons, 2022).

Following Trump's 2016 victory, South Carolina saw the most significant shifts in both the makeup of the state's top elected representatives and in the ways that those leaders presented their platforms to voters. No politician's reversal to embrace Trump was starker than that of Lindsey Graham. After Trump won South Carolina's 2016 primary Graham declared: "Donald is like being shot in the head... I'm saying my party's completely screwed up" (*The Daily Show*, 2020). However, Graham quickly became one of the 45th President's most ardent defenders, later saying that his message to Trump would be, "I love you" (*Meet the Press*, 2024). Graham's turn offers support for hypothesis 1A. For his part, Trump has returned the favor. In 2024, Trump introduced the state's senior senator to audible boos and shouts of "traitor", saying, "He happens to be a little bit, uh, further left than some of the people on this stage, but I always say, 'when I'm in trouble on the left, I call up Lindsey Graham and he straightens it out so fast.'" As the boos grew louder, Trump added, "No, no, no, remember, remember, I love him, he's a good man. Come up here Lindsey!" (The Recount, 2024). Further, in May of 2025, Trump granted Graham an early endorsement ahead of his 2026 reelection, rewarding his continued allegiance.

After Trump was vaulted to the presidency and assumed office in January of 2017, he elevated Nikki Haley—then six years into her governorship—to serve as ambassador to the United Nations. Of Haley’s appointment, Trump later said: “I gave her the position. But I gave it to her much more so because I wanted Henry McMaster, who was the lieutenant governor, to be the governor of South Carolina” (Sockol, 2024). Indeed, with Haley’s resignation, McMaster was sworn in as governor, where he would complete the two remaining years of Haley’s second term before seeking his first full term in 2018. Trump’s statement demonstrates how he worked to elevate his supporters in sometimes unconventional ways and offers evidence for hypothesis H1B.

Another South Carolinian, Mick Mulvaney, was tapped by Trump first to serve as director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) from 2017 to 2019 and then as acting White House chief of staff between January 2019 and March 2020. Mulvaney’s departure created an opening for then-state Representative Ralph Norman to win a special election to complete his unexpired term serving the 5th Congressional District. Discussing the 2017 race, in which Norman faced off against fellow state Representative and then-House President Pro Tempore Tommy Pope, he described:

It was tight. And, you know, part of our district—if you look at the South part—is farmers, down to earth people. [Suburban] Charlotte, York County, which makes up the bulk of 725,000 people [along with] Lancaster [County] is hardworking people, a lot of them in manufacturing jobs, a lot of them that own their own businesses... And the turning point came when the Freedom Caucus got involved... See the Chamber of Commerce spent close to a million dollars against me. Gowdy came out [against me]—and Gowdy’s real popular. And you don’t forget those things at all (Norman, 2022).

In the first round of voting, Pope narrowly finished ahead of Norman—taking 30.4% to 30.1%—in a seven-candidate field. Norman largely self-funded his primary campaign, loaning more than \$300,000 to seed the effort. After Pope said he was unlikely to join the Freedom Caucus, Norman

exploited the issue with the support of the conservative outside group, Club for Growth Action, which ran ads on behalf of his campaign.

Honing his message in the closing stretch, Norman said, “if you’re interested in duplicating what Mick Mulvaney did, the choice is obviously me,” citing the fact that Mulvaney served as a co-founder of the House Freedom Caucus in January of 2015, which was created with the aim of pushing the GOP conference to the right and decentralizing political power from leadership (Pathé, 2017). When the final votes were tallied, Norman bested Pope by a margin of just over 200 votes. As the first special election contest in the Trump era—held on the same day as the race to succeed Rep. Tom Price in Georgia’s 6th District—the general election was unusually competitive, with Norman defeating first-time Democratic candidate Archie Parnell by a margin of three-percentage points. When the two met for a general election rematch in November of 2018, Norman won by 16-percentage points. Although Parnell came up short, this is one of the few examples offering at least some evidence for a resurgence in two party competition, as South Carolina Democrats have generally lost ground electorally during the period of this study.

The 2018 election cycle saw two new additions to South Carolina’s congressional delegation. In the 4th District, after placing second in a 10-candidate field to replace outgoing Rep. Trey Gowdy, William Timmons defeated former state Senator Lee Bright by a margin of nearly nine percentage points. Bright, the conservative gadfly who previously challenged Graham in 2014, made a long list of enemies by taking inflammatory positions while in the legislature, making a statement saying, “if at first you don’t secede, try again” and staunchly defending the placement of the Confederate flag atop the statehouse (Smith, 2016). Prior to running for Congress, Bright had lost a 2016 primary for reelection to serve a third term in the state Senate to Republican Scott Talley, saying at the time, “I knew I had collected so many enemies that winning re-election was

going to be really hard” (Ibid). Of Bright’s style, Timmons opined, “he believes what he says, he’s just a poor advocate. He can literally say something that you firmly agree with, but he’ll say it in a way that makes you cringe... my campaign slogan for the runoff was ‘conservative not crazy,’ and he very much had painted himself into a little bit of a box” (Timmons, 2022).

In the Charleston-based 1st District, after Mark Sanford provoked Trump’s ire—then at the height of his presidency—Trump issued an endorsement just ahead the primary, tweeting: “Mark Sanford has been very unhelpful to me in my campaign to MAGA. He is MIA and nothing but trouble. He is better off in Argentina. I fully endorse Katie Arrington for Congress in SC, a state I love... VOTE Katie!” (Trump, 2018). Arrington defeated Sanford by less than 2,700 votes, a margin of 4.1-percentage points. Commenting on the defeat, Dan Hanlon, who served as chief of staff to Nancy Mace (2022-23), pointed to another reason for Sanford’s loss: “he was cheap. He had \$1.3 million in his [campaign] account, and he didn’t spend a dime of it. And he didn’t take it seriously until the last few weeks and went ‘oh crap.’ That’s the only reason why he lost. He could have still been in his seat right now... He got lazy, that’s really what it is. And then you saw what happened... Katie couldn’t win the seat because that crazy Republicanism is not attractive [in the district]” (Hanlon, 2022).

In fact, Sanford retained \$1.3 million at the end of the 2018 election cycle, after spending just \$509,000 between 2017 to 2018 (Open Secrets, 2018). In the 2018 general election, Arrington was narrowly defeated by Charleston attorney Joe Cunningham, losing by 4,000 votes—a margin of 1.4-percentage points. This short-lived victory (2019-2021) marked the lone breakthrough of the decade for South Carolina Democrats.

At the state level, with Trump’s endorsement, Henry McMaster bested a five-candidate field in the first round of voting, winning 42.3% of the vote and outperforming his closest

competitor, John Warren, by 14.5-percentage points. Two weeks later, in the runoff, McMaster secured victory with 53.6%. Trump aided in the campaign, tweeting multiple times on McMaster's behalf and sending Mike Pence to campaign with him. Trump also staged a pre-election rally in Columbia and urged South Carolinians to "get your asses out tomorrow and vote," demonstrating his dedication to the effort by saying, "I have never taken a longer trip ever to South Carolina" as storms complicated his flight path (Thomas & Superville, 2018).

McMaster subsequently defeated Democratic state Representative James Smith in the 2018 general election by an eight-percentage point margin, as Republicans swept all statewide elected offices. Although substantial, McMaster's general election performance was not impressive. With a margin of 137,200 votes, he trailed all six other statewide GOP candidates to secure his first full term as governor. Notably, 2018 marked the first instance in which the state's governor and lieutenant governor were elected as part of the same ticket after the state enacted a constitutional amendment to end the practice of independent elections for the state's second highest office, which has no formal constitutional responsibilities outside of serving in the line of succession to the governor.

2020 TO 2024: SOUTH CAROLINA REPUBLICANS LINE UP FOR TRUMP

With Republicans firmly entrenched as the governing party, dominating races up and down the ballot in South Carolina, the election cycles between 2020 and 2024 brought few changes to major elected offices across the Palmetto State, outside of modest gains for the GOP and the further entrenchment of pro-Trump Republicans. Rewarding Graham's loyalty, ahead of the 2020 primary contest featuring three far lower profile competitors, Trump endorsed his campaign, tweeting: "Senator @LindseyGrahamSC is a good friend and a strong voice for the people of South Carolina... Lindsey has my Complete and Total Endorsement" (Coleman, 2020). Joining Trump

in endorsing Graham's 2020 Senate campaign were all eight statewide elected Republicans, who delivered the show of force in the year prior to the election in June of 2019 (Kinnard 2019). The following year, Graham garnered an impressive 68% of the vote, his largest margin of victory in a primary election since he ran unopposed in 2002. Beyond Graham's strong relationship with Trump, South Carolina GOP chairman Drew McKissick praised his defense of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, with Graham as the Chairman of the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee emerging as Kavanaugh's strongest defender during the captivating, widely televised hearings (Brown, 2020).

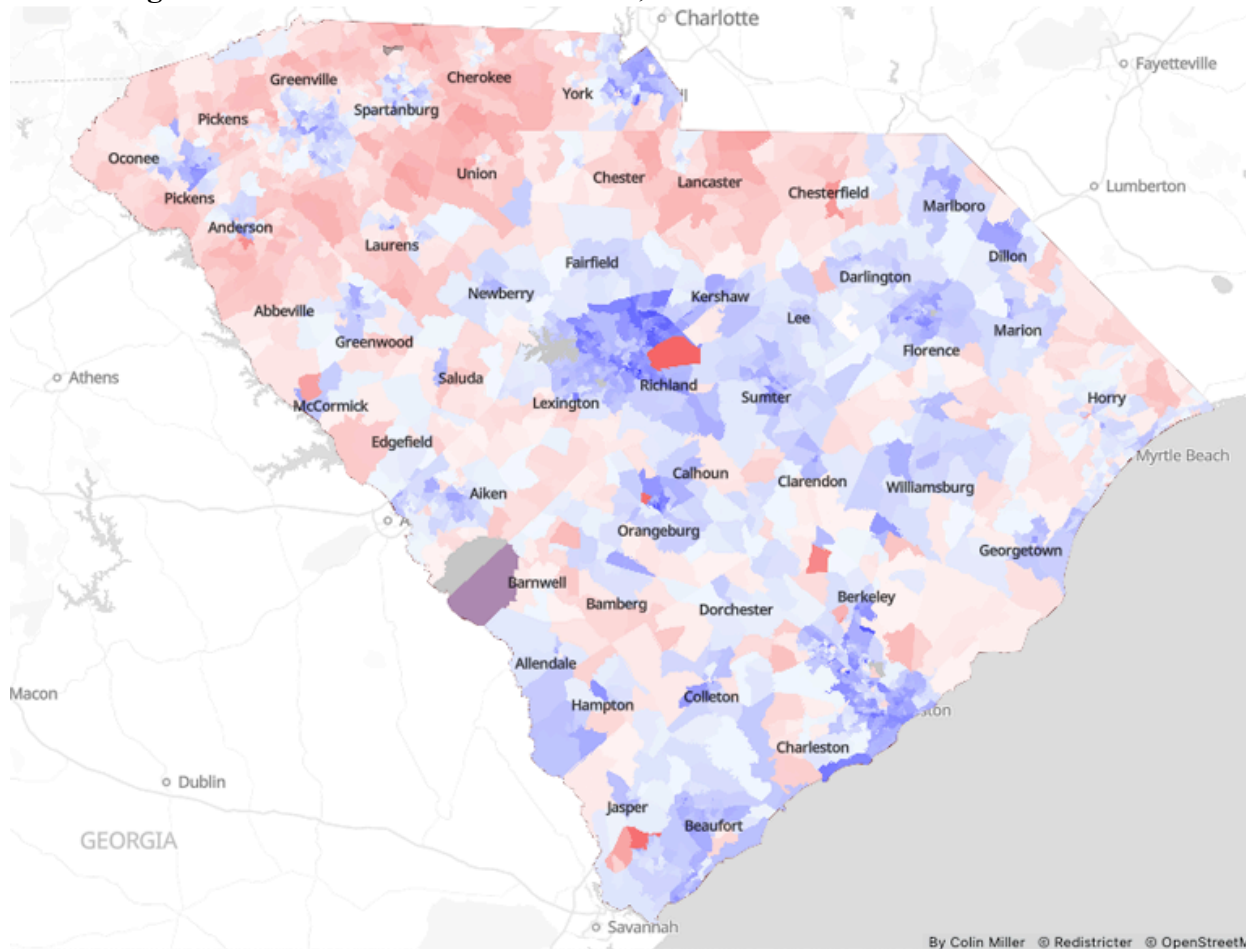
During his previous reelection campaign in 2014, the state's senior senator made waves when, "unprompted," he repeatedly brought up "his support of Obama's nominations of Elena Kagan and Sonya Sotomayor to the Supreme Court," arguing that senators "should weigh only nominees' qualifications, not their ideological bent" (Raju, 2014). Eight years later, he described the Senate's hearings of Kavanaugh as "hell" and accused Democratic members of wanting to "destroy this guy's life," so that they could "hold this seat open and hope [they] win in 2020" (Freking, 2018). Graham's strong support of Kavanaugh's confirmation reinvigorated his status as "a new darling of the GOP," who was invited to barnstorm "for candidates throughout the country in 2018" (Kinnard, 2019). Paired with his newfound support for Trump, these hearings offered Graham a high-profile opportunity to demonstrate how he had changed politically in response to the events around him.

Graham's general election opponent in 2020 was former South Carolina Democratic Party chairman, Jaime Harrison, who significantly outraised him with \$130 million on behalf of his campaign to Graham's \$109 million (OpenSecrets, 2020). Harrison was "widely seen as the most formidable foe that Graham [had] faced in his long political career," and staked his campaign on

a message that voters “in South Carolina know that the principled, statesman Lindsey Graham of the past has been replaced with a person more focused on political games than on fixing the longstanding issues plaguing our state” (Brown, 2020). After Supreme Court Associate Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died just seven weeks before the 2020 presidential election, Graham led the Senate Judiciary Committee to confirm her conservative replacement, Amy Coney Barrett, in record time—within just 30-days of her announcement as Trump’s nominee (Campisi & Cole, 2022).

Previously Graham had said that, if a vacancy occurred in the last year of a president’s term, he would say “let the next president, whoever it might be, make that nomination” (Schwartz, 2020). However, during the Kavanaugh hearings, Graham changed his mind, saying “We’ve got the votes to confirm Justice Ginsburg’s replacement before the election... [and] We’re going to... vote before the election. That’s the constitutional process” (Linton, 2020). In line with his central message that Graham had changed, Harrison attempted to exploit the message in the closing weeks of the election, tweeting “My grandpa always said that a man is only as good as his word. Senator Graham, you have proven that your word is worthless” (Harrison, 2020).

Figure 4.10 Graham Defeats Harrison, U.S. Senate Shift from 2008 to 2020



Source: Redistricter.com, created by author.

Despite Harrison's relative statewide strength in comparison to recent Democratic campaigns—in addition to his prolific fundraising and ability to garner attention from local and national media—Graham prevailed in 2020 by a margin greater than 10-percentage points. Figure 4.10 demonstrates the shift by precinct between the 2008 and 2020 races for U.S. Senate, in which Graham was on the ballot, where Harrison improved on the statewide performance of Bob Conley by 5-percentage points. While Harrison made significant inroads in the state's Midlands, across the Black Belt, and on the coast, Graham also improved his margins in traditionally GOP precincts across the 3rd, 4th, and 5th congressional districts, registering a strong performance throughout the traditionally conservative Upstate. With Trump also on the ballot for his reelection bid, Graham's

performance closely matched that of Trump, who won a marginally higher share of support, finishing about 0.6-percentage points, or 16,000 votes, ahead of the three term South Carolina senator.

Harrison's reward for his strong fundraising effort, in addition to his staunch support of Joe Biden, was a 2021 appointment to serve as chairman of the Democratic National Committee (DNC). Following his four-year tenure atop the DNC (2021-2025), Harrison later complained, "I feel like, as chair, my voice was not always heard, that I was taken for granted. I was seen as somebody to just rubber-stamp and not to actually have a seat at the table to influence certain things" (Rodriguez, 2025). After his decision not to seek reelection as chairman, Harrison expressed concern that Black voters had been taken for granted by the Democratic party, saying, "We can't just be nice ornaments" (Ibid).

The 2020 presidential election was uneventful in South Carolina—with Trump's 12-percentage point victory representing the third consecutive double-digit GOP margin of victory at the top of the ballot. However, for approximately eight weeks, between September and November of 2019, Mark Sanford stepped up as Trump's top intra-party challenger for the GOP nomination. Running on a platform focused on the national debt and increasing deficits under Trump's watch, Sanford struggled to gain traction and raised just \$100,000 for his campaign. In an announcement ending his campaign, Sanford described that he hoped to run an issue-focused campaign but found that Trump's first impeachment had made his "goal of making the debt, deficit and spending issue a part of this presidential debate impossible right now" (Buck, 2019). Sanford explained that "Impeachment noise has moved what was hard to herculean as nearly everything in Republican Party politics is currently viewed through the prism of impeachment" (Ibid). Indeed, with GOP

voters rallying around an embattled president, Sanford's campaign only further cemented his exile from the Republican Party.

At the start of the 2022 legislative session, 14 members of South Carolina's House launched a state chapter of the Freedom Caucus, aiming to push the caucus to the right on abortion, expansions of gun rights, tax cuts, and other conservative priorities. That June, with support from the Freedom Caucus, first-time candidate Robert Harris unseated 28-year incumbent and chairwoman of the House Education and Public Works Committee, Rita Allison, defeating her by a margin of approximately 200 votes (7.8 percentage points) in a low turnout primary. During the next cycle, in 2024, House GOP assistant majority leader Jay West was defeated by Freedom Caucus aligned candidate Lee Gilreath, while 20-year incumbent Bill Sandifer was defeated by novice candidate Adam Duncan and moderate Republican Jerry Carter was defeated by former Pickens County Republican Chairman Phillip Bowers (Thompson & Reynolds, 2024).

At the federal level, in 2022, South Carolina's Republican primary voters initially delivered mixed results for Trump as Nancy Mace defeated Trump-endorsed Katie Arrington in the 1st Congressional District, while Tom Rice—who supported impeaching the 45th President in the wake of the events on January 6, 2021—was defeated by Russell Fry with Trump's support. Meanwhile, McMaster easily defeated his lone primary challenger Harrison Musselwhite by a 67-percentage point margin and Tim Scott ran uncontested without a GOP opponent. In the 2022 general election, McMaster significantly improved upon his previous eight-percentage point margin, this time securing 58% of the vote with running mate Pamela Evette against Joe Cunningham, as Tim Scott was comfortably reelected with 63%.

The remainder of South Carolina's congressional officeholders won reelection to serve through 2024, as Clyburn once again remained the lone Democrat in the seven member House

delegation. Furthermore, the 2022 election resulted in a Republican supermajority in the South Carolina state House for the first time since Reconstruction, as the GOP netted seven seats to claim an 88-seat majority in the 124-member chamber. McKissick, the Republican Party chairman, gloated: “the ‘Red Wave’ came and swept in along the coast and went all the way to the Upstate, proving, yet again, what we already know, that South Carolina is a solid Republican state” (Pollard, 2022).

Nancy Mace cut her teeth in the 2014 U.S. Senate GOP primary against Lindsey Graham, placing fifth with just 6.2% before winning election to represent the Charleston-based 99th District in the state House in 2018. In between these campaigns, in 2016, she served as a multistate field director working in support of Trump’s first presidential bid in 2016. After defeating Joe Cunningham to reclaim the 1st Congressional District for Republicans in 2020—winning by just 5,400 votes or 1%—South Carolina Republicans enacted a redistricting plan that shifted approximately 30,000 Black Charleston residents out of the 1st district and into Clyburn’s neighboring 6th District, which grew to stretch over 125 miles in length (Kruzel & Chung, 2024).

In the next cycle, Mace won reelection by 38,000 votes or 14-percentage points. In 2022, Trump decried Mace as “nasty, disloyal, and bad for the Republican Party,” as he waged war on members of his party who criticized him in the wake of January 6th (Ward, 2022). The day after the attack on the U.S. Capitol, Mace had commented to the media that Trump’s “entire legacy was wiped out yesterday,” and that Republicans have “got to start over” (Forgey, 2021). Following Trump’s endorsement of Katie Arrington against her in February of 2022, Mace shot a campaign video outside of Trump Tower in New York, in which she reminded viewers, “I remember in 2015 when President Trump announced his run. I was one of his earliest supporters, I actually worked for the campaign... in seven different states,” while strongly praising his record (Mace, 2022A).

Responding directly to Trump’s attempt to oust her, Mace called herself “a constitutionalist” and reflected:

Supporting the former president’s policies was never an issue... it was never an issue for me of policy but more of personality... so we had a constitutional duty to certify the Electoral College because no state offered any legitimate alternative electors—or slate of electors—during that time.

And so, without that, we don't have any other option—no matter what you think of the election. So, if we were to give Democrats that kind of power—you know, if we did it—then, what's to say they won't do it to us in four years when we have [the 2024 election]? ... It's about the balance of power and ensuring that Republicans can win the White House fair and square in the future (Mace, 2022B).

Accounting for the shifting makeup of the 1st District and the reinvigoration of Trump’s standing in the GOP, Mace quickly rebranded herself after the start of the 118th Congress. Within six months of her reelection, media reports noted that, “all of a sudden, Nancy Mace (R-S.C.) has turned into one of former President Donald Trump’s unlikeliest defenders,” as she took to the cable airways in 2023 to call indictments against him “unfair,” saying, “I’m willing to bury the hatchet to save the country, and I know President Trump is too” (Allison, 2023).

Later that year, in October, Mace joined seven House Republicans and the entire Democratic conference to remove GOP Speaker Kevin McCarthy through a motion to vacate the chair. Mace explained her vote, saying, “This isn’t about left vs right... This is about trust and keeping your word... We were promised we would move on women’s issues and legislation to keep our communities safe. Those things never happened” (Mace, 2023). In Mace’s 2022 race, McCarthy held a Charleston fundraiser for her that raised a six-figure sum, and he repeatedly donated to her campaign and supported efforts to elect her (Kinnard, 2022).

After Mace’s decisive vote in support of his removal, her 2022 Trump-endorsed primary opponent Katie Arrington scoffed, “I did text him because he did dump \$3 million into that run to defeat me... He wasted money” (Weissert & Slodysko, 2023). Mace later saw all nine staffers who

worked for her before November of 2023 depart her congressional office, marking a 100% rate of turnover, with her former chief of staff Dan Hanlon even contemplating challenging her in the 2024 GOP primary (Gorman, 2024). Although Hanlon retreated from the race, Mace faced a serious challenge in the 2024 GOP primary from Catherine Templeton, who previously came in third place in a primary challenge to McMaster in 2018.

After she backed Trump against Nikki Haley in January of 2024 ahead of South Carolina's presidential primary—despite the fact that Haley previously stood with Mace in 2022 when she did not have Trump's support—Trump returned the favor later that March, declaring “It is my great honor to Endorse a Strong Conservative Voice for South Carolina's 1st Congressional District. Nancy Mace worked hard campaigning across South Carolina in support of our Record-Breaking WIN” (Beavers, 2024A). Mace's turn offers support for hypothesis H1A and H1B, as she made distinct efforts to solidify her standing with Trump once her chief electoral concern became the GOP primary.

The 2024 presidential primary in South Carolina served as the ultimate test of Trump's GOP support in the Palmetto State, as he vied against two South Carolina Republicans, Nikki Haley and Tim Scott. After a stop in New Hampshire, Trump launched his 2024 comeback campaign in South Carolina, flanked on either side by Gov. Henry McMaster and Sen. Lindsey Graham, along with Congressmen William Timmons, Russell Fry, and Joe Wilson, Lieutenant Governor Pamela Evette, Attorney General Alan Wilson, Treasurer Curtis Loftis, Secretary of State Mark Hammond, and a large group of state legislators (*CSPAN*, 2023).

Scott launched his campaign with an aspirational appeal to his hometown GOP in Charleston County, declaring, “This is not 1865... to think about the country that's made the most progress in the least amount of time, there's no better place to tell that story than the place where

the Civil War started... I understand being treated as a second-class citizen because of the color of my skin. I refuse, refuse to be treated as a second-class citizen because of the color of my party” (Harris, 2023).

Haley struck a similar tone in her opening video, saying of her native Bamberg, South Carolina: “The railroad tracks divided the town by race. I was the proud daughter of Indian immigrants. Not Black, not white. I was different. But my mom would always say your job is not to focus on the differences but the similarities” (Sullivan et al., 2023). The 51-year-old former governor, running against Trump, who would be 78 years old when assuming office, also called for “a new generation of leadership to rediscover fiscal responsibility, secure our border, and strengthen our country, our pride, and our purpose” (Ibid).

Throughout the campaign, Haley led the field in terms of campaign travel to the Palmetto State, visiting 18-times, followed by Scott who made eight-trips and Trump who visited seven-times (Ballotpedia, 2024). In one illuminating interview with Trey Gowdy, in which he was asked whether his campaign was staked on policy differences with Trump or in terms of style, he responded, “I do think this is a message in how we communicate” (Byrd, 2023). Failing to gain traction, Scott withdrew from the campaign by November of 2023, less than six-months after he entered the race. Scott chose to end his campaign on Gowdy’s *Fox News* show, telling the host, who appeared surprised by the announcement, “I think the voters, who are the most remarkable people on the planet, have been really clear that they’re telling me, ‘not now, Tim’” (Stelter 2023).

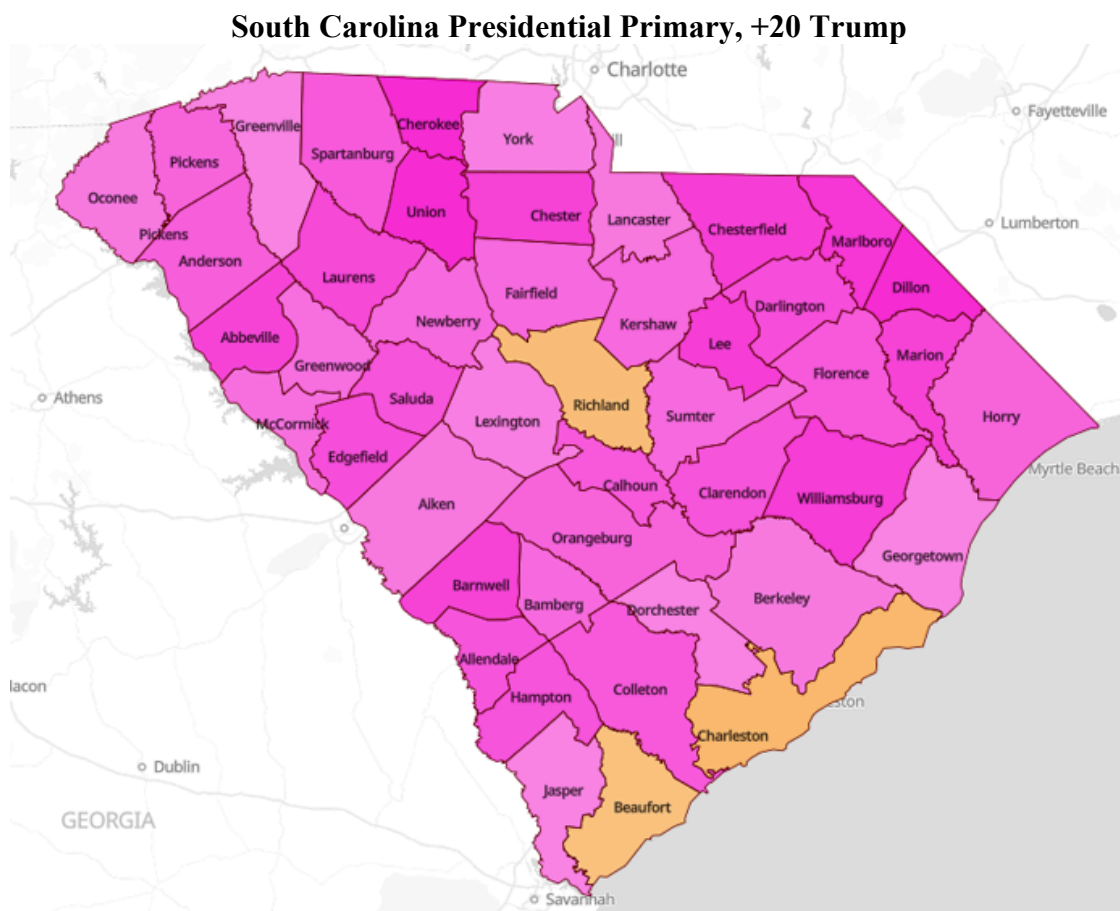
Scott further surprised many of his long-time supporters when he endorsed Trump over Haley ahead of South Carolina’s primary in January of 2024. At a rally with Scott, Trump even remarked, “Did you ever think that she actually appointed you, Tim? And—think of it—appointed and you’re the senator of her state and [he] endorsed me, you must really hate her... it’s a shame”

(Rupar, 2024A). To which, Scott stepped up to the microphone to interject, “I just love you!” (Ibid). Recognizing the awkwardness of the scene, Trump retorted back to the crowd, “That’s why he’s a great politician” (Ibid). Describing the significance of Scott’s decision to endorse Trump against Haley, Whit Ayres commented:

Ambition knows no bounds. And people are willing to prostrate themselves in order to advance their political career... Nikki Haley made Tim Scott. Tim Scott would be nobody without Nikki Haley, literally, nobody. We would never have heard of Tim Scott without Nikki Haley.

He could have kept his mouth shut. He didn't have to endorse Nikki—or Trump. But he owed his entire political career to Nikki Haley, and he stabbed her in the back... That will guarantee you there are a lot of people who respected Tim Scott before that move, who have no respect for him whatsoever now (Ayres, 2024B).

Figure 4.11 Trump Vanquishes Haley in 2024



Source: Redistricter.com, created by author.

For Republicans who had long pined for a one-on-one intra-party race with Trump, Haley's home turf loss marked a painful realization that Trump's continued hold on the GOP would not be broken in 2024. With much of South Carolina's Republican political establishment backing him, Trump easily defeated Haley by a margin greater than 20-percentage points, winning 43-out-of-46 counties. Figure 4.11 shows the scale of Trump's victory, as Haley was only successful in Richland, Charleston, and Beaufort counties.

Haley's acrimonious relationship with the General Assembly during her governorship helped to tilt some South Carolina Republicans against her. Of her lack of endorsements, long-time Haley ally and state Representative Nathan Ballentine commented, "It tells you everything that people like about her... she's not going to be the same old guard that does the same old thing" (Bustos, 2023). Representative Bill Hixon, who served with Haley through the duration of her governorship summed up how her style was received by critics, saying "She has her way, and then a lot of times that didn't agree with the way we were trying to do things in the House or in the Senate" (Ibid). One of Haley's lone high-profile allies, 5th District Congressman Ralph Norman, made the affirmative case for her candidacy, saying "You always know exactly where Nikki stands... From her time in the statehouse and as governor, there was never a shred of doubt she would do what she believed was right... Even as governor, everyone knew she was destined for bigger things" (Laco, 2023).

After running far behind Trump in most GOP primaries—and only winning contests in Washington, D.C. and Vermont—Haley ended her candidacy in March of 2024 following a poor showing on Super Tuesday. Exiting the contest, she declared "It is now up to Donald Trump to earn the votes of those in our party and beyond it who did not support him" (McCormick 2024). Three months later, Haley opened her speech at the 2024 Republican National Convention by

declaring, “I’ll start by making one thing perfectly clear: Donald Trump has my strong endorsement, period” (Arit et al., 2024).

After Trump was elected in 2024, he made it clear that he did not see a place for Haley and her supporters in his administration. In a notice posted to Truth Social, Trump requested: “In order to save time, money, and effort, it would be helpful if you would not send, or recommend to us, people who worked with, or are endorsed by, Americans for No Prosperity (headed by Charles Koch), ‘Dumb as a Rock’ John Bolton, ‘Birdbrain’ Nikki Haley, Mike Pence, disloyal Warmongers Dick Cheney, and his Psycho daughter, Liz, Mitt Romney, Raul Ryan... or any of the other people suffering from Trump Derangement Syndrome” (Katz, 2025). This statement demonstrates how Trump attempted to push Republicans he disagreed with out of the party, including Haley, supporting hypothesis H1.

CONCLUSION

South Carolina’s political transition in recent years is deeply emblematic of the broader trends that have occurred within the national Republican Party, from the rise of the Tea Party between 2008 and 2014 to the consolidation of the GOP behind Donald Trump as its standard-bearer in 2016, 2020, and 2024. After a decade of battles waged largely within the GOP, the contemporary South Carolina Republican Party has fallen firmly in line with Donald Trump (H1, H1A, H1B). As such, GOP primaries have taken center stage as the Palmetto State’s centrally determinative electoral contests. Among 15 Republicans included as part of evaluating hypothesis H1, eight are classified as MAGA Republicans, five are Sometimes Trump Republicans, and two are Anti-Trump Republicans. The lone bright spot for Democrats during the period of this study came in the form of Joe Cunningham’s 2018 upset election to represent the state’s 1st District in

the U.S. House for a single term, a brief victory before Cunningham succumbed to Nancy Mace under lines redrawn by the General Assembly.

This transition is clearly displayed through Trump's effort to coalesce Palmetto State Republicans in support of his comeback bid for president in 2024, the defeat of representatives who dissented against the 45th president such as Tom Rice, and the conversion of once-Trump-skeptical Republicans to become Trump backers, with examples ranging from Lindsey Graham to Tim Scott to Nancy Mace. However, unlike in Georgia, this change has not discernibly improved the prospects of statewide Democrats. Because South Carolina's electorate has also shifted to comprise a smaller share of Black voters—as turnout among Asian and Hispanic voters remains low—the state's electoral patterns also deviate from much of the Growth South. A broader analysis of racial and gender polarization within the electorate is included in Chapter Six.

An initial test of the twelve hypotheses put forward as part of this study finds support for H1, H1A, H1B, H5, as Black elected officials have become a larger share of Democratic officeholders, and H9, as racial polarization has increased among officeholders. I find some support for hypothesis H6, as women have become a larger share of Democratic officeholders but the number of Democratic women serving has essentially remained unchanged. I also find mixed results for hypothesis H10 on gender polarization among officeholders, as women have remained under-represented among both Democrats and Republicans. Support is also presented in response to interrogating hypothesis H2, which nonetheless arouses further questions about when a 30-30 election is sufficient for Democratic victories statewide that are considered in Chapter Six.

Additionally, South Carolina disconfirms H4, which posits that women have become a larger share of those supporting Democratic candidates. Rather, the vote share generated by Democrats among South Carolina women has remained largely flat. South Carolina's political

experience disconfirms hypothesis H3, as Black voters have represented a smaller share of overall Democratic support in recent cycles. Additionally, the data recorded as part of this study disconfirms hypothesis H7 for South Carolina as racial polarization has not significantly increased within the electorate, with some support for hypothesis H8, as the level of gender polarization in the electorate has increased in races for president and U.S. Senate.

Between 2022 and 2024, the Palmetto State's politics reached a new inflection point, led by Henry McMaster as governor, with the 40-year plus veteran of Republican campaigns presiding over the first GOP supermajorities elected to the General Assembly in state history. In 2026, South Carolina holds statewide elections that will produce the first instances of turnover in several executive offices in at least a decade, including the governorship, which McMaster has held since 2017. Further, looking ahead to 2028, as evidenced by the elevation of Jaime Harrison as Chairman of the Democratic National Committee in 2021 and the strength of Congressman James Clyburn in helping to coalesce his party around Joe Biden in 2020, South Carolina's electorate is also an important component of the base of the Democratic Party. Although Democrats appear to be in their weakest position of the modern era, it remains to be seen how statewide voters will react to the state's newfound political landscape. In any case, recent electoral trends have made clear where the South Carolina Republican Party stands in 2024: firmly behind Trump and trending toward the next generation of conservative leaders who continue to push the state's political ecosystem toward a more conservative governing approach.

CHAPTER 5: LOUISIANA CASE STUDY: 2008 TO 2024

INTRODUCTION

After claiming the first Republican supermajority in both chambers of the state’s General Assembly since Reconstruction, along with flipping the governorship from eight-years of Democratic control in 2023, Louisiana quickly enacted a flurry of GOP-led legislative measures that positioned the Bayou State at the forefront of pushing Southern Republicanism to the right. Proclaiming that, “a new Louisiana day dawns,” the first twelve months of Gov. Jeff Landry’s term included signing legislation to mandate the placement of the Ten Commandments in public schools, criminalizing the possession of the medications mifepristone and misoprostol that can be used in abortions, and dedicating a special session to dramatically overhauling the state’s criminal justice system with measures intended to set a new standard for being tough-on-crime (*Louisiana Illuminator*, 2024; Brasted, 2024). Louisiana’s political roadmap between 2008 and 2024 is strongly representative of the Stagnant South, with Republican political power peaking in 2024 as GOP successes trickled down from presidential elections to the state legislative level. Through a combination of increasingly nationalized state contests and systematic electoral changes such as legislative term limits and redistricting, the Democratic bench was stunted as Louisiana shifted to elect Republicans up and down the ballot by increasingly large margins.

Instances of Democratic success in recent years—most notably Mary Landrieu’s reelection to the U.S. Senate in 2008 and John Bel Edwards’s victorious gubernatorial campaigns in 2015 and 2019—were fueled by intra-GOP divisions and unique political conditions that stand as exceptions to the state’s clear trendline of rising Republican political strength. In all three instances of

statewide victory, successful Democratic candidates met or exceeded the 30-30 formula tested as part of hypothesis H2. In 2008, Landrieu won 52% of the vote by claiming 33% of ballots cast by white voters and turning out Black voters to comprise 29.5% of the electorate, in addition to 3.4% of voters from other races. This is especially impressive considering that Obama only garnered 14% of support from white Louisianans on the same ballot.

Six years later, although Black turnout increased slightly to 30.3% of the full electorate in the runoff, Landrieu lost in a landslide to Bill Cassidy as her share of white support dropped to an estimated 23% (Chervenak et al., 2014). The following year, John Bel Edwards blew out David Vitter in the state's gubernatorial runoff, winning 56% of votes cast. Edwards won support from 42% from white voters—by far the highest level observed during the period of this study—and Black voters made up 30% of the electorate (Chervenak et al., 2015). Four years later, Edwards was reelected with 51% when he won 33.5% of ballots cast by white voters and Black voters grew to make up 31% of the statewide runoff electorate (Bridges, 2019B).

The 16-year period between 2008 and 2024 captures the rise of the Bayou State GOP from holding a legislative minority to growing to dominate every major political office. Concurrently, Democrats have become increasingly divided as racial polarization in Louisiana has reached new heights. As an early forerunner in American populism, led first by “The Kingfish,” Huey Long, and carried forward by a bevy of excentric standard bearers from Edwin Edwards onward, Louisiana's politics have evolved from being uniquely situated to the state's political environment to become predictably in-line with trends observed across the five states of the Stagnant South. Political consultant and former chief of staff to U.S. Senator John Kennedy, Preston Robinson, explained that the Bayou State's shift to embrace Republicans began in earnest in the early 2000s (Robinson, 2024). Robinson reflected:

My hypothesis is the reason that it took a long time to catch up [to the rest of the South] is because Louisiana's politics was less politics and more entertainment...

Going through Governor [Edwin] Edwards, and then Treen, and Roemer—we have David Duke in the mix—and it was almost like pop culture, not real, like, political leanings happening, and so it took a lot of that winding down and those characters exiting the stage for us to get a reset that was more partisan. It happened in our national offices first, before it worked its way down into our state legislature and into local government (Ibid).

The following chapter traces the expansion of political power among Louisiana Republicans by closely tracking the outcomes of presidential, U.S. Senate, and gubernatorial contests, while also offering an overview of major developments at the congressional and state legislative level. Following case studies in Georgia and South Carolina, this study tests twelve hypotheses and offers a basis of comparison for the five state Stagnant South for H11, H12, and H13. Beginning with an analysis of the factors that contribute to Louisiana's status as a Stagnant South state, the chapter continues with an overview of major developments in two-party political competition that is presented as part of testing Hypotheses H1 to H10 before concluding with a detailed narrative of intra-Republican and two-party competition from 2008 to 2024 that helps to connect major events and trends in the state's political development with the data offered as part of testing this study's hypotheses.

In ways that mirror South Carolina's political transition more so than Georgia's, between the late 1990s and 2010s, Louisiana's state government was largely led by moderate Republicans and former Democrats who sometimes won leadership elections and governed by securing votes from moderate and conservative Democrats to overrule a bloc of more politically extreme Republican members. Toward the tail end of this study, between 2020 and 2024, a new paradigm emerged as a new group of largely pro-Trump Republicans were elected as part of the first GOP supermajority to serve alongside a GOP governor. Louisiana's Republican candidates and

officeholders have largely coalesced toward Trump, with the notable exception of Bill Cassidy who offers a strong case study example to test H1, H1A, and H1B.

After evaluating changes in racial and gender polarization between voters and elected officials as part of testing hypotheses H2 through H10, the chapter charts how partisan preferences have evolved across demographic groups. This analysis also positions Louisiana as an example of the broader Stagnant South that will serve as a basis of comparison for Chapter Six to test hypotheses H11, H12, and H13, which evaluate if Trump's influence has helped his supporters win more leadership posts in the Stagnant South, while contributing to increased two-party political competition in the Growth South. This research is informed by personal interviews conducted with individuals involved in Louisiana and national politics, public polling, election returns, and a comprehensive analysis of social media activity, media reports, and campaign materials.

UNDERSTANDING THE STAGNANT SOUTH THROUGH LOUISIANA'S DEMOGRAPHICS

Between 2000 and 2023, Louisiana grew at an anemic annualized rate of just 0.2%, trailing far behind the national average of 0.47% per year (Biernacka-Lievestro & Fall, 2024). Owing to this stagnant population trend, the Bayou State lost one of its seven U.S. House seats in the 2010 redistricting cycle, its second in recent decades. Table 5.1 demonstrates other major demographic trends between 2010 and 2022, in which Louisiana appears strongly representative of the Stagnant South. Although educational attainment has improved—with the share of the population reporting a high school diploma as their highest level of education decreasing from 55% to 44%—the state ranks second only to Mississippi as the least educated in the South. Further, 78% of Louisiana's residents were born in-state as of 2022, indicating extremely low levels of in-migration in recent

years. On this measure, Louisiana ranks last in the South, with a far larger percentage of its population born in state than South Carolina and Georgia, which both register at 53%.

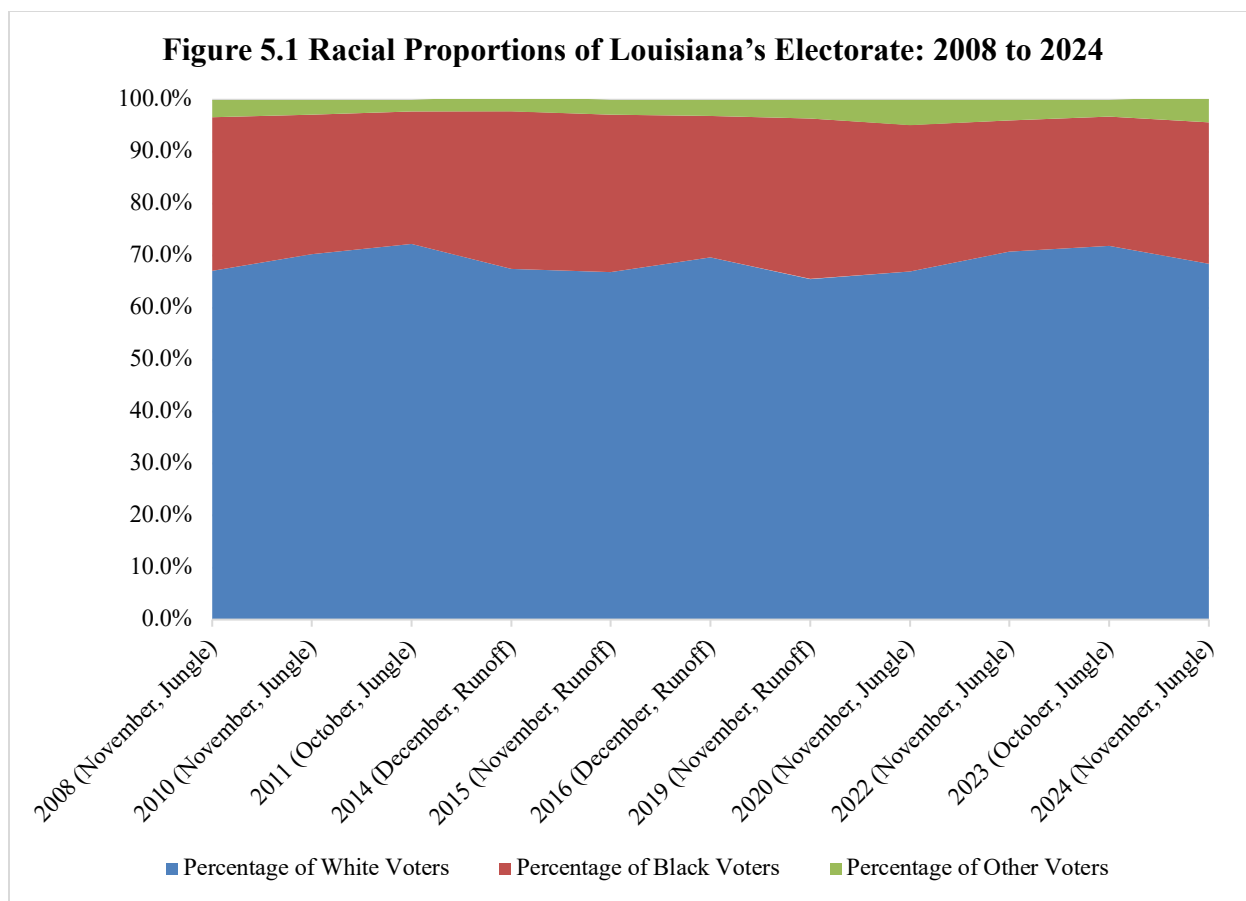
Table 5.1 GOP Expands Ranks as Louisiana's Population Remains Level		
	2010	2022
Total Population	4,533,372	4,588,023
Congressional Representation	7	6
Republican House Members (after general election)	6	5
High School or Less (Population 25 years and over)	55%	45%
Share of Population Born in State	79%	78%
Percentage of Population is Black or African American	33.0%	32.8%
Percentage of Population is White (not Hispanic or Latino)	61%	58%
<i>Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin for Louisiana: April 1, 2020, to July 1, 2023; 2022 American Community Survey, 1-year estimates; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 American Community Survey.</i>		

As the state’s percentage of Black residents has remained consistent, its white population has dipped slightly. However, in terms of electoral representation, statewide contests continue as battles along the traditional Black-white dichotomy long observed across the South, with relatively low levels of participation from Asian or Hispanic Louisianians. From 2010 until 2024, Louisiana Democrats held a single majority Black U.S. House district, while Republican candidates have claimed the state’s remaining House seats and both U.S. Senate posts since 2014. Due in part to the U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling in *Robinson v. Callais*, Louisiana’s leaders adopted a reconfigured map for the 2024 cycle to create a second majority Black district stretching from Baton Rouge through to the Northwestern part of the state. This redistricting battle exposed intraparty fault lines for Republicans, while reenforcing the central importance of Black voters to Democratic electoral prospects. In November of 2024, Representative Cleo Fields was elected to represent the state’s newly drawn 6th district, giving Louisiana Democrats control of two majority Black districts.

Since 1975, Louisiana’s election system for statewide elections has revolved around the jungle primary, in which all candidates run on the same ballot in October during odd years and

November in even years. With political competition during much of the 20th Century centered around battles between “Longites” loyal to The Kingfish’s brand of populism and Democrats opposed to Huey Long’s populist style, then-governor Edwin Edwards championed the jungle primary as a solution to avoid allowing Republicans to get a “clean shot” against weakened Democrats, who often had to compete in primaries with many candidates before being nominated in a runoff (Coleman, 2019). With Edwards’ reform, if a candidate exceeds the 50% threshold in the first round of voting, then that candidate wins. Otherwise, the top two finishers advance to a runoff four weeks after the initial contest. When one party is united and the other is divided, the candidate from the united party has the advantage of two distinct opportunities to win the election outright in contrast to the candidate from the divided party, who is at first campaigning for a spot in the runoff.

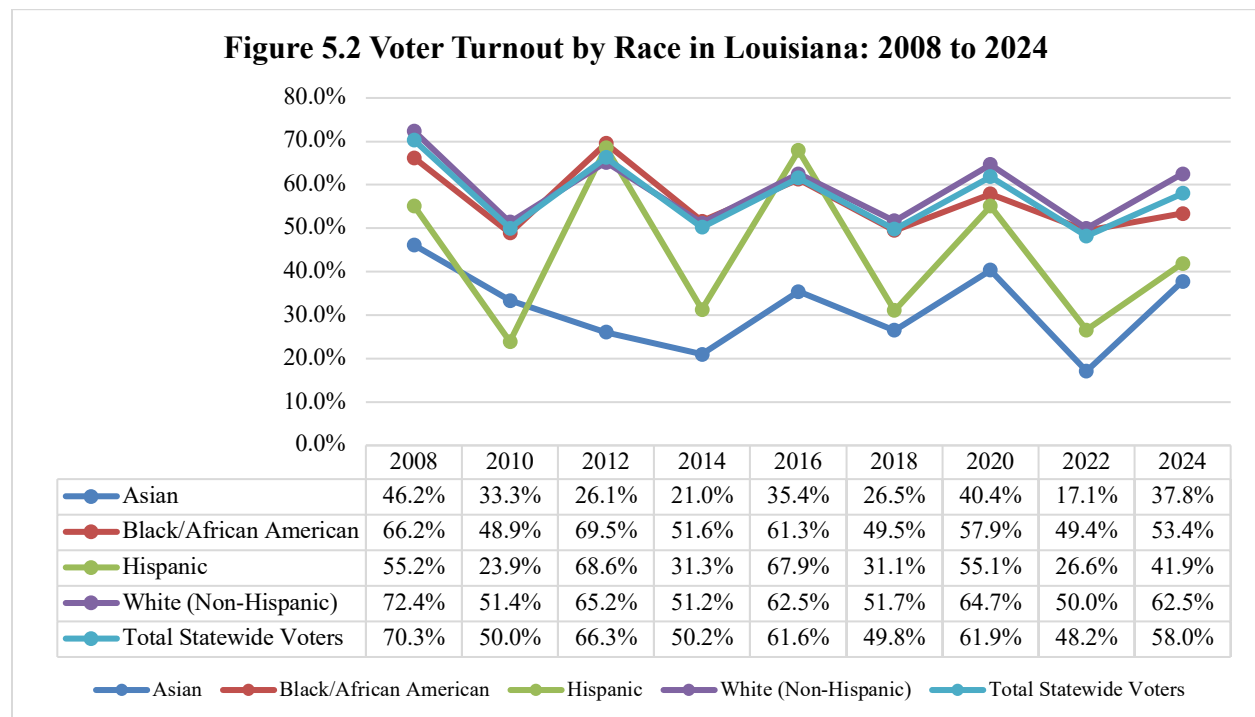
Indeed, intraparty divisions among Republicans helped to usher in rare Democratic victories in 2015 and 2019, demonstrating the importance of party unity even under Louisiana’s unique election system. Just as the Bayou State’s jungle primaries slowed GOP growth, as Republicans have reached the pinnacle of political power, it is now increasingly possible for GOP candidates to win on the first ballot, as Jeff Landry did in 2023, or for Democrats to be shut out of runoff elections in favor of two Republicans. Louisiana’s election system also creates unique logistical constraints that makes it challenging to compare the performance of some candidates in non-competitive jungle primary elections, in which unusually large gaps sometimes separate first and second place candidates.



Source: Louisiana Secretary of State, Post Election Statistics, statewide, compiled by author.

Over the 16-year period of this study, white voters regularly cast ballots at rates that significantly exceed their share of the state’s population, ranging between 67% (2008) to 69% (2024) in presidential cycles and from 67% (2010) to 72% (2023) in midterms and gubernatorial elections. Among Black voters, turnout has consistently fallen below the 33% of the state’s resident population comprised by Black residents, fluctuating between 27% to 31% in presidential cycles and from 25% to 31% in other statewide elections. When elections are viewed to be non-competitive, such as in 2010, 2022 and 2023, white voters tend to comprise an even larger share of the electorate. This trend is reflected in Figure 5.1. With support for Democratic candidates consistently dropping among white voters during this period, turning out larger numbers of Black voters is an essential component of successful Democratic campaigns, with Black voters

representing at least 29.5% of the electorate in the 2008 U.S. Senate election and in the 2015 and 2019 gubernatorial runoffs.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2008 - November 2024, Compiled by author.

Consistent with the pattern observed in other Southern states, as the Obama era gave way to the Trump era, turnout among white voters has consistently outpaced turnout levels among Black voters in recent cycles. As observed in Figure 5.2, one of the factors that distinguishes Louisiana from other Southern states with genuine two-party competition is the abysmally low levels of turnout observed among Asian and Hispanic voters, particularly in off-year cycles. It is also notable that Black and white voters have registered similar turnout levels in all cycles outside of 2020. Figure 5.2 uses U.S. Census data to approximate voter turnout among Asian and Hispanic residents, as Louisiana only reports turnout data in terms of three demographic categories: white, Black, and other. These figures generally align with those produced by the Louisiana Secretary of

State, in terms of the share of white and non-white voters and are offered to add additional definition to the level of participation from voters of emerging backgrounds.

Cumulatively, voters of other races represented five percent or less of Louisiana's electorate in every cycle between 2008 to 2024. Although residents who do not identify as either Black or white have grown to comprise nearly nine percent of the state's population, these voters continue to lag significantly behind other demographic groups as a percentage of the electorate. Party registration data suggests a 2-1 advantage for Louisiana Democrats among voters of other races, suggesting that Democratic candidates have room to improve their margins in future election cycles by replicating efforts seen in states like Georgia to more deeply engage Asian and Hispanic voters. As of 2025, Louisiana's 144-member General Assembly does not include a single member who does not identify as either white or Black (Louisiana House of Representatives, 2025; Louisiana Senate, 2025).

THE LOUISIANA GOP COMES ALIVE:

CHANGES IN 21ST CENTURY POLITICAL COMPETITION

In 1995, then-freshman state Representative David Vitter led the effort to author a state constitutional amendment, limiting members of the House and the Senate to serving three consecutive four-year terms in each chamber. With support from 75% of voters, the amendment was adopted to make Louisiana the second state in the South (following Florida in 1992) to enact term limits, with the first wave of members reaching the limit in 2007. Vitter's term limits legislation—along with redistricting and party switching—was instrumental in accelerating the shift from Democratic to Republican control of the General Assembly, and in helping to reshape the inner workings of the state legislature in the years that followed.

In 2007, the first year in which legislators were termed out of office, 28 Democrats, who comprised 30% of the Democratic Caucus between the House and Senate, reached the 12-year term limit (Louisiana House of Representatives, 2008). This exodus of long-time Democratic members aided Republicans in flipping 14 House Seats to achieve a near-split chamber. After the election, Democrats held on to a 53-50-2 majority that lasted until 2010. When new members were seated following the 2007 elections, 45% of those sworn in to the state House were new members—up from 19% in both 2004 and 2000—while seniority dropped from an average of 32 years to 10 years (Ibid). In December of 2010, Republicans obtained a majority in the state House when four white Democrats switched parties, including Fred Mills of St. Martin Parish, Simone Champagne of Iberia Parish, Walker Hines of New Orleans, and Noble Ellington of Franklin Parish. The loss of these Democrats from primarily rural districts portended an even greater shift in the 2011 election cycle.

Shortly after the GOP gained control of the state House, control of the state Senate followed in March of 2011 with the special election of Jonathan Perry to represent a Southwest Louisiana district (Louisiana Republican Legislative Delegation, 2011). This special election victory was preceded by the party switch of several Senate Democrats, including former two-time House speaker (1984-88, 1992-96) and state Senator John Alario, who upon switching parties remarked to the press: “I just casually went in and took care of it... I’m not angry with my local Democratic friends... I have an issue with the national Democratic Party and the direction it’s going” (Moller, 2010). When Republicans expanded their margins to win 24-of-39 state Senate seats in 2011—the same number claimed by Democrats just four years earlier—Alario was elected Senate president by his Republican colleagues in 2012, where he served atop the state’s upper legislative chamber through 2020.

Beyond championing term limits, Vitter was a central player in helping Republicans to win control of the Louisiana General Assembly, leveraging his post as U.S. senator, which he won in 2004 as the first Republican to hold that office since Reconstruction. In 2005, Vitter co-founded the Louisiana Committee for a Republican Majority. Between 2005 to 2011, he channeled more than \$3 million through the independent expenditure organization to support state legislative campaigns, while lobbying then-Democrats to switch parties (Moller, 2011). Of the organization’s efforts in 2011, he remarked: “Collectively, we have now set the new perception that any white majority district in the state can elect a Republican” (Deslatte, 2011). Vitter’s statement offers baseline support to test hypotheses H5 (Black elected officials have become a larger share of Democratic officeholders) and H7 (racial polarization has increased among officeholders), as Republicans positioned themselves as the party of white Louisianans and Democrats as the party representing Black residents. Table 5.2 demonstrates the growth of GOP political power between 2008 to 2023, as Republicans steadily expanded their ranks to dominate elected offices up and down the ballot.

Table 5.2 Percentage of Seats Held by Louisiana Republicans After Election				
Year	U.S. House	U.S. Senate	State House	State Senate
2009	86%	50%	48%	38%
2011	86%	50%	55%	62%
2013	83%	50%	55%	64%
2015	83%	100%	58%	64%
2017	83%	100%	59%	64%
2019	83%	100%	65%	69%
2021	83%	100%	65%	69%
2023	83%	100%	70%	72%
2025*	67%	100%	70%	72%
<i>Source: Ballotpedia, compiled by author; figures for 2025 are as of January, for all other years, figures are recorded after election cycle. .</i>				

With majorities secured in both legislative chambers ahead of the 2011 election cycle, Louisiana Republicans managed the state's reapportionment and redistricting process, offering a boost to the prospects of both Republicans and Black legislative Democrats. Prior to the creation of one additional majority Black state House district and one additional majority Black state Senate district in 2011, Louisiana maintained 10-majority Black Senate districts and 27 majority Black House districts (Barrow, 2011). Before the 2011 maps took hold, creating a total of 31 majority-minority state House districts and 11 majority-minority state Senate districts, state level Democrats included 28 Black members (36%) out-of-77 legislators serving in the General Assembly in 2008 (Dave's Redistricting 2020B, 2021B). When it came time to redraw the state's legislative maps after the 2020 Census, lawmakers increased the number of majority Black state House districts to 29 for a total of 33 majority-minority seats, while maintaining 11 majority Black state Senate districts and the same number of majority-minority state Senate seats (Dave's Redistricting 2024C, 2024D).

In 2024, the Democratic Caucus was overwhelmingly comprised of Black members, representing 36-out-of-43 districts held (84%), along with two white representatives also serving in majority-minority districts. On the other hand, among 65 Republicans serving in Louisiana's General Assembly in 2008 and 101 Republicans serving in 2024, just one of these 166 members was non-white. This transition demonstrates the staggering level of racial polarization now seen in the state's General Assembly, offering initial support for hypotheses H5 and H7 as a significant share of white Democrats have either switched parties, cycled through term limits, or faced defeat.

In 2003, then-Lieutenant Governor Kathleen Blanco channeled her rural, Cajun-born roots in a home-spun campaign to narrowly defeat 32-year-old former Bush Administration official Bobby Jindal. Marking the height of Democratic power in the contemporary era, Blanco was

elected alongside Democrats who claimed six-out-of-seven of Louisiana's statewide offices, along with holding both U.S. Senate seats and three-out-of-seven House seats, with Republicans limited to carrying the office of secretary of state. Four years later, in the aftermath of the disastrous fallout from Hurricane Katrina (2005) and plummeting approval ratings, Blanco stepped aside and decided not to seek reelection, leaving Jindal as the clear favorite (Henderson, 2022).

Jindal, who built his political base serving in the suburban New Orleans-based 1st Congressional District (2005-2008), easily claimed victory in the first round of October 2007 voting with the nearest Democratic contender, state Senator Walter Boasso, claiming just 17% of the vote. Down ballot, Democrats managed to hold onto three statewide offices in 2007, including the lieutenant governorship, the attorney general's office, and the commissioner of agriculture. Jindal's exit from Congress also created an opportunity for then-state Senator-elect Steve Scalise, who had been term limited out of the state House, serving from 1996-2008. After spending just four months in the state Senate, Scalise was elected to fill the seat vacated by Jindal in a May 2008 special election.

Following the initial wave of GOP victories in 2007, the National Republican Senatorial Committee declared Mary Landrieu as their top target in the effort to regain the majority in the closely divided 51-49 U.S. Senate. Landrieu's opponent, then-state treasurer John Kennedy had been the Democratic standard bearer just four years earlier, facing off against David Vitter in 2004. Months before the 2007 election, in which he ran unopposed for treasurer, Kennedy switched parties. Reflecting on the challenges that Kennedy had uniting the Democratic coalition in 2004 and then, in running as a Republican in his 2008 race, long-time Kennedy staffer Preston Robinson opined:

I think he saw that his opportunities in the future were severely limited... and that he was going to be opposed by the [Democratic] party hierarchy. If they hadn't done that, I don't

know if he would have ever moved forward with switching, but once they did, they kind of told him, “You are never going to be able to be anything higher than treasurer.” And so, in some ways, I think they kind of created what happened with him switching parties. They put him in a place where he did not have any option except to go home or to switch parties. And he ultimately did what I think most politicians would do in that case, [asking] “What do I need to do to continue my career?” And he did it...

That said, it was a tough race for Kennedy going against Landrieu because it wasn’t just any Democrat. It was, you know, one of the most successful, one of the most powerful—her herself—her family name, her brother’s the lieutenant governor, she has essentially unlimited money. And he had to carry the burden of, “okay, it’s 2008 and you’re telling us how conservative you are, but in 2004, here’s a picture of you with John Kerry. You’re smiling. Why did you smile, John?”

And then there were questions about the involvement of some national figures in his decision-making process, and it’s one of those things where I think enough people felt that there were questions that weren’t quite answered in terms of—why did he switch? Who were you really? Well, now you say this, but a few minutes ago, you were that.

That combined with bad modeling, the belief that the Black turnout because of Katrina was going to look like Bobby Jindal’s 2007 race and it wasn’t (Robinson, 2024).

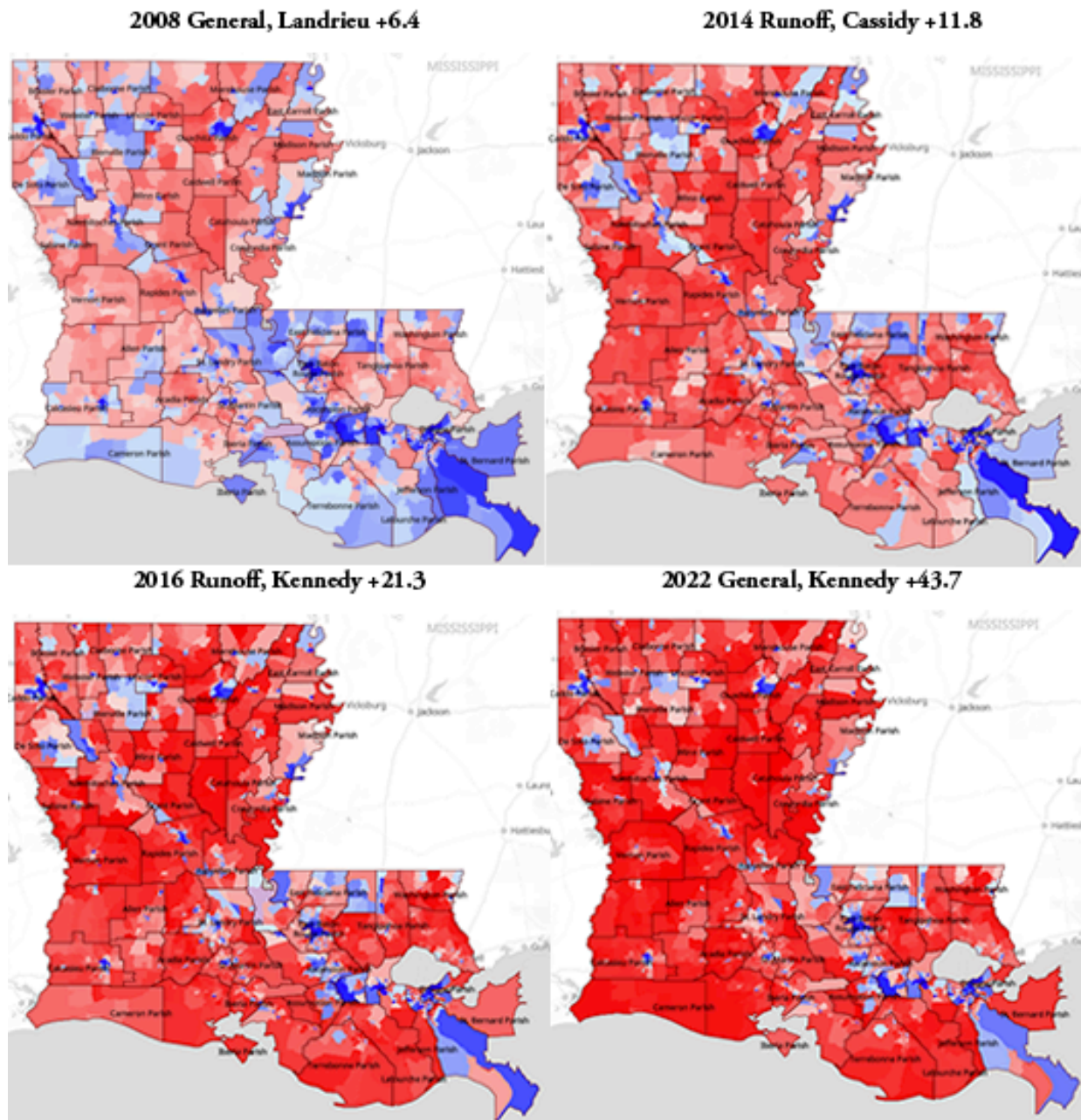
Landrieu’s 2008 victory, as shown in Figure 5.3 in comparison to U.S. Senate races in 2014, 2016, and 2022, marks a high watermark for federal Democratic candidates over the past 16-years. Estimates pegged the total amount of funding directed to Louisiana in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina at about \$76 billion (Alpert, 2015). Remarking on the political challenges that the state’s delegation faced, Congressman Steve Scalise remarked, “there were people questioning whether or not the city of New Orleans would be rebuilt or should be rebuilt” (Ibid). Landrieu served as the main sponsor of two major federal bills to unlock the funding and took on a combative role with the Bush administration in support of the state’s efforts, remarking, “Had terrorists blown up our levees, maybe the president would talk about us more often than he does. Because the damage would have been caused by something other than his own Corps of Engineers, which failed” (Reilly, 2007).

Through her advocacy for the state, Landrieu maintained strong levels of support among Louisiana voters, registering a favorability rating of 61% ahead of the contest with Kennedy (Kraushaar, 2008). By drawing a positive contrast with unpopular figures at both the state and federal level in her leadership after Hurricane Katrina, Landrieu strengthened her brand as a popular Louisiana scion, while tying Kennedy's role as state treasurer to Louisiana's negative financial position in the wake of the Great Recession (*Associated Press*, 2008). Calling Kennedy "one confused politician," Landrieu also reminded voters of "the NRSC's opposition research from 2004, when the group cast Kennedy in the part of irresponsible liberal" (Anderson, 2008).

With endorsements from David Treen—the state's first GOP governor (1980-84), along with the Parish Presidents of St. Tammany and Jefferson and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Landrieu succeeded in dividing the traditional Republican coalition (Ibid). As a result of these efforts, Kennedy finished the race with 281,000 fewer votes than GOP Presidential nominee John McCain. Even as Obama lost the state by 18.7-percentage points, Landrieu claimed victory by a healthy 6.3-percentage point margin.

As demonstrated in Figure 5.3 and Table 5.3, the 2008 cycle stands in stark contrast to subsequent elections in 2016 and 2020, in which GOP candidates for U.S. Senate outperformed presidential contenders in terms of vote margin. Although not shown graphically, in 2020, Cassidy outperformed his closest Democratic opponent by 40-percentage points and won every parish outside of Orleans. Races in which the leading Democratic candidate won less than 30% of votes cast (2011, 2020, 2022, 2023) are excluded from the remaining visuals included in this chapter due to the consistently overwhelming nature of GOP victories

Figure 5.3 Louisiana's Partisan Shift in U.S. Senate Elections, 2008 to 2022



Source: Redistricter.com, created by author.

Landrieu's 2008 victory marks the last election cycle in which a Democratic candidate for federal office claimed a majority of Louisiana's 64 parishes. Figure 5.3 illustrates this shrinking geographic footprint. As demonstrated in Table 5.3, Republican candidates for president reliably won 54-out-of-64 parishes in every election between 2008 to 2020, a feat that GOP U.S. Senate

candidates have exceeded in every cycle since 2016. In 2024, Trump set an all-time GOP record by winning 57 parishes. In doing so, Trump’s 2024 victory registered the best performance for a presidential candidate since Reagan’s 1984 landslide.

Table 5.3 Number of Parishes Won by GOP Candidate	
Republican Candidate	Total Out of 64
2008 President (McCain)	54
2008 U.S. Senate (Kennedy)	26
2010 U.S. Senate (Vitter)	56
2012 President (Romney)	54
2014 U.S. Senate (Cassidy)	49
2015 Governor (Vitter)	25
2016 President (Trump)	54
2016 U.S. Senate (Kennedy)	55
2019 Governor (Rispone)	40
2020 President (Trump)	54
2024 President (Trump)	57
<i>Source: Louisiana Secretary of State, compiled by author.</i>	

At the state level, Edwards topped Landrieu’s performance in a November 2015 blowout of Vitter, claiming victory in 39 parishes. However, just four years later, Edwards’ campaign receded back to cover a considerably smaller geographic area, with the popular governor narrowly claiming victory by dominating in parishes with the highest percentage of Black voters and holding his own in swing areas. Describing Louisiana’s political culture, pollster Dan Judy reflected:

Culturally, you’ve got very different areas... New Orleans is kind of its own thing, but then Baton Rouge is... the state government is there, but it’s much more business focused.... It’s a state capitol, so a lot of government business, the university [LSU] is there, which has a big impact...

But then you’ve got true Cajun country out to the West... between Baton Rouge and Texas and Lafayette... And then you’ve got North Louisiana, which is like kind of anywhere else in the South... But most campaigns in the state are going to begin and end in Baton Rouge and New Orleans... that’s where most of the voters live and that’s where most of your swing voters are going to be (Judy, 2024).

Table 5.4 GOP Path to Victory in Louisiana Runs Through Suburban, Exurban Parishes						
Republican Candidate	Margin of Victory in St. Tammany Parish	Margin of Victory in Livingston Parish	Margin of Victory in Lafayette Parish	Margin of Victory in Bossier Parish	Four Parish Margin	Statewide Margin Over Democratic Candidate
2008 President (McCain)	58,482	36,588	29,910	20,010	144,990	365,286
2008 U.S. Sen. (Kennedy)	25,721	18,106	9,228	8,468	61,523	(121,121)
2010 U.S. Sen. (Vitter)	40,848	20,524	22,898	13,524	97,794	238,843
2012 President (Romney)	58,995	38,062	33,224	22,032	152,313	343,121
2014 U.S. Sen. (Cassidy)	33,320	21,625	22,240	13,054	90,239	151,169
2015 Gov. (Vitter)	15,057	5,782	3,365	6,260	30,464	(140,984)
2016 President (Trump)	63,198	41,874	35,469	22,833	163,374	398,484
2016 U.S. Sen. (Kennedy)	31,046	14,819	18,682	10,923	75,470	188,375
2019 Gov. (Rispone)	17,956	16,227	15,109	11,763	61,055	(40,212)
2020 President (Trump)	61,920	45,628	32,834	22,412	162,794	399,742
2024 President (Trump)	60,600	45,136	34,837	22,638	163,211	441,635
<i>Source: Louisiana Secretary of State, compiled by author.</i>						

Between 2008 and 2020, Republicans have consistently generated their largest margins across four parishes: St. Tammany, Livingston, Lafayette, and Bossier. Geographically, St. Tammany is located North of New Orleans and Livingston is east of Baton Rouge. To the southwest of Baton Rouge is Lafayette, while Bossier is in the northwestern part of the state and borders Shreveport. Table 5.4 reflects the importance of these areas to each candidate’s overall margin over their Democratic opponent.

Losing Republican campaigns in 2008, 2015, and 2019 generated substantially fewer votes from these GOP strongholds than those that were successful in recent years. For winning campaigns, these four parishes have represented between 40% and 60% of the Republican candidate's total margin of victory (2008 to 2020). One commonality between these four parishes is a lower percentage of Black voters than that seen statewide, which is highest in Lafayette (16-22%) and Bossier Parish (15-20%), and lowest in Livingston (4-6%) and St. Tammany (8-11%). Complementing these strongholds are also smaller, mostly white rural parishes, such as Lasalle and Grant, which reliably deliver outsized margins to GOP candidates.

Table 5.5 Democratic Victories Depend on New Orleans, Baton Rouge, and Swing Parishes Calcasieu and Jefferson					
Republican Candidate	GOP Margin in Jefferson Parish	GOP Margin in Calcasieu Parish	GOP Margin in East Baton Rouge Parish	GOP Margin in Orleans Parish	Four Parish Total Margin
2008 President (McCain)	48,095	20,205	(4,262)	(88,972)	(24,934)
2008 U.S. Sen. (Kennedy)	(12,001)	(4,328)	(30,472)	(99,557)	(146,358)
2010 U.S. Sen. (Vitter)	31,167	13,885	2,737	(53,213)	(5,424)
2012 President (Romney)	32,152	23,491	(10,365)	(98,719)	(53,441)
2014 U.S. Sen. (Cassidy)	6,643	12,641	(7,153)	(71,851)	(59,720)
2015 Gov. (Vitter)	(1,269)	(7,483)	(41,979)	(69,154)	(119,885)
2016 President (Trump)	26,728	27,895	(18,168)	(109,704)	(73,249)
2016 U.S. Sen. (Kennedy)	21,632	9,102	(4,588)	(50,398)	(24,252)
2019 Gov. (Rispone)	(17,656)	2,074	(50,603)	(101,771)	(167,956)
2020 President (Trump)	21,472	27,352	(27,157)	(121,190)	(99,523)
2024 President (Trump)	23,079	32,146	(21,100)	(106,630)	(72,505)
<i>Source: Louisiana Secretary of State, compiled by author.</i>					

Overall, the Orleans Metro area includes seven parishes: Orleans, Jefferson, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, St. Charles, St. James, and St. John the Baptist. These parishes are home to 966,000 residents, representing 21% of Louisiana’s 4.6 million population (U.S. Census, 2024C). Along the lines described by Judy, Democratic success statewide is dependent on a combination of performing well in the swing parishes of Jefferson and Calcasieu, while running up significant margins in East Baton Rouge and Orleans. Table 5.5 demonstrates that, although Jefferson and Calcasieu Parishes sometimes rank in the top five areas delivering the largest margins to Republicans—as is the case in the 2008, 2012, 2016, and 2020 presidential races, and in the 2010 U.S. Senate contest—successful Democratic statewide campaigns have also claimed outright victory in these areas. With its county seat of Lake Charles, Calcasieu is the most populous Parish in Western Louisiana. Although Calcasieu tilts heavily toward Republicans at the presidential level and has trended away from Democrats down ballot, it has remained a key battleground in competitive races.

In terms of population, East Baton Rouge, Jefferson, and Orleans, respectively, rank as the three largest Parishes in Louisiana. As shown in Table 5.5, Democrats have generally seen year-over-year increases in their margins in Orleans during presidential cycles but experience considerable variance down ballot. Although competitive GOP campaigns can cut Democratic margins in East Baton Rouge substantially—or win outright as David Vitter achieved in 2010—the parish has ranked second to Orleans for Democratic candidates in all other races listed above between 2008 to 2020. With more Louisianans residing in Jefferson Parish than in Orleans, the suburban population center represents a critical component of the formula for any winning statewide campaign.

Orleans is majority Black¹² and the core voter base among a group of 10-to-17 Black Belt parishes, in which Black voters have exceeded 40% of those turning out to vote in at least one of the nine election cycles (jungle primary and runoff) examined between 2008 and 2024. Stretching from Orleans Parish up into East Baton Rouge Parish and through the northeastern part of the state that borders Mississippi—these areas with historically large Black populations represent an important part of the Democratic coalition statewide. Turnout in this core group of Black Belt parishes, including East Carroll, St. John the Baptist, Madison, St. Helena, Tensas, St. James, Iberville, and Caddo, can be decisive in determining if the share of the Black vote statewide reaches or exceeds the 30% level needed for a 30-30 election.

Democrats succeeded in the 2008 U.S. Senate race and, in the 2015 and 2019 gubernatorial contests, in part because of their performance in Jefferson Parish, which is usually comprised of 75% to 80% white voters. At the state level, former House speaker and Senate president, John Alario, built his career representing Jefferson Parish and leveraged his positions of legislative power to ensure that the area received considerable attention in the state’s budget and from political leaders. Reflecting both Alario’s power and the importance of Jefferson Parish, John Bel Edwards featured Louisiana’s then-Senate president in the closing ad for his 2019 reelection campaign, in which the Republican praised his leadership (Bridges, 2019A). After the votes were tallied, Edwards recorded the largest margin in Jefferson Parish of any Democrat in the contemporary era, winning by 17,700 votes. When Alario’s eight-year tenure as Senate leader ended in 2020, it marked the end of an era of leadership in the General Assembly from Republicans who began their careers as Democrats, shifting the legislature in a more conservative direction.

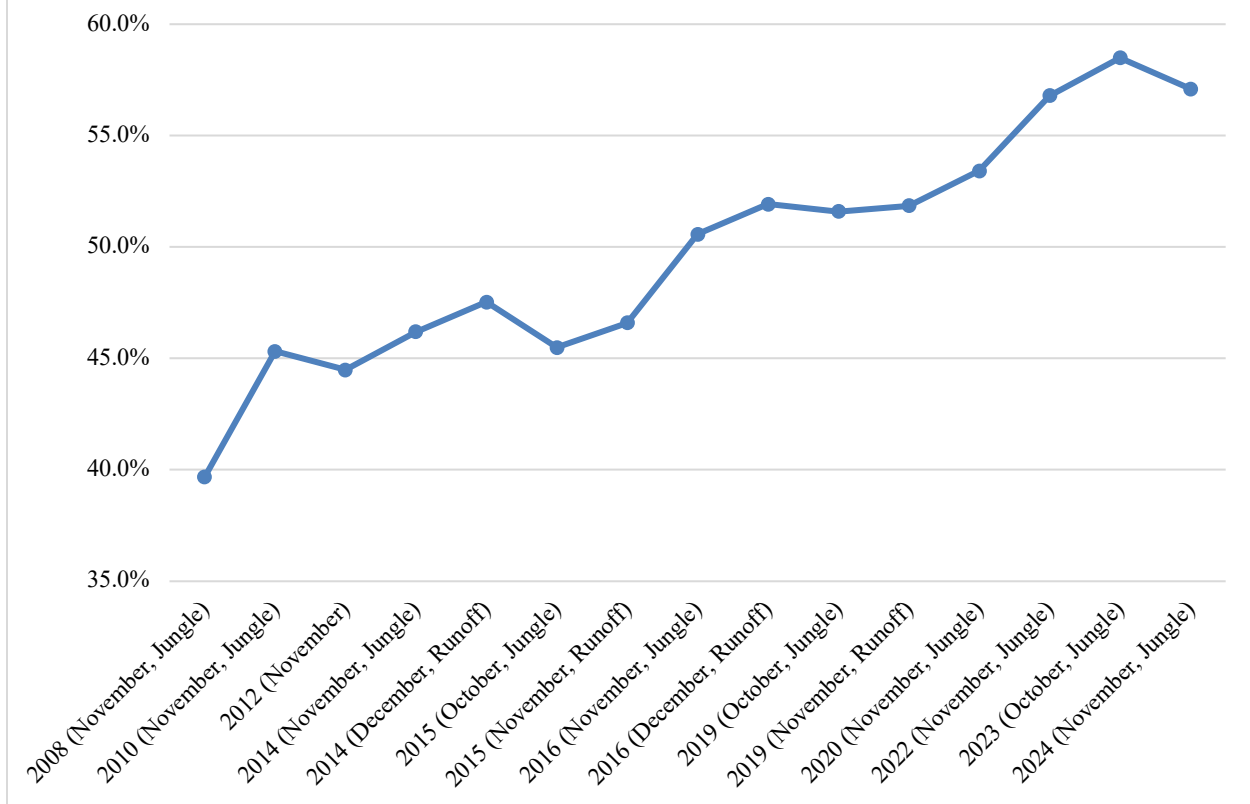
¹² The share of Black voters as a percentage of the total casting Ballots in Orleans only dropped below 50% once during the nine rounds of voting tracked by this study, in the 2016 runoff when Black voters were a plurality at 48.7%.

ANALYSIS: LOUISIANA’S RED WAVE AND THE RACIALLY POLARIZED, NATIONALIZED POLITICS OF THE STAGNANT SOUTH

Louisiana’s political transition between 2008 and 2024 can be explained through racial polarization, the increasing nationalization of elections, and structural electoral changes that have helped to enhance the cumulative effects of these trends as the state’s population stagnated. Although white Louisiana voters began casting ballots for Republican candidates in substantial numbers as early as the 1960s and 1970s, Democratic Party registration among white voters remained artificially high as an increasing number of residents continued to reliably support Republicans without officially changing their party allegiance. However, over the past 16-years, the percentage of white Louisianans registered as Republicans has markedly increased.

In 2008, less than 40% of white Bayou State voters casting ballots were registered as Republicans. By 2023, that figure increased to nearly 59%. Still, exit polling and other data demonstrate that this figure still significantly understates the level of support Republican candidates regularly generate from white voters, with ancestral party identification habits continuing to skew party registration figures. Figure 5.4 demonstrates how, with each successive election cycle, the percentage of white voters registered as Republicans grew.

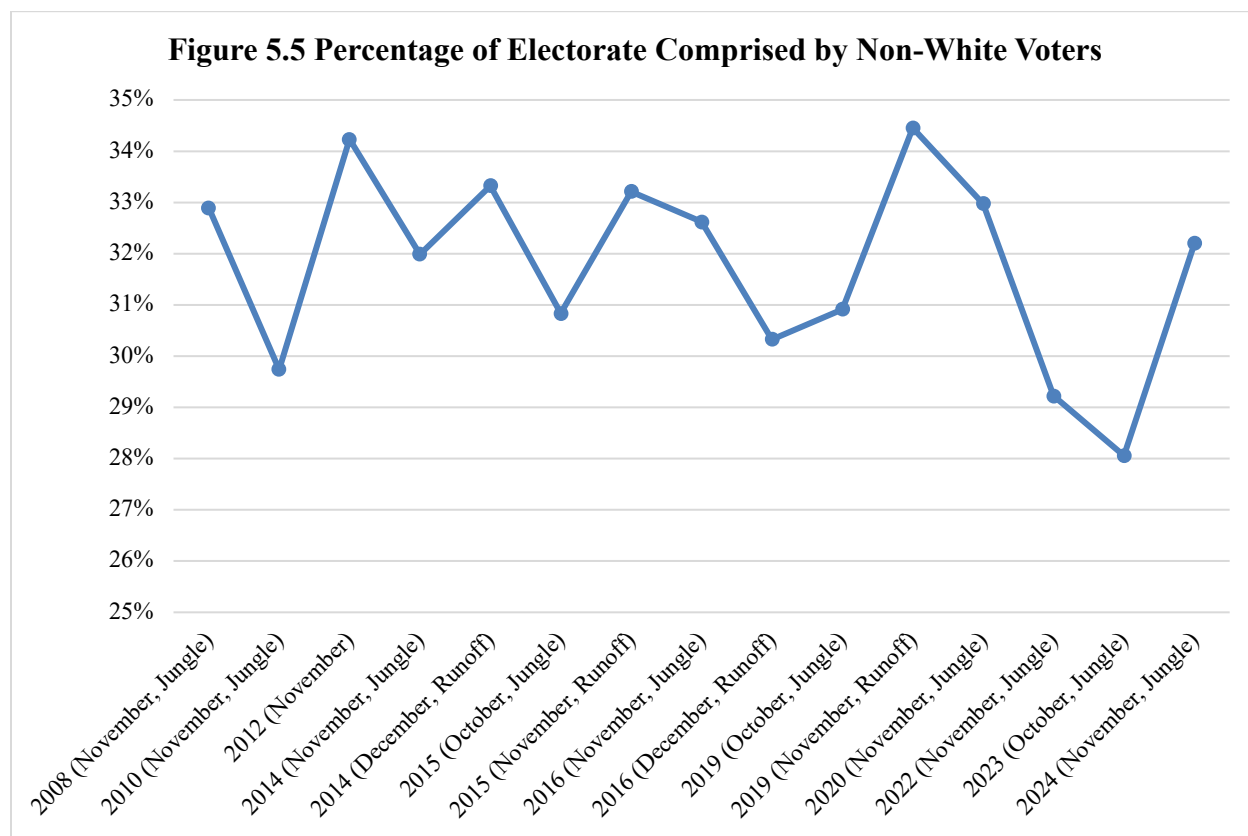
Figure 5.4 Percentage of White Louisiana Voters Registered as Republicans (Among Those Voting)



Source: Louisiana Secretary of State, Post Election Statistics, statewide, compiled by author.

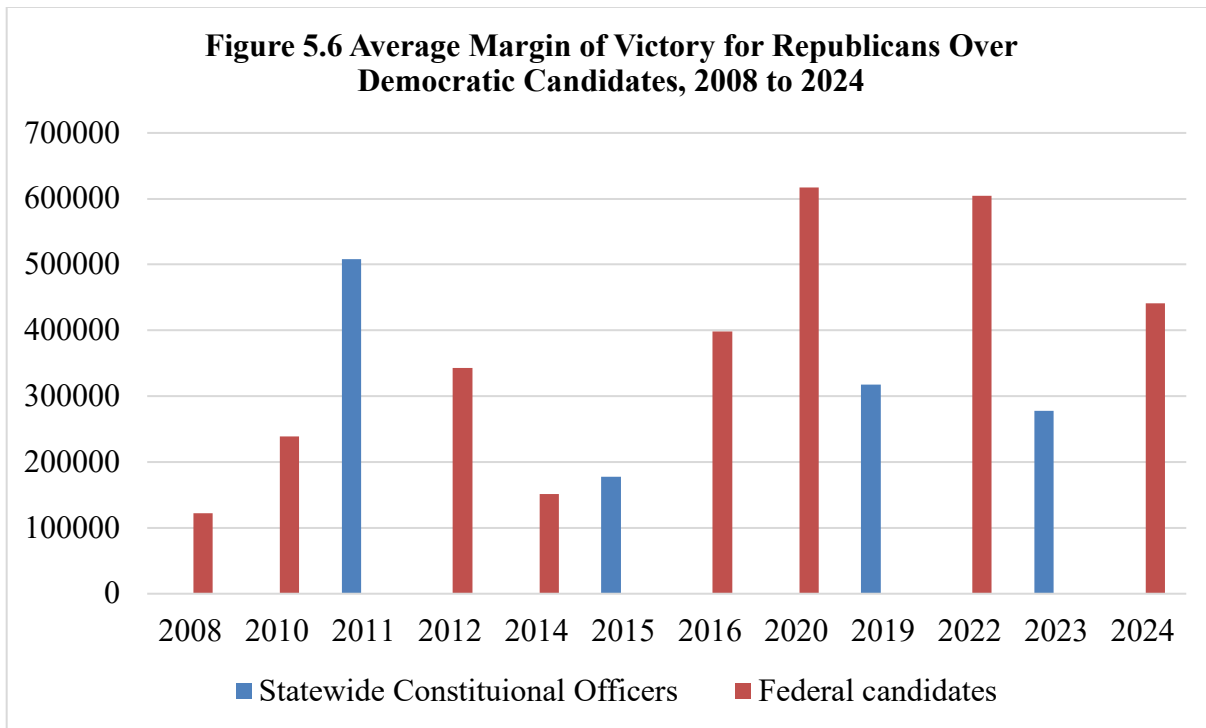
The growth in the percentage of white voters registered as Republicans trails the share of the statewide vote going to GOP candidates, as many voters became accustomed to casting ballots for candidates for president, U.S. Senate, and governor before officially switching their party registration. As Democrats bled support from white Louisianans, turning out substantial numbers of Black voters—in addition to other racial and ethnic groups that generally favor Democrats—is an essential component of remaining competitive electorally. However, as seen in Figure 5.5, the percentage of the electorate comprised of non-white voters has also decreased in recent election cycles. Even as the share of non-whites registered to vote has increased from 35% in 2008 to 37% in 2025, the share of non-white voters casting ballots has remained relatively consistent and dipped

to reach the lowest levels recorded during the 16-years tracked in 2022 and 2023 (Louisiana Secretary of State).



Source: Louisiana Secretary of State, Post Election Statistics, statewide, compiled by author.

With Republicans on the ascent and statewide contests in 2022 and 2023 viewed as non-competitive for Democrats, the percentage of the electorate comprised by non-white voters dipped below 30% for the first time in recent history. Most significant for the declining prospects of Democrats is that the percentage of Black voters dropped to approximately 25% in both 2022 and 2023. That was down from the recent high of 31% set in the 2019 gubernatorial runoff. Taken together with the increasing number of white residents favoring Republican candidates, these intersecting trends have made it difficult for Democrats to cobble together an electoral coalition with a chance of achieving the majority of voters needed to win statewide in the model of a 30-30 election as put forward by hypothesis H2.



Source: Louisiana Secretary of State, Post Election Statistics, statewide, compiled by author.

In recent years, Democrats have experienced challenges fielding top tier candidates for statewide offices, with Louisiana voters supporting Republicans by increasingly large margins. In 2023, Republicans ran unopposed for two-out-of-seven statewide executive offices, while posting an average margin of victory that approached 278,000 votes or 26 percentage points (excluding uncontested elections). As demonstrated in Figure 5.6, Republicans have consistently outperformed Democrats by large margins in most statewide contests between 2008 to 2024.

Even in 2019, when Democratic candidate John Bel Edwards was narrowly reelected to the governorship, Republicans recorded substantial margins of victory in races for the other six statewide executive offices. In terms of federal contests, Republicans Bill Cassidy and John Kennedy set new records in the 2020 and 2022 U.S. Senate contests by both defeating their nearest Democratic competitor by more than 600,000 votes or an average of 37 percentage points. At the presidential level, Louisiana has reliably supported the Republican nominee by a margin of 16 to 20 percentage points, or 343,000 to 400,000 votes, in every election cycle since 2008.

TESTING HYPOTHESES H1 TO H10 IN LOUISIANA

When eight Republican members of the U.S. House deposed California Republican Kevin McCarthy from the Speakership in October of 2023, support for Trump and against the certification of the 2020 election became a central issue in the intraparty race to choose his successor. With Scalise serving as Majority Leader, the nine-term 1st District Congressman threw his hat in the ring for the House's top post. After besting Trump's initial pick Judiciary Chairman Jim Jordan in a 113-99 vote, Scalise failed to obtain the 217 votes required from the GOP's narrow 221 seat majority. When Trump opposed Majority Whip Tom Emmer's bid for the speakership, saying supporting him "would be a tragic mistake," four-term 4th District Congressman Mike Johnson emerged as a consensus pick (Samuels, 2023). In Trump's eyes, Emmer had shown himself to be a "Globalist RINO" who was "totally out-of-touch with Republican Voters" by serving as one of 83 House GOP lawmakers who voted to certify the 2020 electoral vote count (McGraw & Isenstadt, 2023; Stevens et al., 2025).

Table 5.6 lists the 11 Republicans who, from 2016 to 2025, have represented the Bayou State in Congress, the U.S. Senate, and as the lone GOP governor to hold office. As part of hypothesis H1, seven of these Republicans are categorized as MAGA Republicans, including: Mike Johnson, Steve Scalise, Clay Higgins, John Fleming, Ralph Abraham, John Kennedy, and Jeff Landry. Two are Sometimes Trump Republicans: Garret Graves and Julia Letlow. Finally, two are Anti-Trump. Republicans: Charles Boustany, who endorsed Kamala Harris in 2024, and Bill Cassidy, who was one of two Southern Republican senators (in addition to Richard Burr of North Carolina) to vote in favor of a conviction in Trump's second impeachment trial.¹³

¹³ Seven U.S. Senate Republicans voted in favor of convicting Trump: Richard Burr (North Carolina), Bill Cassidy (Louisiana), Susan Collins (Maine), Lisa Murkowski (Alaska), Mitt Romney (Utah), Ben Sasse (Nebraska), and Pat Toomy (Pennsylvania). Only three (Collins, Murkowski, and Cassidy) remained in the Senate at the start of Trump's second term in 2025.

Table 5.6 Hypothesis H1: Trump Leads Louisiana Republicans								
Office	Name	Class	Trump Endorsed?	Endorsed Trump in 2024 Primary?	2020 Amicus Brief? (2020 Reps.)	EC Obj. Vote? (Cong.)	Stolen 2020 claims? (If N/A for others)	Hypothesis 1:
LA-01	Steve Scalise	2008	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	MAGA Republican
LA-03	Clay Higgins	2016	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	MAGA Republican
LA-03	Charles Boustany	2004	No	No	N/A	N/A	No	Anti-Trump Republican
LA-04	Mike Johnson	2016	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	MAGA Republican
LA-04	John Fleming	2008	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican
LA-05	Julia Letlow	2021	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	N/A	No	Sometimes Trump Republican
LA-05	Ralph Abraham	2014	No	No	Yes	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican
LA-06	Garret Graves	2014	No	No	No	Yes	No	Sometimes Trump Republican
U.S. Senate	Bill Cassidy	2014	No	No	N/A	No	No	Anti-Trump Republican
U.S. Senate	John Kennedy	2016	Yes (2022)	Yes	N/A	Yes	N/A	MAGA Republican
Gov	Jeff Landry	2023	Yes (2023)	Yes	N/A	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican
<i>Source: Compiled by author; The Washington Post (2021); Ballotpedia.</i>								

As the House elevated its first speaker from the South since Newt Gingrich, media reports noted that, “He was next to no one’s first pick, but the onetime No. 7 Republican was shielded from much of the intraparty political drama that tanked speaker picks before him” (Ferris et al., 2023). Ahead of the floor vote, Trump also offered his blessing, posting: “My strong

SUGGESTION is to go with the leading candidate, Mike Johnson” (Frazier, 2023). POLITICO national columnist Jonathan Martin described the liabilities of Johnson’s unique background as both a staunch social conservative and devoted Trump supporter, commenting: “Democrats have not just somebody who you can connect to the kind of Trump election MAGA denialism, but they also have somebody who reflects all the pre-Trump hits... which is, he wants to get rid of entitlements, he’s an extremist on gay rights and abortion rights... so, like, in some ways, he kind of reflects the Democratic songbook of attacks in both the pre-Trump and post-Trump era” (Axelrod et al., 2023). As a result of the unconventional election, Louisiana now had both the Speaker of the House and the Majority Leader among its six-member delegation.

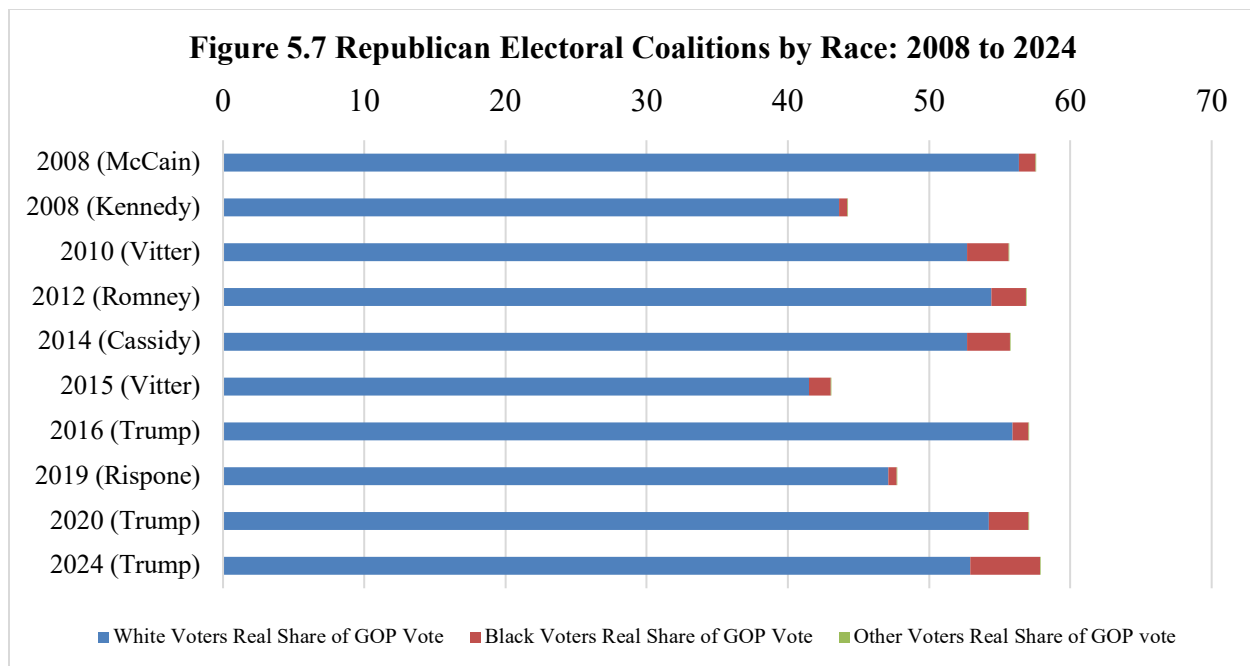
Returning the favor to the 45th President, Johnson “wholeheartedly” endorsed Trump’s 2024 comeback bid for president, as Trump nicknamed him “MAGA Mike Johnson” (Price, 2023). Shortly thereafter, Trump’s 2024 campaign was endorsed by Scalise and Emmer, demonstrating that House GOP leadership was in lockstep behind him before the first primary votes were cast (Ibssa et al., 2024). Prior to Johnson’s selection as Speaker, he was the lead signatory on the amicus brief filed with the U.S. Supreme Court, which was signed by 125 fellow House Republicans in an effort to overturn the 2020 presidential election results in the states of Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin (Concepcion, 2023; Johnson, 2021). Despite Cassidy’s prominent role as one of the lone GOP voices in favor of Trump’s impeachment, the support from five other GOP members of Louisiana’s congressional delegation for overturning the results of the 2020 election is emblematic of the ways that the state’s Republican delegation has aligned in close concert with shifts in the national Republican party toward Trump.

Graves is the only eligible Bayou State member of the House (among five Republicans serving at the time) who did not sign on to Johnson’s amicus brief to the U.S. Supreme Court,

although he voted in support of objecting to the certification of Pennsylvania's Electoral College votes. Kennedy is included as a MAGA Republican as one of eight Republican senators to support the Electoral College objection, who also meets the endorsement criteria. Then-state Attorney General Jeff Landry joined 17 other state attorneys general in supporting Trump's claims of a stolen election "in a last-minute attempt to overturn the presidential election results in Pennsylvania" and was later elected governor with Trump's endorsement (Muller, 2020).

In 2021, Julia Letlow became the first Republican woman elected to Congress from Louisiana after Trump endorsed her primary campaign to fill the slot initially won by her late husband. Letlow is categorized as a Sometimes Trump Republican because she endorsed Trump ahead of the state's 2024 primary and was endorsed by Trump ahead of her own 2021 primary but was not among the defenders of his stolen election claims and was not sworn in early enough to vote on the Electoral College certification. In fact, Letlow was the lone candidate in the 2020-2021 cycle to receive a campaign contribution from both Liz Cheney and Elise Stefanik, demonstrating her middle-of-the-road political orientation within the GOP (Bowman et al., 2021).

Exit polling and an analysis of the outcomes of elections between 2008 to 2024 reveals that successful Republican campaigns usually garner between 72% to 84% support from white Louisiana voters. Unsuccessful GOP candidates, such as John Kennedy in 2008 and Eddie Rispone in 2019, failed to breach the 67% mark among white Bayou State voters as Democrats surpassed the minima of a 30-30 election. Figure 5.7 demonstrates how these levels of support among voters of different races and ethnicities translate into the electoral coalitions assembled by Republican candidates.



Source: Exit Polls (2008, 2010); The University of New Orleans (2014, 2015, 2016); Magellan Strategies BR (2012); Mason-Dixon/Fox 8 (2019); Fox News Voter Analysis (2020, 2024); U.S. Census; author calculations.

The highest level of support among Black voters observed during the period of this study was won by Donald Trump’s 2024 campaign, when he received support from 11% of Louisianans casting ballots, a figure that matched the previous high set by David Vitter in 2010. While Trump won 78% of support from white voters statewide in 2024, Harris performed far better in the state’s most Democratic leaning areas, capturing 63% of white voters in Orleans parish and 32% in East Baton Rouge (Couvillon, 2024). Although voters of other races comprise too small of a percentage of the electorate to reliably poll—coming in between two to five percent of the electorate from 2008 to 2023—party registration data indicate that between 26% to 35% of those casting ballots are Republicans.

Although Republicans generally win a majority of the state’s college-educated voters and those without four-year degrees, Louisiana has followed a similar trend seen nationally, in which non-college educated voters have shifted to become more strongly aligned with Republicans in the

Trump era. In 2008, 64% of college educated voters supported McCain, in comparison to 57% of Louisiana voters without college degrees (National Election Pool, 2008D). By 2016, Trump was generating his highest levels of support from white voters without college degrees. In an October 2016 survey from the University of New Orleans, investigators found that Trump received support from 75% of white voters with a high school education in comparison to 61% of support from white respondents with a college degree (Chervenak et al., 2016). Exit polling in 2020 produced similar results, with Trump winning support statewide from 60% of voters without a college education, in comparison to 55% of college graduates. Table 5.7 shows the gap in GOP performance between voters without college degrees and those with four-year degrees.

Table 5.7 Louisiana GOP Gap Between White College and Non-College Voters Grows			
Type	Year	Margin (GOP) Between White Voters without College Degrees and with College Degrees	Margin (GOP) Between Non-White Voters without College Degrees and with College Degrees
Presidential	2008	7%	-6%
Presidential	2020	14%	3%
Presidential	2024	23%	6%
U.S. Senate	2008	-3%	-7%
U.S. Senate	2010	4%	-10%
U.S. Senate	2014	2%	-5%
U.S. Senate	2020	9%	7%
U.S. Senate	2022	6%	4%
<i>Source: National Election Pool, 2008, 2010, 2014; Fox News 2020, 2022, 2024.</i>			

Zooming in to differences among white and non-white voters by education levels reveals that Donald Trump has opened a similarly large gap between white college and non-college educated voters to that seen in Georgia and South Carolina. However, unlike these two states, the gap among white college and non-college voters registers in the double-digits for Trump alone, in contrast to for other candidates such as Bill Cassidy (2020) or John Kennedy (2022). In most

cycles, white voters without college degrees have significantly outnumbered white Louisianans with four-year degrees with the gap standing at 43% of the electorate to 24% in 2024 (*Fox News*, 2024). In contrast to white voters, and as observed in Georgia and South Carolina, most Republicans have tended to perform better among voters of color with college degrees than those without. In 2024, Trump matched McCain’s blowout performance with white non-college voters, winning 87%, while underperforming the 2008 ticket with white college educated voters, where support dropped from 80% to 64%. Between 2020 and 2024, Trump slightly improved his performance with both white non-college voters, improving from 82% to 87%, and non-white voters without college degrees, going from 19% to 24%.

Table 5.8 Black Turnout in Louisiana (Percentage of Electorate)									
Office	2008	2010-11	2012	2014-15	2016	2018-19	2020	2022-23	2024
President	30		31		29		28		27
Gov.		26		30		31		25	
U.S. Sen.	30	27		30	29		28	25	
<i>Source: Exit Polls (2008, 2010, 2020); University of New Orleans (2014, 2015, 2016); Magellan Strategies BR (2012); Mason-Dixon/Fox 8 (2019); Fox News (2022, 2024); Louisiana Secretary of State (2011, 2023). Note: Figures for 2015 and 2019 are for jungle primary gubernatorial runoff, and figures for 2014 and 2016 are for jungle primary U.S. Senate runoff.</i>									

Table 5.8 shows the share of the overall electorate comprised of Black voters in races for president, governor, and U.S. Senate between 2008 and 2024. As shown in the table, Democrats satisfied the 30% threshold for Black turnout as part of testing hypothesis H2 in four elections, while reaching or exceeding 29% in four others. These instances include: the 2008 presidential, 2008 U.S. Senate, 2012 presidential, 2014 U.S. Senate, 2015 gubernatorial, 2016 presidential, 2016 U.S. Senate, and the 2019 gubernatorial election. However, in recent cycles, Black turnout has dropped to 25% (2022-2023) to 27% (2024) of those casting ballots.

Table 5.9 White Vote Share for Democratic Candidate in Louisiana									
Office	2008	2010-11	2012	2014-15	2016	2018-19	2020	2022-23	2024
President	14%		16%		15%		22%		20%
Gov				42%		34%			
U.S. Sen.	33%	22%		18%	22%		25%	22%	
<i>Source: Exit Polls (2008, 2010, 2020); University of New Orleans (2014, 2015, 2016); Magellan Strategies BR (2012); Mason-Dixon/Fox 8 (2019); Fox News (2022, 2024). Note: Figures for 2015 and 2019 are for jungle primary gubernatorial runoff, and figures for 2014 and 2016 are for jungle primary U.S. Senate runoff. Democratic candidate totals are aggregated for the 2016, 2020, and 2022 U.S. Senate elections.</i>									

The second criteria required for a 30-30 election is for Democratic candidates to win a 30% vote share among white voters. Table 5.9 demonstrates that, while Democrats exceeded that 30% threshold in all three of the statewide elections won in 2008, 2015, and 2019, other candidates usually lagged far behind in support from white voters. In the five presidential elections conducted during the period of this study, Joe Biden’s support from 22% of white Louisiana voters registers as the strongest Democratic performance, while Obama’s 14% in 2008 narrowly trails Clinton’s 15% in 2016 and his 16% in his 2012 reelection for the worst performances in races with only two major candidates. Aside from Landrieu’s winning performance in 2008 and her 12-point loss in 2014, no Democratic Senate candidate has even breached 40% of support statewide. In large part, this is because no other single Democratic candidate for U.S. Senate has won support from more than 18% of white voters. At the gubernatorial level, Edwards won 42% of support from white voters in the 2015 runoff and 33.5% in 2019, easily exceeding the minima for 30-30 contests in both performances.

Table 5.10 tests hypothesis H2 and whether a 30-30 election is sufficient for Democratic victory by modeling the vote share if Black voters comprised 30% of the electorate (but cast ballots for Democrats at the same rate observed in exit polls) and if 30% of white voters supported the Democratic candidate (but turned out at the same rate reported in exit polls). This analysis holds

support from voters of other races constant. To avoid presenting a scenario in which the total eligible pool of voters exceeds 100%, turnout is proportionally reduced among white voters and those of other races in instances when increasing Black turnout to 30% results in an overcount.

Table 5.10 Testing Hypothesis H2 by Adjusting Black Turnout to 30% and White Democratic Support to 30%									
Office	2008	2010-11	2012	2014-15	2016	2018-19	2020	2022-23	2024
Pres.	51%		49%		49%		46%		46%
Gov.				49%		50%		45%	
U.S. Sen.	49%	46%		50%	40%		45%	46%	
<i>Source: Exit Polls (2008, 2010, 2020); University of New Orleans (2014, 2015, 2016); Magellan Strategies BR (2012); Mason-Dixon/Fox 8 (2019); Fox News (2022, 2024); Author calculations. Note: Figures for 2015 and 2019 are for jungle primary gubernatorial runoff, and figures for 2014 and 2016 are for jungle primary U.S. Senate runoff.</i>									

Applying a 30-30 framework results in Democrats breaching 50% in three elections (the 2008 presidential, 2014 U.S. Senate runoff, and 2019 gubernatorial runoff), while falling slightly below that threshold in the 2008 U.S. Senate race, 2012 presidential, 2015 gubernatorial runoff, and the 2016 presidential elections. These seven elections, in which Democrats would have finished on top, among 13 cycles examined, provide support for hypothesis H2. However, in reality, Democratic candidates won these two races under the conditions reported by Table 5.8 (Black turnout) and Table 5.9 (white support). Overall, these results support the idea that Democrats can win using a 30-30 formula as put forward by hypothesis H2 but suggest that minima does not guarantee victory and is essentially the baseline required. By winning upwards of 10% of Black voters in 2010 (U.S. Senate), 2016 (U.S. Senate), 2020 (presidential), 2020 (U.S. Senate), 2022 (U.S. Senate), and 2024 (presidential), Republican candidates essentially eliminated the path to victory for Democratic candidates in these races—even if the other conditions for a 30-30 election were met.

In 2008, Mary Landrieu won 34% of support from white voters in 2008—a feat that was topped by Jon Bel Edwards when he won 42% in 2015. Because of the relatively small share of Louisiana’s electorate comprised by voters of other races, Democrats may need to generate slightly greater than 30% of support from white voters to get above the 50% threshold needed statewide. For example, a 30-30 election, in which the Democrat wins 95% of support from Black voters who comprise 30% of the electorate and 30% from white voters who comprise 67% of the electorate—along with support from two-thirds of the 2.5% of voters of other races—results in a vote share of 50%. This is slightly lower than the 51.3% that Edwards won against Rispone in the 2019 runoff, in which he won approximately 33.5% of support from white voters and 95% of Black voters who comprised 31% of the electorate. Determining the exact threshold of support needed from white voters in Louisiana depends on the overall share of support Democrats win from Black voters (at least 90% to 95% in the three instances of statewide victory), as well as the level of representation from voters of other races. Louisiana’s Secretary of State reports the percentage of voters who are not Black or white ranged between 2% and 5% over the 16-year period tracked, producing an electorate that has continued to revolve around a Black/white dichotomy.

Table 5.11 Democratic Vote Share from Black Voters in Louisiana									
Office	2008	2010-11	2012	2014-15	2016	2018-19	2020	2022-23	2024
President	69%		66%		64%		62%		58%
Gov.				49%		55%			
U.S. Senator	54%	61%		66%	50%		65%	68%	
<i>Source: Exit Polls (2008, 2010, 2020); University of New Orleans (2014, 2015, 2016); Magellan Strategies BR (2012); Mason-Dixon/Fox 8 (2019); Fox News (2022, 2024); Author calculations. Note: Figures for 2015 and 2019 are for jungle primary gubernatorial runoff, and figures for 2014 and 2016 are for jungle primary U.S. Senate runoff.</i>									

Table 5.12 Democratic Vote Share from White Voters in Louisiana									
Office	2008	2010-11	2012	2014-15	2016	2018-19	2020	2022-23	2024
President	24%		26%		26%		37%		36%
Gov.				50%		46%			
U.S. Sen.	42%	41%		37%	29%		39%	28%	
<i>Source: Exit Polls (2008, 2010, 2020); University of New Orleans (2014, 2015, 2016); Magellan Strategies BR (2012); Mason-Dixon/Fox 8 (2019); Fox News (2022, 2024); Author calculations.</i>									

Table 5.13 Democratic Vote Share from Voters of Other Races in Louisiana									
Office	2008	2010-11	2012	2014-15	2016	2018-19	2020	2022-23	2024
President	7%		8%		10%		3%		6%
Gov.				2%		2%			
U.S. Sen.	3%	3%		3%	12%		5%	6%	
<i>Source: Exit Polls (2008, 2010, 2020); University of New Orleans (2014, 2015, 2016); Magellan Strategies BR (2012); Mason-Dixon/Fox 8 (2019); Fox News (2022, 2024); Author calculations.</i>									

Tables 5.11, 5.12, and 5.13 report the vote share delivered to Democratic candidates from white voters, Black voters, and those of other races. Hypothesis H3 states that, between 2008 and 2024, Black voters have become a larger share of those supporting Democratic candidates in the electorate. However, as shown in Table 5.11, in races for president and U.S. Senate, the vote share provided by Black voters has decreased for Democratic presidential candidates from 69% in 2008 to 58% in 2024. Put differently, at the beginning of this study in 2008, the net vote share delivered to Democrats from Black voters was 28 percentage points. In the 2024 presidential election, the margin generated for Biden from Black voters fell to 22 percentage points. In races for U.S. Senate, while the share of Democratic support from Black voters increased from 54% in 2008 to 68% in 2022, the top Democratic finisher won just 18% of the vote in a first-round defeat to John Kennedy.

Worse yet, in 2020 and 2022, respectively, that figure fell to 12% as both Cassidy and Kennedy won blowout first-round reelection victories against a divided field of multiple Democratic challengers. In gubernatorial elections, although data are only available for 2015 and

2019, these other races are not highly significant because Jindal (2011) and Landry (2019) also recorded landslide GOP gubernatorial victories during the first round of jungle primary voting to win without a runoff. In the two races for which data are included, Jon Bel Edwards improved slightly on his first performance to win 28% of his overall support from Black voters during his 2019 reelection, up from 27% in 2015, the lone finding from Louisiana that shows Black voters delivering an increased share of support to a Democratic candidate. Overall, these results generally disconfirm hypothesis H3 for Louisiana.

Table 5.13 demonstrates that the share of support for Democratic candidates from voters of other races has remained consistent during the period of this study. Alternatively, as shown in Table 5.12, support from white voters for Democratic candidates has followed a more volatile pattern. In presidential races, Harris improved upon Obama's dismal 2008 margin, winning 20% of white voters which represented a net improvement of 4.3 percentage points. In U.S. Senate races, Democrats declined from Mary Landrieu's strong 2008 performance, in which she won 33% of white voters in 2008, to seeing Republican John Kennedy secure support from 78% of white voters in 2022.

Hypothesis H4 tests whether women have become a larger share of those supporting Democratic candidates. Statewide, Census data show that the percentage of Louisiana's electorate comprised by women generally hovers between 52% to 53%.¹⁴ Exit polling and other electoral data demonstrate a consistent Republican gender gap that ranges between one percentage point to 12 percentage points in recent statewide elections, with men favoring Republican candidates in

¹⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2008 - November 2022, compiled by author.

every election cycle between 2008 to 2020.¹⁵ Table 5.14 demonstrates the share of Democratic support generated from women voters as a percentage of each candidate's total.

Table 5.14 Democratic Vote Share from Women in Louisiana									
Office	2008	2010-11	2012	2014-15	2016	2018-19	2020	2022-23	2024
President	61		53		60		59		63
Governor				56		55			
U.S. Sen.	63	52		61	54		68	54	
<i>Source: Exit Polls (2008, 2010, 2020); University of New Orleans (2014, 2015, 2016); Magellan Strategies BR (2012); Mason-Dixon/Fox 8 (2019); Fox News (2022, 2024); Author calculations. Note: Figures for 2015 and 2019 are for jungle primary gubernatorial runoff, and figures for 2014 and 2016 are for jungle primary U.S. Senate runoff. Figures show the percentage of the Democratic candidate's vote total contributed by women.</i>									

As reflected in Table 5.14, the share of Democratic votes from women increased slightly in presidential elections, from 61% to 63% of support, while the level remained steady in gubernatorial elections at 56% in the 2015 runoff and 55% in the 2019 runoff. In U.S. Senate elections, Landrieu won 63%, while longshot Democratic candidates Adrian Perkins (2020) and Gary Chambers (2022) generated 68% and 54% of their respective totals from women. In their losses to Cassidy and Kennedy, however, both candidates won less than 20% of ballots cast statewide. These data do not support hypothesis H4, as the share of female support earned by Democratic candidates has not notably increased during the period of this study.

Table 5.15 Racial Polarization in Louisiana's Electorate									
Office	2008	2010-11	2012	2014-15	2016	2018-19	2020	2022-23	2024
President	80%		71%		63%		67%		62%
Governor				42%		64%			
U.S. Sen.	63%	61%		56%	48%		61%	62%	
<i>Source: Exit Polls (2008, 2010, 2020); University of New Orleans (2014, 2015, 2016); Magellan Strategies BR (2012); Mason-Dixon/Fox 8 (2019); Fox News (2022, 2024). Note: Figures for 2015 and 2019 are for jungle primary gubernatorial runoff, and figures for 2014 and 2016 are for jungle primary U.S. Senate runoff. Figures show the GOP's gap between the share of support won from Black voters subtracted from the share won from white voters.</i>									

¹⁵ Compilation of Exit Polls (2008, 2010, 2020); Survey research from The University of New Orleans (2014, 2015, 2016); Magellan Strategies BR (2012); Mason-Dixon/Fox 8 (2019); U.S. Census data; author calculations.

To evaluate whether racial polarization has increased, as put forward by hypothesis H7, Table 5.15 charts the gap between the share of votes won by Republican candidates from white and Black voters between 2008 and 2024. At the presidential level, Louisiana’s electorate has become less polarized by race, with a massive 80% gap separating Black and white levels of support for John McCain in 2008 declining to 71 percentage points in 2012, and down to 62 percentage points in 2024. After an unusually strong performance from Edwards against Vitter in the 2015 runoff, the level of racial polarization in the 2019 runoff reverted to a 64-percentage point gap separating support for Edwards’ Republican challenger from white and Black voters. A similar gap in the 60-plus percentage range observed in four out of six U.S. Senate cycles tracked by this study. These data generally disconfirm Hypothesis H7 and indicate that racial polarization in support for Republican candidates has varied between 42% to 64% in gubernatorial and U.S. Senate elections, while steadily decreasing at the presidential level from 80% to 62%.

Table 5.16 Gender Polarization in Louisiana's Electorate									
Office	2008	2010-11	2012	2014-15	2016	2018-19	2020	2022-23	2024
President	8%		7%		12%		6%		8%
Governor				5%		14%			
U.S. Senator	9%	1%		12%	9%		11%	5%	
<i>Source: Exit Polls (2008, 2010, 2020); University of New Orleans (2014, 2015, 2016); Magellan Strategies BR (2012); Mason-Dixon/Fox 8 (2019); Fox News (2022, 2024); Note: Figures for 2015 and 2019 are for jungle primary gubernatorial runoff, and figures for 2014 and 2016 are for jungle primary U.S. Senate runoff. Figures show the GOP's gap between the share of support won from female voters subtracted from the share won from male voters.</i>									

Hypothesis H8 states that between 2008 to 2024, gender polarization has increased in the electorate. Table 5.16 tests this proposition in Louisiana by tracking the gap in support for Republican candidates from male and female voters. These data demonstrate a similar pattern recorded as part of testing hypothesis H7, where there has been a greater of level of volatility in U.S. Senate races, as well as a major shift recorded between the gubernatorial runoff of 2015 and

2019, where support for Edwards among men slid from 56% to a still impressive 44% vote share. In fact, the 44% of the male vote claimed by Edwards in 2019 represents the third best performance from a Democrat recorded as part of this case study, after the 47% vote share won by Landrieu in 2008. Although a consistent gender gap has remained through the duration of this study, the data do not support H8's contention that the level of gender polarization has increased.

Table 5.17 Percent Black among Democratic Officeholders in Louisiana									
Office	2008	2011	2013	2015	2017	2019	2021	2023	2024
Statewide (U.S. Sen., Gov., Constitutional Officers)	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Congress	0%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
St. Senate	33%	53%	53%	57%	57%	75%	75%	82%	82%
St. House	38%	51%	51%	57%	57%	74%	74%	84%	84%
General Assembly	36%	52%	52%	52%	57%	57%	74%	84%	84%
<i>Source: Louisiana House of Representatives, Louisiana Senate; Author calculations.</i>									

As foreshadowed by David Vitter's warning that "any white majority district in the state can elect a Republican," the trajectory that saw the Democratic Party's membership in Louisiana's General Assembly shift from Black members representing 36% of the caucus in 2008 (28 legislators) to 84% in 2024 (36 legislators) was paved through intentional efforts that positioned the Republican Party as the political party of white residents and the Democratic Party as the party of Black Louisianans (Deslatte, 2011). Table 5.17 shows that while Louisiana Democrats have not elected a non-white statewide official and only elected one white member of Congress (2009-2011) during the 16-year period observed, a dramatic shift has occurred in the demographic make-up of state's House and Senate chambers.

Applying a difference in proportions test to determine if Black elected officials have become a larger share of Democratic Party officeholders in Louisiana reveals significance in the

shift from 2008 to 2024 in the state House, state Senate, and General Assembly as a whole. For state Senate, a difference of proportions test produces a Z score of -2.67 and a p value of 0.004, reflecting that the share of Black Democrats has increased from 33% (eight of 24 members) in 2008 to 82% (nine of 11 members) in 2024. Similarly, a test of the change in share of Democratic officeholders serving in the state House who are Black yields a Z score of -4.19 and a p value that is less than 0.001, while the share of Black Democrats increasing from 38% (20 of 53) in 2008 to 84% (27 of 32) in 2024). Looking at the General Assembly as a whole produces a Z score of -5.02 and a p value of less than 0.00001. Through the creation of majority-minority districts as the cornerstone of Democratic legislative representation in Louisiana, the number of Black Democrats serving increased during the period of this study, even as Democrats overall lost representation in the House and Senate. These data offer strong support for hypothesis H5.

Table 5.18 Racial Polarization among Officeholders: GOP Gap in Number of Non-White Officeholders in Louisiana After Election									
Office	2008	2010-11	2012	2014-15	2016	2018-19	2020	2022-23	2024
Statewide (U.S. Sen., Gov., and Const. Officers)		1		2		1		1	
Congress	1	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(2)
St. Senate	(9)		(11)		(12)		(12)		(7)
St. House	(27)	(29)	(28)	(27)	(30)	(31)	(32)	(25)	(22)
<i>Source: Louisiana House of Representatives, Louisiana Senate; Author calculations.</i>									

Recognizing the changes that have occurred within the demographics of the Democratic Party's membership, Hypothesis H9 posits that racial polarization has increased among state officeholders. Table 5.18 assesses the gap in the number of non-white officeholders elected by Democrats and Republicans between in statewide offices, Congress, state Senate, and State House between 2008 and 2024. Although state legislative Republicans saw a breakthrough when Elbert

Guillory switched parties in 2013 to become the first Black Republican state senator since Reconstruction, the Louisiana GOP elected few other non-white leaders during the period tracked by this study. Outside of the brief two-year period in which Joseph Cao represented the state’s 2nd District in Congress (2009-2011), and the second term of Governor Bobby Jindal (2012-2016), a clear divide can be observed between the share of non-white leaders elected from the Democratic and Republican parties.

At the state legislative level, Louisiana’s Senate Democratic Caucus has been led by Gerald Boudreaux since 2021. A member of the Legislative Black Caucus, Boudreaux succeeded Troy Carter, who served as Senate minority leader from 2016 to 2021 before being elected to represent the state’s 2nd Congressional District. Since 2024, Bayou State House Democrats have been led by Representative Matthew Williard, who succeeded Sam Jenkins who served from 2020 to 2024, before being elected to the Senate. Jenkins succeeded Robert Johnson, who served as minority leader between 2018 to 2020. Both Willard and Johnson are part of the legislative Black Caucus, while Jenkins was the most recent white Democrat to lead his party’s caucus in the Louisiana General Assembly.

Table 5.19 Chi Square Test: Louisiana General Assembly, Non-white and White Members by Political Party						
Office	2008	2011	2015	2019	2023	2025
Chi Squared	30.76	50.51	55.96	89.55	108.11	111.89
P Value	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01
Significance	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Source: Louisiana House of Representatives, Louisiana Senate; Author calculations.</i>						

As another means of assessing whether racial polarization has increased among Republicans and Democrats in Louisiana’s General Assembly, Table 5.19 calculates chi squares at four-year intervals after elections for House and Senate to determine if there is a change in the probabilities recorded during the period of this study. Although the level of polarization is

significant in all six cycles examined, a clear trend can be observed through the chi squared values that Louisiana’s General Assembly has become increasingly polarized by race. Testing the shift in the number of white members in each party between 2008 and 2024 produces a Z score of 38.3 and a p value of less than 0.01, indicating a strong level of significance. The clearest explanation for this phenomenon is that, as the number of Black Democrats has increased from 28 in 2008 to 36 in 2024 despite the overall loss of 34 Democratic seats, almost all the Republicans members elected to replace these Democrats have been white.

Table 5.20 Percent Women among Democratic Officeholders in Louisiana After Election									
Office	2008	2011	2013	2015	2017	2019	2021	2023	2024
Statewide (U.S. Sen., Gov., Const. Officers)	33%	100%	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Congress	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
St. Senate	33%	20%	20%	21%	21%	25%	25%	18%	18%
St. House	17%	18%	18%	21%	21%	23%	23%	34%	34%
General Assembly	22%	22%	18%	18%	21%	21%	23%	30%	30%
<i>Source: Louisiana House of Representatives, Louisiana Senate; Author calculations.</i>									

At the state level, elected offices are also dominated by men across both the Democratic and Republican caucuses. In the state Senate, as of 2024, just five (13%) of its 39 members are women, divided between two Democrats (18% of members) and three Republicans (11% of members). In the state House, just 29 (28%) of 105 members are women, comprised of 18-Republicans (25% of members) and 11-Democrats (35% of members). This marks a change in representation among both parties from 2008, when the state House included 14 women, split between nine Democrats (17% of members) and five Republicans (10% of members). Similarly, in 2008, the state Senate included 10 women in 2008, with eight Democrats (33% of members) and two Republicans (13% of members). These trends are consistent with the challenges women

face in winning elected office in states with deeply conservative political cultures, despite the greater frequency of electoral participation from female residents.

Tested between 2008 and 2024, Hypothesis H6 submits that women have become a larger share of Democratic Party officeholders. Table 5.20 assesses the share of women elected among Democrats serving statewide, in the U.S. House, state Senate, state House, and the General Assembly as a whole. Outside of Mary Landrieu, Democrats did not elect a woman to statewide office or to Congress during the 16-year period observed. In terms of gender diversity among state senators, Louisiana Democrats lost ground during the period tracked by this study—going from eight women (33%) serving in 2008 to just two women (18%) in 2024. In the state House, the number of Democratic women has gone from nine (17%) serving in 2008 to 11 (35%) in 2024. Although the percentage of women among Democrats overall has improved, representation has increased by just two members, as the party lost 21 House seats during the 16-year period of this study.

Using a difference of proportions test to compare the share of Democratic women serving in Louisiana’s House in 2008 to 2024 demonstrates that the shift has been significant, producing a Z score of -1.89 and a p value of 0.03. Looking at changes in the share of women among Democrats in the General Assembly as a whole produces a Z score of -0.97 and a p value of 0.166—a result that is not significant—as the number of Democratic women went from 17 (22%) in 2008 to 13 (30%) in 2024. These calculations are likely affected by the fact that the overall number of female Democrats decreased, even as the percentage Democrats who are women increased slightly.

Table 5.21 Chi Square Test: Louisiana General Assembly, Men and Women Elected by Political Party						
Office	2008	2011	2015	2019	2023	2025
Chi Squared	3.2	4.84	1.686	1.2	1.49	1.49
P Value	0.07	0.03	0.17	0.27	0.22	0.22
Significance	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
<i>Source: Louisiana House of Representatives, Louisiana Senate; Author calculations.</i>						

Hypothesis H10 claims that gender polarization has increased among public officeholders over the period of this study. This is evaluated using a chi square test of independence to assess the relationship between party and gender in the General Assembly at six intervals. As shown in Table 5.21, significance is found within a 95% confidence interval in just one cycle—after the 2015 legislative elections. Calculating the change in female representation between parties from 2008 to 2024 produces a Z score of 5.9 and a p value of less than 0.01, indicating that the Louisiana General Assembly has become less polarized by gender.

Ultimately, the data demonstrate that women are highly under-represented in Louisiana’s General Assembly in both parties. Among Republicans, the share of women was as 11% (seven of 58 members) in 2008 and increased to 21% in 2024 at 21 members among 101 legislators serving in the General Assembly. For Democrats, the share of women in 2008 was 22% (17 of 77 members), which moved to 30% in 2024 (13 of 43 members). Although a larger share of Democratic legislators are women, a larger number of Republicans are women, complicating notions of polarization by gender between the parties and serving to disconfirm hypothesis H10 for Louisiana.

2008 TO 2012: THE RISE OF LOUISIANA’S REPUBLICAN MAJORITY

Outside of Mary Landrieu’s exceptional 2008 U.S. Senate reelection campaign, the period between 2008 to 2012 is notable for the rise of the Bayou State’s Republican power structure that

set the foundation the next decade. In 2008, as Landrieu posted an impressive margin that exceeded her vote share in both 1996 and 2002, Obama's performance among white voters in Louisiana marked the largest drop off from the previous cycle recorded in any state in the nation. Among white Louisianans, the 44th President's support fell 10-percentage points below Kerry's 2004 performance to reach an abysmal 14%, the lowest level recorded in any cycle during the period of this study (Tilove, 2008). That same year, Democrats also fell short of expectations in contests for the U.S. House in the state's 2nd and 6th Districts, dropping from three-of-seven to just one representative in Congress.

In the state's most heavily Democratic 2nd District, which included a majority Black population and voted for Obama that year by a 49-percentage point margin, embattled Congressman Bill Jefferson lost his bid for a tenth term. Jefferson, the first African American man to represent Louisiana since Reconstruction, was indicted in June of 2007 "on 16 counts of bribery, fraud, and racketeering related to hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes paid to him and family members for help on African telecom contracts" (Bresnahan, 2008). Jefferson was defeated by Vietnamese American, Anh "Joseph" Cao, in a December runoff, which recorded a turnout drop off of about 60% from the November general election. Cao had previously finished fifth in a six-candidate field for the state's 103rd House district and staked his campaign around the salacious details of Jefferson's indictment, including "revelations in 2005 that FBI agents found \$90,000 in marked bills in his freezer" (Krupa, 2008). The next year, Jefferson was sentenced to 13 years in federal prison, representing the ever longest sentence for a U.S. Representative (U.S. Department of Justice, 2009). Cao's victory was short-lived, serving a single term before he was defeated by then-state Representative Cedric Richmond in 2010.

In a May 2008 special election to replace 6th District GOP Congressman Richard Baker, who resigned to accept a job as a financial services lobbyist, Don Cazayoux won a hard-fought contest to become the first Democrat to represent the Baton Rouge-based district since 1974. In the general election, Cazayoux faced a bruising intraparty challenge from state Representative Michael Jackson, who took issue with the national Democratic Party's decision to support the incumbent and challenged him as an independent. The race exposed divisions inside the Democratic Party, between Cazayoux, who is white, and Jackson, who is Black, helping to elect Republican Bill Cassidy in the November 2008 general election (McArdle, 2008A). That same cycle, Republican John Fleming narrowly defeated Democrat Paul Carmouche in a December runoff to claim the open 4th District seat by a margin of 356 votes. To keep pace with the \$1.8 million raised by his opponent, Fleming spent approximately \$1 million of his personal fortune (McArdle, 2008B; *OpenSecrets*, 2008).

Gearing up for his 2010 reelection campaign against three-term 3rd District Congressman Charlie Melançon, Vitter leaned heavily into the issue of immigration. In an October 2010 television ad, entitled "Enter Here," the narrator decries, "Charlie Melançon, thanks to him, we might as well put out a welcome sign for illegal aliens," as the camera flashes to group holding balloons and greeting a group of Hispanic men cutting through a border fence with a sign that says, "Bienvenido a los USA!" As the men enter a limousine and carry an enlarged check through its window, the narrator closes, "Thanks to Charlie Melançon, it's no wonder illegals keep coming and coming and coming" (Ramirez, 2010).

Reflecting on how saturated the issue of immigration became among Republican candidates, political consultant Preston Robinson remarked: "I've literally seen the same ad on immigration recut by the same firm and used in four different states at the same time, but the same

B-roll of a young Hispanic male with wire cutters and a fence and it's night, and it's the same thing everywhere" (Robinson, 2024). To differentiate himself, Vitter continued his crusade by unsuccessfully attempting to change U.S. Census laws and blaming the loss of Louisiana's 7th Congressional District on undocumented immigrants, claiming "Louisiana stands to lose clout in Congress, while states that welcome illegal immigrants stand to unfairly benefit from artificially inflated population totals" (Epstein, 2010). The issue provided a welcome distraction from the junior senator's personal life.

When Vitter's phone number was discovered in connection with the D.C. Madam prostitution scandal, he issued a terse written statement saying, "This was a very serious sin in my past... Several years ago, I asked for and received forgiveness from God and my wife in confession and marriage counseling. Out of respect for my family, I will keep my discussion of the matter there with God and them" (*Associated Press*, 2007). While avoiding discussions of his personal scandal, Vitter made family values and opposition to abortion and gay marriage hallmarks of his campaign. During an October debate, Vitter attempted to use one of Melançon's campaign ads that focused on his own indiscretion against him, calling it "R-rated," and saying, "If that's part of your Melançon family values, Charlie, I don't want anything to do with it" (Kornacki, 2010). Although Melançon responded that Vitter had "sinned... lied... broken the law... [and] embarrassed the state," Vitter only acknowledged the scandal in passing, saying, "I think Louisiana citizens all around the state heard me, and I think they understood me" (Ibid).

Despite his opponent's opposition to Obama's signature Affordable Care Act (ACA) while in the House, Vitter nonetheless tied him to the president, charging "Charlie Melançon has voted with President Obama's big government, big spending agenda at least 84% of the time" (Brusk, 2010). Ultimately, Vitter was reelected to the U.S. Senate in a landslide, setting a new record for

a federal Republican candidate by winning 56-out-of-64 parishes. Vitter's victory was so resounding that he even claimed traditionally Democratic strongholds like East Baton Rouge Parish, and limited Melançon to a 52,200-vote margin in Orleans Parish.

Following his successful reelection campaign in which he garnered 66% of the vote, Governor Bobby Jindal presided over the Louisiana GOP's first trifecta since Reconstruction. Along with the governor's resounding victory—and with the decision of sitting Attorney General Buddy Caldwell to switch parties that February ahead of the election—Republicans swept all seven executive offices in the 2011 cycle. Jindal went to work with a Republican legislative majority that included 13-former Democrats who switched parties, including six members of the state Senate and seven members of the House (Louisiana Republican Legislative Delegation, 2019). Term limits and redistricting also helped Republicans to flip four seats from Democratic control in 2011, setting up a comfortable 58-seat House majority and a 25-seat Senate majority. Following the state's long-held tradition of supporting the governor's choice for speaker, the House majority elected Rep. Chuck Kleckley of Calcasieu, demonstrating the relative strength of the Bayou State's governor over the General Assembly.

After breaking Louisiana's 40-year streak as a presidential bellwether in 2008, the 2012 presidential election cycle brought few surprises. With a six-percentage point increase in Black turnout from the 2008 cycle—equivalent to just over a full percentage point of the electorate—Obama slightly improved on his previous margin in a 17.2 percentage point loss to Mitt Romney. In the wake of the elimination of the state's 7th Congressional District, which had been held by Republican Charles Boustany since the 2004 cycle, Boustany challenged first term GOP Representative Jeff Landry for the state's 3rd Congressional District. With approximately 80% of

the new southwestern district coming from Boustany's previous 7th District, the four-term congressman emerged as a heavy favorite.

The intraparty contest served as a proxy for the larger national debate between Tea Party and establishment Republicans with Speaker John Boehner supporting Boustany and Jim DeMint and FreedomWorks supporting Landry (Isenstadt, 2012). Attacking Boustany for voting for an increase in the debt ceiling, Landry cast the election as a referendum on business as usual in D.C., saying: "Every single day, even while we are here tonight, he is racking up his special congressional retirement which will be paid for on your backs... Ladies and gentlemen—Charles voted with Nancy Pelosi to increase his own pay... Now, do you believe that is a conservative vote?" (Snider, 2012). Outraising Landry by close to a 2-1 margin, Boustany defeated the junior congressman in the runoff by 61% to 39% (Isenstadt, 2012).

2014 TO 2019: AFTER CASSIDY OUSTS LANDRIEU,

EDWARDS CAPITALIZES ON DIVISION IN LOUISIANA'S GOP

As state level Republicans expanded their ranks during the election cycles between 2014 and 2019—and Louisiana Republicans geared up to assume starring roles on the national stage—John Bel Edwards defied political gravity to win the governorship in 2015 and 2019. This period represented the last gasp of Democratic political strength before Republicans consolidated power up and down the ballot. Once again, in 2014, Mary Landrieu emerged as a top target of the NRSC. However, this time, the three-term Democrat was running in a low turnout, mid-term environment, and left holding considerable baggage from her support of the Obama administration's legislative agenda. Leveraging his prodigious fundraising ability and career as a Baton Rouge physician and professor of medicine, three-term Congressman Bill Cassidy cleared the GOP field of serious challengers.

Louisiana's open primary system also helped the more moderate Cassidy to consolidate support without giving up his identity as a pragmatist. For example, the Baton Rouge Republican responded to weak marks from the Heritage Action advocacy group ahead of the race, saying: "I'm not going to vote to appease some private think tank in D.C" (Blum, 2013). The only other declared Republican to garner a significant share of votes—at 14% in the first round of voting—was Rob Maness, who secured the support of Jim DeMint's Senate Conservatives Fund despite running a shoestring campaign that attracted little support from more mainstream GOP backers (Alpert, 2013).

Ahead of the 2014 election, conservative groups poured millions into attacking Landrieu's support for the ACA, dubbed Obamacare, prompting her to respond with her own ads promoting legislation that would modify the landmark health care law (Raju, 2014). Cassidy was aided by the NRSC in making it a fixture of his campaign to highlight Landrieu's role in supporting what he called "the unaffordable care act." The issue also took centerstage in Cassidy's media strategy, with his campaign localizing a broader criticism of the ACA made nationally to claim that, "Thanks to Mary Landrieu being the deciding vote to pass Obamacare, almost 100-thousand Louisianans were told they're being thrown off their health insurance" (Elliot, 2014).

With racial polarization on the rise, Landrieu was caught between the necessity of turning out Black voters loyal to the 44th President and carving out a unique lane of support from white voters who had become increasingly comfortable with casting ballots for Republicans. Also at issue was the national Democratic Party's resistance to supporting oil and gas priorities that the state's senior senator had long staked her reputation on, such as approving the Keystone XL oil pipeline. After Landrieu's attempt to call the question on the measure was narrowly defeated in a 59-41 vote less than a month before the December runoff with Cassidy, he called the gambit a

“Fail Mary” and said it was emblematic of the national Democratic Party’s leftward shift (Fausset, 2014).

Working on behalf of Cassidy’s campaign, GOP pollster Dan Judy described how attitudes among Louisiana voters toward Landrieu had shifted over the years:

I did focus groups in New Orleans... Baton Rouge... Lafayette, and I was kind of testing out some [messages]. And it was funny because people were like, “she hasn’t changed. So, Mary—this is just Mary. She’s always been liberal.” They were just like, before, it didn’t matter. It didn’t really matter. Now, with Barack Obama in the White House... the things she’s done over the last six years [with] the Obama administration had been really harmful... Before, the liberal stuff she did didn’t really matter that much, but now, this stuff’s hurting us and it’s just time for her to go. So... it was really, purely ideological—Mary Landrieu is just too liberal for the state now (Judy, 2024).

Ultimately, Landrieu was defeated in the runoff by a margin of 12-percentage points, marking the defeat of the last federally elected, statewide official to serve Louisiana and the first time that the state had not sent a Democrat to the U.S. Senate in 138-years. The 2014 election cycle also saw important developments in the state’s U.S. House delegation. Along with the election of GOP Representatives Ralph Abraham and Garret Graves to serve the state’s 5th and 6th congressional districts, respectively, four-term 1st District Congressman Steve Scalise was elevated by his colleagues to serve as the House Majority Whip.

Following the surprising primary defeat of Eric Cantor in Virginia’s 7th District, Scalise bested Illinois Congressman Peter Roskam to claim the coveted leadership post. Scalise’s election demonstrated the increasing influence of the House GOP’s more conservative, Southern wing. Former Louisiana congressman Bob Livingston described the significance of Scalise winning the post, saying: “He’s a fighter and a Southerner... He represents the biggest constituency in the caucus” (Costa & O’Keefe, 2014). Shortly after Scalise’s election as whip, he became embroiled in a national controversy over an earlier campaign appearance before the David Duke-founded European-American Unity and Rights Organization (EURO). With his GOP colleagues rallying

around him, Scalise apologized and retained his newfound leadership position, explaining that: “Twelve years ago, I spoke to many different Louisiana groups as a state representative... It was a mistake I regret, and I emphatically oppose the divisive racial and religious views groups like these hold” (Sherman & Bresnahan, 2015).

Gearing up for his own run for governor, Vitter’s unusual level of involvement in state legislative races sometimes made for awkward encounters with other leading Louisiana Republicans. During Jindal’s 2011 reelection campaign, Vitter sent out a public fundraising missive on behalf of his independent expenditure group, the Louisiana Committee for a Republican Majority, writing: “the focus on true conservatives in Louisiana is an exciting development... I’m hoping it signals a bolder, more engaged Bobby already” (Moller, 2011). Turmoil in Louisiana’s financial standing also helped to set the table for the 2015 gubernatorial campaign, with John Bel Edwards consistently opposing the policies that helped to create the state’s budget woes in his post as House Minority Leader from 2012-16.

Jindal made his hope to eliminate Louisiana’s personal and corporate income tax a hallmark of his second term legislative agenda. As the governor’s approval rating sank from the 60s into the 30s by 2013, state Representative Edwards encouraged his Republican colleagues to buck the increasingly unpopular governor, decrying: “There have been growing concerns that we’re not an independent, co-equal branch of government” (Bridges, 2013). Indeed, despite strong support from national pundits and conservative think tanks, even Jindal’s closest legislative allies, such as Speaker Chuck Kleckley, opposed his tax plan, which included trading income taxes for new sales taxes. At the time, then-treasurer John Kennedy remarked to the press: “the governor’s plan was not going to pass. Nor should it, if for no other reason than it would have raised taxes on business by \$500 million” (Alford, 2013). Rather than enacting a sweeping tax package, Jindal

settled for a mix of smaller tax breaks, centered toward corporations. An analysis of the measures adopted during his governorship found: “In all, annual corporate tax exemptions rose during Jindal’s term by about \$1 billion, to \$1.96 billion in 2014,” exempting more than 80% of corporate income taxes that would otherwise be collected under state law (Respaut & Thevenot, 2016).

Following income and sales taxes, Louisiana’s next largest source of revenue has historically been derived from severance taxes, assessed on oil and gas production. Between 2014 to 2016, the average price of crude oil sold in Louisiana dropped by 42%, falling from \$97 to \$56 per barrel and contributing to the state’s significant budget deficit (Upton, 2016). As part of Jindal’s plan to address an estimated \$1.6 billion shortfall in 2015, the governor proposed cutting, “\$600 million total, or 82 percent of the state’s funding for its colleges and universities,” which “would amount to the biggest legislative downsizing ever faced by higher education in the U.S” (Wong, 2015). After receiving bipartisan public outcry, Jindal and the legislature were able to avoid this scale of budget cuts by embracing one-time funding sources, such as the sale of the state’s long-term tobacco settlement for “an upfront lump sum of \$750 million,” and “drawing down \$520 million from the Medicaid Trust Fund for the Elderly and \$540 million from a reserve fund for state employee healthcare” (Respaut & Thevenot, 2016). Treasurer John Kennedy likened the moves to “a junkie selling his TV or smartphone to buy another fix,” but the short-term infusion of resources allowed Jindal to punt the most difficult decisions over Louisiana’s financial future to the next governor (Ibid).

With Jindal turning his attention toward a 2016 campaign for president, declaring his candidacy in June of 2015, Louisiana residents were left to select his successor as governor. As Edwards emerged as the only serious Democratic contender, Vitter launched his long-awaited gubernatorial campaign vying for GOP support against sitting lieutenant governor Jay Dardenne

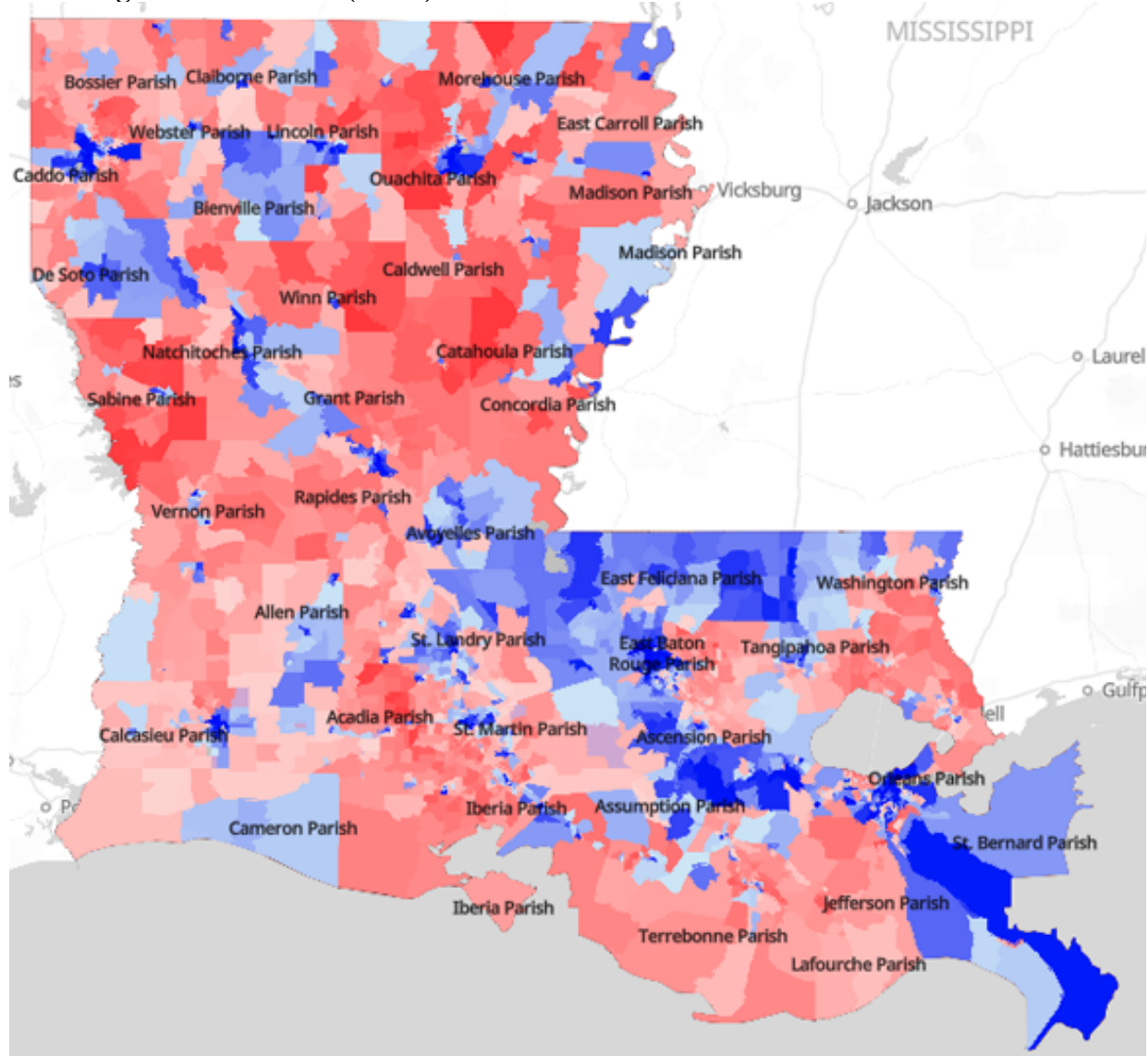
and former lieutenant governor and then-public service commissioner Scott Angelle. Early polls pegged Vitter as the favorite to advance to a head-to-head contest with Edwards, placing a prime target on his back for his fellow Republican candidates in the race.

Vitter's strategy of laying low and hoping his momentum would carry him toward the November runoff was on full view at a three-person televised debate that included Edwards, Dardenne, and Angelle, with Dardenne calling Vitter's absence the "elephant in the room" (Crisp, 2015). Campaigning as "the true conservative in the race," Vitter faced sustained attacks from his Republican rivals throughout the lengthy jungle primary campaign, with Angelle decrying his ability to make decisions for Louisiana families, saying "We can't trust David Vitter to handle our children's educations. He's not only been wrong on fornication, he's been wrong on taxation and he's been wrong on education" (Elliot, 2015).

After narrowly beating out Angelle and Dardenne with 23% of votes cast in the first round of voting—with Edwards finishing first at 40%—Vitter produced an ad in which he openly addressed the prostitution scandal that had long plagued him. This move represented a break with his previous strategy of pivoting away from any mentions of his indiscretion. Speaking face-to-camera, Vitter acknowledged, "Fifteen years ago, I failed my family but found forgiveness and love," before the scene flashed to him enjoying dinner with his wife and children (Deslatte, 2015). With Edwards running on a conservative platform that included being anti-abortion and pro-gun rights, he found the support of Republican Jay Dardenne. The lieutenant governor and third-place finisher strongly endorsed his campaign in the runoff against Vitter, saying that his choice was "not a case of choosing the lesser of two evils," and that Edwards would "govern in a bipartisan manner based upon what's best for Louisiana, without regard for how it plays to a national

audience” (Litten, 2015). For his part, Angelle declined to endorse either candidate—a decision that made clear Republicans were not united behind Vitter’s candidacy.

Figure 5.8 Edwards (+12.2) Defeats Vitter in 2015 Gubernatorial Runoff



Source: Redistricter.com, created by author.

When votes were cast in the November gubernatorial runoff, Edwards won in dominant fashion, claiming 39-out-of-64 parishes. Figure 5.8 demonstrates the impressive scale of Edwards’ victory, in which the Democrat defeated Vitter outright in conservative areas across the state that reliably vote Republican, such as Jefferson Davis Parish, Calcasieu Parish, Rapides Parish, among

a host of others. Edwards also secured substantially stronger margins in areas that usually tilt Democratic, such as East Baton Rouge, where he generated a margin of 42,000 votes as part of his 12-point win statewide.

However, after he was sworn in as governor, members of the House defied the state's tradition of backing the governor's pick for speaker by selecting state Representative Taylor Barras to serve from 2016 to 2020. Although Barras, a Republican, had switched parties in 2011 after being first elected to the House as a Democrat, Edwards had asked the legislature to support his fellow Democrat Walt Leger. The legislative race marked the first contested vote for speaker since 1984, and its result represented a compromise between Edwards' choice and the candidate championed by the body's most conservative Republicans, Representative Cameron Henry. When he finished on the losing side of the legislative vote, Henry opined: "It simply had to do with the fact that some members felt that I almost was a little too conservative for the body" (Ballard, 2016A).

Following Vitter's defeat in the gubernatorial contest, attention turned to selecting his successor in the 2016 U.S. Senate race. With Jindal exiting the GOP presidential primary after failing to gain traction before any ballots were cast, Trump claimed a majority of Louisiana's delegates in the state's 2016 Super Tuesday primary, defeating Texas Senator Ted Cruz by a 41% to 38% margin. As the race for U.S. Senate shaped up in concert with the presidential campaign, state treasurer John Kennedy launched his third bid for the office following unsuccessful tries in 2004 and 2008. This time, Kennedy hitched his wagon to Trump and his style of politics as he competed against two sitting Republican members of the U.S. House, 3rd District Congressman Charles Boustany and 4th District Congressman John Fleming, all vying for a spot in the December runoff.

When both Boustany and Fleming criticized Trump during the fallout from his comments on the infamous Access Hollywood tape—with Boustany going the furthest to call the remarks “reprehensible” and releasing a statement saying “there is no situation where derogatory and chauvinistic language characterizing women in this way is acceptable”—Kennedy declined to weigh in (*WWL*, 2016). Former Kennedy chief of staff Preston Robinson explained how the Oxford-educated Kennedy’s style aligned with both the 45th President’s and Louisiana’s populist tradition:

This is one of those rare occasions where Louisiana was ahead of the rest of the country. Because, while Louisiana is considered a conservative state, it’s really not. It’s a conservative-leaning, populist state and that goes back to Huey Long... and sort of the colorful commentary wrapped up in populism and anti-establishment rhetoric, John was doing that way before Trump... Of course, John is very quotable, and Trump is quotable, you know, in a different way I guess, but it’s the same thing of trying to attach personality to it and get back some of what they saw in their youth. These are both older guys—they grew up with it still being a more personality-driven game, and so they use that language to sort of make themselves more human and less just... cargo ships for policy points.

Ultimately, voters need to like you. And I think they’ve both taken the approach of wanting to be liked. Trump, I think has taken it from being tough and John has taken it for being clever or witty. But it’s the same thing. It’s trying to make [voters] see a person version of you, in addition to a policy version of you (Robinson, 2024).

With near universal name recognition after serving as a statewide elected official for 16-years and running two prior U.S. Senate campaigns, Kennedy emerged as the race’s early favorite. Kennedy’s political base in the state’s north shore—located equidistant from New Orleans, Baton Rouge, and the Mississippi coast—also helped him to garner endorsements in the GOP stronghold of St. Tammany Parish, with his primary opponent Boustany drawing his political base in Lafayette and Fleming from Shreveport. This left Baton Rouge and the New Orleans suburbs as primary competitive, neutral territory of the campaign. When the state’s votes were cast that November, John Kennedy emerged in first place with Democrat Foster Campbell narrowly beating out Charles Boustany for the second spot in the December runoff. The next month, Kennedy

handily defeated Campbell by a margin of 22-percentage points. Robinson explained the importance that sharing the ballot with Trump had in producing that outcome:

The big risk that year was always going into a runoff against Charles Boustany, and it was down to the last few boxes. And if you didn't have this big, outside populist driver, would John have gotten over the hump? I don't know. If he had gone into that runoff with... Charles Boustany instead of Foster Campbell, I think there would have been an immediate wave of money from Washington for Boustany, and I think it would have been a very difficult race to win...

You win by 20-points against Foster Campbell, but you might have lost by 20 against Charles Boustany. You know, a couple of boxes make the difference on whether you're the state's King Kong politician, or whether you're a guy who... always loses the big ones (Robinson, 2024).

Because of the decision by Fleming and Boustany to seek the U.S. Senate seat, Louisiana's congressional delegation also experienced considerable turnover that would have significant implications for the nation's political future. In the state's 3rd district, reserve deputy Clay Higgins defeated Scott Angelle. John Mathis, who worked in support of electing Higgins tied his victory to the anti-establishment mood sweeping Louisiana, along with residual conservative resentment toward Angelle for his lack of support for David Vitter's gubernatorial campaign during the previous year. Mathis remarked: "We believed that Scott Angelle created long-term damage to the state of Louisiana when he refused to support Sen. Vitter and allowed his supporters to raise money for John Bel Edwards" (Ballard, 2016B). Former Vitter aide, Kyle Ruckert, "ran a Super PAC called Make Louisiana Great that spent about \$200,000, mostly on television ads attacking Angelle," named with an ode to Trump's slogan (Ibid). Running with endorsements from both the incumbent congressman and the Freedom Caucus, Mike Johnson was elected to succeed Fleming in the state's conservative 4th District. At the time, pundits noted the similarities between the two men, speculating: "it's fair to say that Johnson would be a near-carbon copy representative" (Alford, 2016).

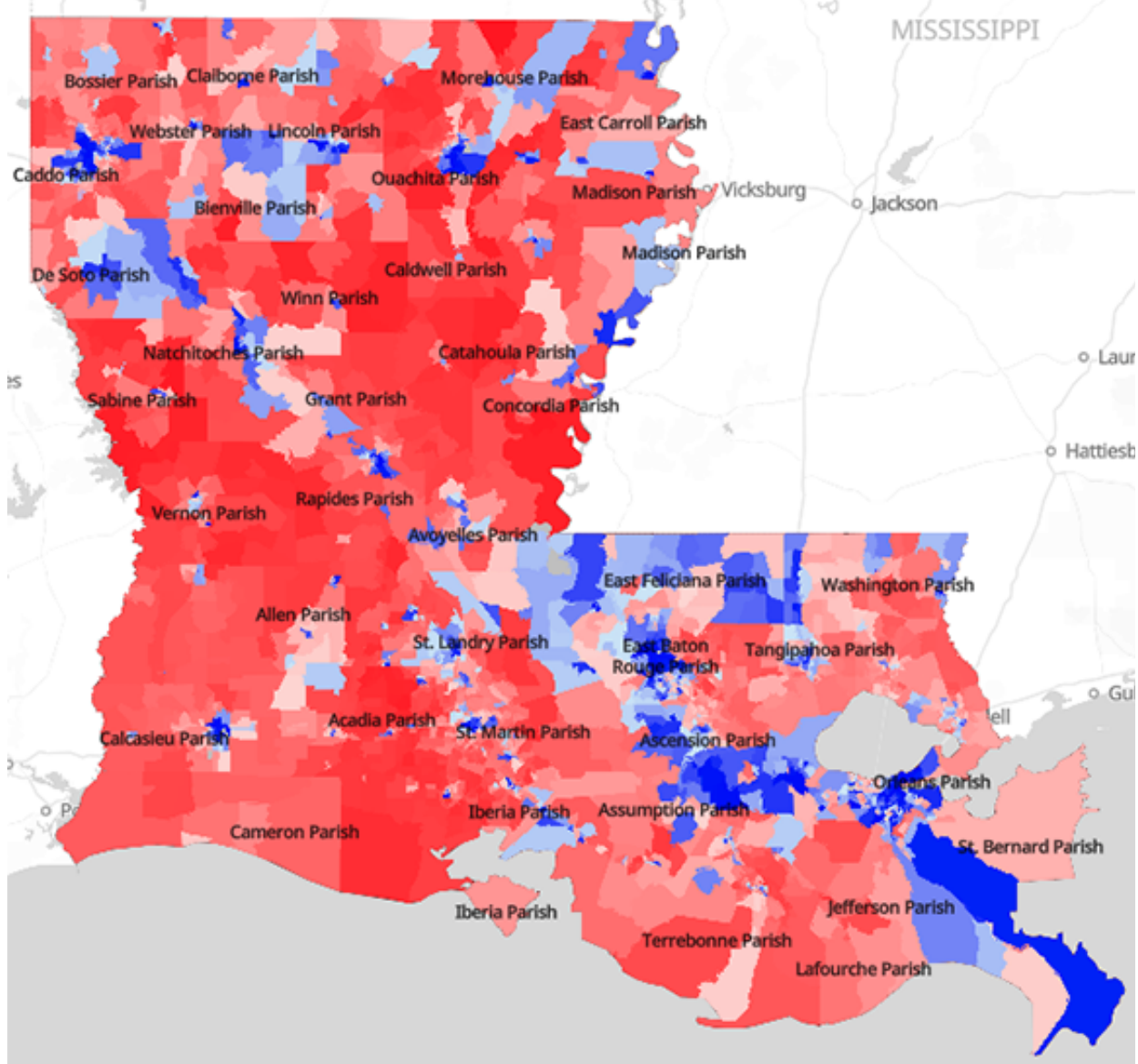
Edwards inherited difficult conditions from Jindal, entering the governorship with a projected budget deficit of \$940 million in his first year and \$2 billion the following year. However, as Louisiana's chief executive, he earned high marks from residents and legislators alike by governing as a centrist (*Bloomberg*, 2016). By 2019, Edwards had succeeded in bringing balance to Louisiana's troubled financial outlook, running three consecutive budget surpluses between 2016-2019 that added more than \$700 million to the state's bottom line (Deslatte, 2019).

In his campaign for reelection, Edwards was boosted by a fractured Republican field, with three-term 5th District Congressman Ralph Abraham and businessman Eddie Rispone competing against one another to unseat the popular incumbent. When Edwards reported raising \$5 million for his reelection campaign, Rispone announced he would inject a substantial amount of his own money into the race, saying "I'm going to put in quite a bit. I've set aside \$5 million to get started. We think it's going to cost somewhere between \$8 million and \$10 million" (Deslatte, 2018). By September of 2019, Rispone had contributed more than \$11.5 million to his largely self-funded campaign and was spending those funds to attack rival Republican Abraham so that he could secure a position in a potential November runoff.

In a September 2019 ad from Rispone's campaign, the narrator asserts: "Abraham personally called on President Trump to step down but joined Nancy Pelosi to oppose a border wall and voted with her over 300 times. Typical politician Ralph Abraham. On so many levels he just doesn't work for Louisiana" (Hillburn, 2019). Abraham volleyed back with his own ad attacking Rispone and clarifying his support for Trump, expressing to viewers: "Eddie Rispone is desperate... Ralph Abraham is rated as the most conservative candidate for governor by Louisiana Family Forum. He's 100% pro-life, pro-Trump, and pro-second amendment... Eddie Rispone is lying to you and that's the truth" (Friends of Dr. Ralph Abraham, 2019). When Louisianans went

to the polls, voters delivered 47% of first-round ballots cast to John Bel Edwards, 27% to Eddie Rispone, and 24% to Ralph Abraham, setting up a November runoff. Although Abraham endorsed Rispone shortly after the election, the bitter divide between the candidates helped to pave the way for an Edwards victory. Figure 5.9 shows the precinct-level results in the 2019 runoff, with Edwards narrowly defeating Rispone by a margin of 40,200 votes.

Figure 5.9 Edwards (+2.7) Defeats Rispone in 2019 Gubernatorial Runoff



Source: Redistricter.com, created by author.

By flipping areas where Abraham performed strongly, such as Morehouse Parish and its bordering precincts in Ouachita, along with cutting down on Rispone's performance in Republican strongholds like St. Tammany Parish—which Edwards only lost by 18,000 votes but that Kennedy had won in the previous cycle by 31,000 votes—the incumbent Democrat assembled a winning multiracial coalition. Between the first and second rounds of voting, Edwards' campaign significantly increased the share of the electorate represented by Black voters, up from less than 28% in October to nearly 31% in November, while winning an estimated 95% of support from these voters. Edwards claimed an estimated 33.5% of ballots cast by white voters, just enough to put him above the 51% mark, as overall voter turnout set a record for a runoff campaign with 1.5 million Louisianians participating (Bridges, 2019B).

2020 TO 2024: LOUISIANA PUSHES THE BOUNDARIES

OF GOP POLITICAL POWER IN THE TRUMP ERA

With Edwards term limited and General Assembly Republicans viewing his administration as less of a threat in the future, the Democratic governor successfully convinced members of the House to support his choice for speaker. In a contentious vote that pitted prominent statewide Republicans, including then-Attorney General Jeff Landry and U.S. Senator John Kennedy, against the state's House GOP Caucus, a bipartisan coalition of 23 Republicans and 35 Democrats voted to select GOP Rep. Clay Schexnayder over state Rep. Sherman Mack (Karlin, 2020). Although the vote signaled a key victory for Edwards and his administration's agenda, it also represented the last show of political strength for state Democrats before a 2023 GOP wave pushed Louisiana's government decidedly rightward.

After moderate Senate President John Alario was term limited out of the state's upper chamber, Republicans won their first Senate super majority in 2019 and unanimously selected

Page Cortez to serve as Alario's successor from 2020 to 2024. During his second term, Edwards encountered a more politically combative and less experienced General Assembly, with 18-of-39 state senators and 46-of-105 House members serving in their first session due to term limits that helped to force a historic level of turnover. Business lobbyist Stephen Waguespack called the body "more conservative, [and] more pro-business than ever before" (Ballard, 2019). The following year, in 2021, Edwards faced the first-ever veto override session convened by Louisiana's General Assembly, with socially conservative Republicans challenging his veto of a measure restricting the participation of transgender students in athletic programs and an expansion of gun rights to allow the concealed carry of firearms without permits, dubbed constitutional carry by conservatives.¹⁶ Ultimately, Republicans fell two members short of the 70-vote threshold required in the House and three votes short of the 26 needed in the Senate and Edwards' vetoes were sustained (Karlin, 2021). However, the statehouse GOP's lurch to the right foreshadowed a broader shift that would soon occur under full Republican control.

At the federal level, Louisiana elections between 2020 and 2022 saw Donald Trump and Republican U.S. Senators Bill Cassidy and John Kennedy all win support from 59% to 62% of Bayou State voters. Despite Trump's endorsement of his 2020 campaign and the 45th President's overwhelming popularity in the state, Cassidy cast one-of-seven GOP votes in the U.S. Senate to impeach Trump for his role in inciting an insurrection as part of the January 6th, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol. Ahead of the impeachment vote, Cassidy was the only Republican member of Louisiana's congressional delegation to vote in favor of certifying the Electoral College results from the 2020 presidential election.

¹⁶ A similar measure restricting transgender participation in youth girls and college women's sports became law in 2022 without Edwards' signature, after advancing through the General Assembly with a veto-proof majority.

In the House, Representatives Higgins, Johnson, and Scalise voted against certifying the electors from both Arizona and Pennsylvania, while Senator Kennedy and Representative Graves voted against recognizing the electors from just Pennsylvania (Ballard et al., 2021). At the time of the certification vote, the state's 5th district was vacant, following the retirement of Ralph Abraham who did not seek reelection after his defeat in the state's 2019 gubernatorial race. Abraham was later replaced by Julia Letlow, an avowed Trump supporter who received the 45th President's endorsement in a 2021 special election following her husband Luke's death of complications from COVID-19 before being sworn into the seat (Axelrod, 2021).

Cassidy described his vote for impeachment by authoring a column in *The Advocate*, writing "Rather than defending the Constitution, President Trump was actively subverting the peaceful transfer of power... I voted to convict former President Trump because he is guilty. That's what the facts demand" (Cassidy, 2021). Continuing, Cassidy explained: "I have no illusions that this is a popular decision. I made this decision because Americans should not be fed lies about 'massive election fraud.'... Mobs should not be inflamed to disrupt the peaceful transfer of power" (Ibid). Gearing up for his 2022 reelection campaign, Kennedy voted with the vast majority of his GOP colleagues to acquit Trump. In a statement following the acquittal, Kennedy struck a combative tone and disagreed with Cassidy's rational, writing:

My job as a Senator and juror in an impeachment trial is not—NOT—to defend, excuse, or explain anyone's behavior—not the Capitol rioters', not the Democrats', not the president's. My job is to evaluate the evidence... The merits of the Democrats' case were not even close... There are one or two things I think we can all agree on: The nut jobs who violated the Capitol on Jan. 6 should be prosecuted and jailed. There can be no justice without order. Political violence is wrong. Always... Finally, both parties should be big tents, but those big tents should each have a big door to kick out extremists who exist on both sides (Kennedy, 2021).

Immediately following Kennedy's launch of his 2022 campaign, he received Trump's endorsement, with the former president writing: "Fantastic news for Louisiana and the U.S.A.—

Senator John Kennedy will be seeking re-election!” (Leonas, 2021). On the other hand, Trump vowed to extract revenge on Cassidy. In a missive to his followers over Truth Social, he charged:

One of the worst Senators in the United States Senate is, without question, Bill Cassidy, A TOTAL FLAKE... He campaigned in the Great State of Louisiana on TRUMP, TRUMP, TRUMP... Nevertheless, when the Democrats’ Impeachment Hoax started this Lamebrain Senator actually voted against me... He thought it was so ‘cool,’ until he got home, and was literally pelted with everything that could be used for such an inglorious happening, especially words, with lots of foul language thrown in” (Nazzaro, 2024).

Following the impeachment vote, Cassidy’s local party in Baton Rouge voted to censure the state’s senior senator for his “betrayal of the people of Louisiana and a rebuke to those who supported President Trump” (Everett, 2021). The state Republican executive committee followed that up with a unanimous vote in favor of his censure (Beaumont, 2025). The opposite paths taken by U.S. Senators Cassidy and Kennedy offer a real time experiment to test hypotheses H1, H1A, and H1B between 2020 and 2026.

At the time of the 2021 vote, Kennedy found himself in a more immediately vulnerable position because of his pending re-election in contrast to Cassidy who would not face voters until 2026. From that period forward, Kennedy has remained staunchly in support of Trump. Cassidy, on the other hand, sealed his fate with Trump when he supported his impeachment, but has waffled since in trying to appease Trump on other issues, such as by supporting the Senate confirmation of Robert Kennedy, Jr., as Secretary of Health and Human Services, despite having expressed serious concerns about Kennedy’s position on vaccines (Bowman & Korecki, 2025).

At the state level, 2023 also opened the floodgates for Louisiana’s shift from its uniquely moderate brand of politics to fall firmly in line with the transition seen across the Stagnant South by ushering in one of the most conservative sets of elected officials in the nation. Prior to the 2023 election cycle, long-time state Representative Francis Thompson switched parties to give Republicans their first 70-member supermajority in the House of Representatives. Shortly

thereafter, in April, West Baton Rouge state Representative Jeremy LaCombe switched parties to further pad the GOP's supermajority. LaCombe issued a statement saying that changing his "lifelong party affiliation from Democrat to Republican" was "one of the hardest decisions of my life," but that "The simple truth is that the part of the state I represent has become more conservative, and I no longer think I can [represent them] to the best that they deserve as a Democrat" (*Post South*, 2023). That October, in the lowest turnout gubernatorial contest in over two decades, Republican Jeff Landry was elected governor in the first round of voting with 52%, as voters expanded the GOP's Senate supermajority to 28-seats and its House supermajority to 73-seats.

Following the election, Republicans handed a victory to Landry by electing Cameron Henry to lead the Senate as its president. Just eight years earlier, Henry had lost the speakership to moderate Republican Taylor Barras. Commenting on Henry's defeat of the more moderate state Senator Mike Reese, outgoing governor John Bel Edwards commented: "I think Sen. Henry has a much closer personal and political relationship with Jeff Landry... Jeff won outright on Saturday. That probably put this in motion" (Bridges, 2023). On the House side, Landry was also successful in moving the needle for his favored candidate for speaker, Phillip DeVillier. Following his selection, media reports observed of Devillier, "He will lead the House effort to push the conservative issues favored by Gov.-elect Jeff Landry and move the state to the right politically" (Bridges & Finn, 2023).

The public policy consequences of Bayou State voters electing a historic Republican supermajority were significant. With an eye towards the 2026 election for the U.S. Senate seat held by Bill Cassidy, Landry led statehouse Republicans to dramatically overhaul Louisiana's election system, eliminating the state's jungle primary system for Congress, the Louisiana Public

Service Commission, the Louisiana Supreme Court, and the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. Cassidy lambasted the change, calling it “incredibly ironic that when for the first time... in our state’s history [of having] a conservative Republican majority, super-majority... in both the state House and state Senate, fiscal conservatives are about to add \$90 million in spending” to adopt the new election system (Wilson, 2024). Because the legislation restricts voting for third party candidates to those who register with that party, it makes it considerably more difficult for Cassidy to run as an independent. If Cassidy loses his seat in 2026, or declines to run for reelection, the changes championed by Landry are likely to have played a significant role.

After John Bel Edwards signed legislation in 2022 to criminalize abortion without exceptions for rape or incest, Landry sought to go further by making the Bayou State the first in the nation to classify two abortion-inducing drugs, mifepristone and misoprostol, as controlled substances. Those opposing the bill “included many physicians who said the drugs have other critical reproductive health care uses,” and who argued that the measure would worsen the state’s already-high maternal mortality rates (McGill, 2024). Following the mold of other Republican-led states like Georgia and South Carolina, Landry signed legislation that Edwards had previously vetoed to allow “constitutional carry,” legalizing the carrying of concealed guns without a permit (Crowe, 2024). Landry also shepherded a private school voucher program through the General Assembly, enacting a favorite priority of conservatives nationally that had long been controversial among a bipartisan group of state leaders because of the potential harm to public schools that are likely to lose funding due to fixed instruction and capital costs that cannot easily be downsized as students disenroll (Babineaux, 2024).

Later in 2024, Landry convened a second special session, calling on the General Assembly to overturn a package of reforms previously passed under Governor John Bel Edwards in 2017,

which had been credited with helping Louisiana to lower its population of incarcerated residents that previously ranked among the highest in the world. As a result, the state “effectively eliminated parole, expanded the death penalty, and lowered age limits for juveniles to be tried as adults” (Brasted, 2024). As part of the state’s redistricting and reapportionment process following the 2020 Census and the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in *Allen v. Milligan*, which invalidated Alabama’s U.S. House map as an illegal racial gerrymander, Landry stoked an intraparty battle by leading the legislature to create a second majority Black congressional district at the expense of his congressional rival Garret Graves.

In the 2023 gubernatorial race, Graves had endorsed Stephen Waguespack over Landry, a move he credited for the governor’s support of drawing him out of Congress. Commenting to the media, Graves remarked, “I’ll be really clear: This isn’t what I wanted. It’s not what I anticipated” (*Associated Press*, 2024). With an unprecedented level of policy and political measures enacted during the newly elected governor and legislative supermajority’s first year together in 2024, Louisiana’s politics have sustained a notable shift that puts the Bayou State at the forefront of implementing conservative priorities and firmly in-line behind Donald Trump.

CONCLUSION

Once the most competitive state in the Deep South, Louisiana’s politics have evolved to strongly resemble trends of the Stagnant South and to become emblematic of the national Republican Party’s shift to embrace both, Donald Trump, and culturally conservative issues such as restrictions to abortion, expansions of gun rights, and measures to shift resources from public to private schools. Still, it is important to recognize the relative speed with which Louisiana transitioned from maintaining a moderate political culture to being led by its newly elected governor, Jeff Landry—alongside the state’s GOP supermajority—to rapidly enact a wish-list of

Republican policy priorities. Responding to the question of, if there could be voter backlash to doing too-much, too-quickly, political consultant and former Kennedy staffer Preston Robinson reflected, “I think we’re still in a pretty highly partisan environment right now, so I don’t expect there to be a price paid for that immediately, but eventually there will be because... they have way outrun their coverage with voters” (Robinson, 2024).

Louisiana’s political transition and the rising fortunes of Republican candidates up and down the ballot is also illustrative of the declining appeal of Democrats to ancestral Southern white voters. Without in-migration or substantial growth among voters of more diverse backgrounds, including Asian and Hispanic Americans, this dynamic creates a challenge that is difficult for Democratic candidates to surmount by relying on super-charging Black turnout alone. Further, Louisiana’s recent electoral history also demonstrates the challenging feat of appealing to white Democrats in an increasingly nationalized political environment.

Although there are examples like John Bel Edwards and Mary Landrieu who could walk the tightrope between turning out Black voters and securing support from moderate white voters to achieve the framework of a 30-30 election as tested by hypothesis H2, most Democrats have fallen short of reaching those markers. In both 2015 and 2019, Edwards also had the good fortune of running against a candidate that divided Republicans. Even if Democrats can attract high quality candidates, which is made increasingly difficult by a limited bench of down ballot officeholders that has been diminished through term limits and GOP redistricting, Louisiana voters do not appear willing to entertain ticket splitting at levels that scratch the surface seen in decades past.

An initial test of the hypotheses put forward as part of this study finds strong support for H1 and H1A, as the GOP has divided based on support for Donald Trump. Louisiana, like much of the Stagnant South, has recently elected Republicans to achieve the party’s pinnacle of political

power. In tandem, the Bayou State's current crop of top political leaders—apart from Senator Bill Cassidy—fit comfortably within the parameters of Donald Trump's GOP (H1A). From Landry to Kennedy to Johnson, Trump's influence has been central to positioning his supporters in key posts up and down the GOP ladder in Louisiana, providing initial support for hypothesis H1B.

This case study offers general support for H2, as the conditions of a 30-30 election have been required for Democratic victories. However, in all three cases, Democrats exceeded the 30% threshold of white support by at least 3%. These results and the scenarios presented as part of Table 5.10 offer mixed support for H2, as Democratic candidates would have won at least a plurality in seven-out-of-13 hypothetical contests by meeting the 30-30 minima. Hypotheses H3 and H4 are generally disconfirmed in Louisiana, as Black voters and women have not become a larger share of those supporting Democratic candidates. Further, hypotheses H7 on whether racial polarization has increased and H8 on if gender polarization has increased are both disconfirmed in races for president, governor, and U.S. Senate. In recent cycles, Democratic prospects have bottomed out in recent cycles, producing consistently large GOP victories. Indeed, statewide Republicans won by an average margin of 26 percentage points in 2023 and Senators Cassidy (2020) and Kennedy (2022) won their most recent reelections by outperforming their nearest opponent by an average of 37 percentage points during the first round of voting.

As of 2025, the Bayou State's elected offices are almost fully polarized by race between Black Democrats and white Republicans, with 38 Black Democrats serving out of 45 members elected to posts in the state's legislature and congressional delegation, alongside 107 white Republicans elected to the General Assembly and Congress. With racial polarization in officeholding reaching new heights as Black members represent 86% of Democratic state legislative districts and both seats in the U.S. House as of 2025, Louisiana offers support for

hypothesis H5 and H9. Assessing whether Black elected officials became a larger share of Democratic officeholders in the state House, state Senate, and General Assembly using a difference of proportions test reveals strong significance for all of these categories between 2008 and 2024. Further, applying a chi square test to the non-white and white members by political party indicates a statistically significant relationship with a probability that increases steadily between 2008 and 2025, as charted in Table 5.19.

However, in testing for changes in the share of Democratic holders who are women, as put forward by H6, significance is only found at the state House level. When testing for an increase in gender polarization, significance is found for the full 16-year period in the state's General Assembly. As Democratic losses have narrowed the party's share of seats from 54% of the state legislators serving to just 30%, the party's membership has been stripped to a bare-bones level.

Still, the state's male-dominated legislature is not equally polarized by party, with Republican women holding more seats (21) to Democrats (13), representing 20% of the full GOP membership (101) and 30% of the Democratic membership (43). Using the state Senate as an example, as of 2025, female Democrats hold two of 11 seats, and female Republicans hold three of 28 seats. At the beginning of this study, in 2008, female Democrats represented eight of 24 state Senate seats and female Republicans held two of 15 seats. As the number of Democrats was reduced by 13, the number of Democratic women was fell by six, whereas, as Republicans gained 13 seats, the party added twelve men and one woman.

Looking ahead, the biggest political questions on the horizon are how the state's senior senator will fare in 2026 after crossing Trump, and if U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson can manage to shepherd Trump's legislative agenda through the House while appeasing the demands of his conference to govern an extremely narrow House majority. In contrast to Georgia,

Louisiana's stagnant population trend has produced an environment in which successful Democratic candidates likely need to replicate a similar formula to Edwards' winning 2019 gubernatorial coalition, in which he won 33.5% support among white voters as Black voters comprised 31% of the electorate to re-elect the popular governor with 51% statewide. Georgia's larger share of Asian and Hispanic voters, who reliably support Democratic candidates and represented 12% of Georgia's 2024 electorate in comparison to less than five percent of Louisiana's, creates more room for variance depending on the overall pool of ballots cast (National Election Pool, 2024; Louisiana Secretary of State). This makes winning statewide all the more challenging for Democrats in Louisiana—a feat that is further complicated by the state's jungle primary, which threatens to lock Democrats out of runoff races for state constitutional offices.

In a Republican Party that has developed a reputation for cannibalizing its leaders on the national stage, Johnson has already survived his first motion to vacate the chair, bailed out by Democrats and most of his Republican colleagues after Representatives Marjorie Taylor Greene and Thomas Massie forced the vote in May of 2024. Although the churn of term limits creates a naturally revolving door for its leaders in the General Assembly and governorship, it remains to be seen how pushing the Louisiana's public policies further to the extremes will affect a state that has had trouble attracting new residents and maintains the nation's second highest poverty rate. Without question, however, Louisiana has entered a new era of governance that will test whether the aggressive agenda being pursued its leaders matches the interests of its voters. In any case, the story of Louisiana's 16-year political transition has been written through consistent gains made by Republicans over more than two decades, building a conservative apparatus that now rivals the GOP's strength in any state in the nation.

CHAPTER 6: COMPARING POLITICAL TRENDS

IN THE SOUTH: 2008 TO 2024

INTRODUCTION

During the period examined by this study, from 2008 through 2024, a new crop of GOP leaders has been elected to replace most Republicans holding major offices across the 11-state South, including governors (100%), U.S. senators (83%), and U.S. House members (89%).¹⁷ Campaigning in the most racially polarized environment since the period immediately after Reconstruction (Bullock et al., 2024), Republicans elected during this phase of the South's realignment are now almost uniformly aligned with Trump. Indeed, among 26 Republicans serving in the offices of governor, U.S. senator, and House of Representatives in Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina after the 2024 election, 23 (88%) met the dual criteria of having been recently endorsed by Trump and endorsing his 2024 presidential campaign ahead of voting in their states.¹⁸ South-wide, among 127 Republicans serving in the U.S. House, U.S. Senate, and governorships as of 2024, 117 (92%) were endorsed by Trump in a recent campaign and 107 (84%) meet the dual criteria of having been endorsed by Trump and publicly supporting his comeback bid ahead of the 2024 Republican presidential primary in their state (see Table 6.19).

The desire of other Republicans to follow Trump's anti-establishment political lead also helped to foster insurgent challenges to the party's congressional leadership, with Louisiana's

¹⁷ Three U.S. Senators were sworn in prior to 2009, including John Cornyn (2002), Lindsey Graham (2003), and Roger Wicker (2007). Eleven U.S. House members were sworn in prior to 2009, including: Robert Aderholt (1997), Joe Wilson (2001), Mike Rogers (2003), Mario Díaz-Balart (2003), John Carter (2003), Virginia Foxx (2005), Michael McCaul (2005), Gus Bilirakis (2007), Vern Buchanan (2007), Rob Whittman (2007), and Steve Scalise (2008).

¹⁸ The three odd men out were Georgia's Brian Kemp, South Carolina's Ralph Norman, as well as Bill Cassidy of Louisiana.

Mike Johnson emerging as the only Republican who could cobble together the necessary GOP majority to claim the speakership when California's Kevin McCarthy was deposed in 2023. Johnson also proved he could hold the top congressional post with Trump's support when Republicans convened the 119th Congress with a one-seat majority of 219 lawmakers—the narrowest since 1931.

In terms of policymaking, changes in the GOP's membership also portend a shift to reflect the loftier, more ideologically conservative preferences of the party's Southern wing across key issues such as federal budgetary legislation. In application of this study's findings, after reviewing findings for the hypotheses tested, I include a case study to assess the role of Southern Republicans in reshaping the GOP's agenda on the central issue of government spending and fiscal policy. In the same vein, this chapter includes a second case study to demonstrate how out-sized support for Trump's claims of a stolen 2020 election from Southern House Republicans demonstrates the near complete loyalty Trump enjoys across both the Stagnant South and Growth South.

Among Democrats, the racial composition of the party's Southern elected leaders changed significantly during the 16-year period observed. At the beginning of this study, in 2008, among 246 Democratic state legislators (holding 45% of state House and Senate positions) in Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina, 48% (119 members) were Black. After the 2024 elections, Democrats held 35% of General Assembly seats in these three states, with 193 members, of whom 145 (75%) were Black. All three states saw a similar shift to record a considerable and statistically significant increase in the share of elected Democrats who are Black. Among 10 Democratic members of the U.S. House and Senate elected from these three states in 2008, five were Black (50%). After the 2024 elections, nine out of 10 federal elected officials (90%) representing these three states were Black, with Jon Ossoff standing out as the only white Democrat.

This chapter charts how the South's continued political realignment into the contemporary era has fed into the Southernization of the Republican Party and Trump's rise, in addition to assessing the resulting effects on two-party competition as the major parties have been redefined ideologically and demographically. First, I offer an analysis connecting the trends explored in the case studies of Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina to assess the twelve hypotheses (H1 – H10) put forward as part of the case studies. Then, I evaluate hypotheses H11, H12, and H13 using data on two-party competition from the 11-state South—in addition to findings taken from the case studies—to expand this study's scope.

This chapter concludes with two policy case studies to assess how changes observed as part of testing how hypotheses H1, H1A, and H1B (on differences between factions of the Republican Party observed between 2016 and 2024), as well as hypotheses H11, H12, and H13 (on variance between the Growth South and Stagnant South), are reflected in fiscal policy and the response among Republicans at large to Trump's claims of a stolen 2020 election. I conclude by reflecting on what the results of this study signal about the role of the South in future elections and policymaking, based on an exploration of trends observed at the state and federal levels over the past 16-years.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF HYPOTHESES H1 TO H13

This dissertation follows the tail end of a decades-long process of Southern realignment, during which officeholding Republicans reached the height of political power in the region. This process helped to prime the GOP for Trump's rise as the South continued to lead the nation in racial polarization and divergence in attitudes about racial issues (Bullock et al., 2019; Maxwell & Shields, 2019). Twelve hypotheses are tested by aggregating the findings of the three case studies presented for Georgia, South Carolina, and Louisiana.

Table 6.1 lists a summary of the results from testing hypotheses H1 through H13. The case studies offered in chapters three through five provided an initial test of these hypotheses with a deep dive into the campaigns and political activity of Republican candidates and elected officials, paired with a contemporaneous analysis of recent trends in voter choice and election data. This section explains the findings recorded in Table 6.1, which includes three gradients from “Disconfirm” to “Mixed results” to “Support.” After offering an assessment for each hypothesis based largely on the three case studies, this chapter also includes sections on fiscal policy and the events around the certification of Biden’s 2020 Electoral College victory to more deeply assess the South’s unique role as part of the GOP’s governing coalition.

Table 6.1 Overview of Findings for Hypotheses H1 to H13			
Hypothesis	Georgia	Louisiana	South Carolina
H1	Support, 8/10 MAGA Rs	Support, 5/7 MAGA Rs	Support, 7/9 MAGA Rs
H1A	Support	Support	Support
H1B	Support	Support	Support
H2	Support	Support	Support
H3	Disconfirm	Disconfirm	Disconfirm
H4	Disconfirm	Mixed Results	Disconfirm
H5	Support	Support	Support
H6	Support	Mixed Results	Support
H7	Disconfirm	Disconfirm	Disconfirm
H8	Disconfirm	Disconfirm	Support
H9	Support	Support	Support
H10	Support	Disconfirm	Mixed Results
Region-wide Hypotheses:			
H11	Support		
H12	Support for statewide races, not congressional.		
H13	Mixed Results		
Source: Compiled by author.			

First, hypothesis H1 is evaluated in the three case studies before surveying the full region to chart how officeholders representing the contemporary GOP can be understood through the lens

of support for, and from, Donald Trump. Findings from testing hypotheses H1A in each case study are also reported, although there are relatively few instances of Southern Republicans voting to impeach Trump, endorsing his Democratic opponents, or denouncing his claims of a stolen 2020 election. Hypothesis H1B is assessed by reporting the near-unanimous level of mutual support between Trump and officials elected to Congress, U.S. Senate, and governorships across the South. Appendix B includes information on endorsements and efforts to support Trump's 2020 stolen election claims for all Southern officeholders elected between 2016 and 2024.

Hypothesis H2 tests if Democratic candidates can win statewide in the Deep South by claiming support from 30% of white voters and turning out Black voters to comprise 30% of the electorate. As part of testing the viability of a 30-30 coalition, each case study also assesses how Democratic support among Asian and Hispanic voters affects each candidate's performance. Hypothesis H3 tests if Black voters have become a larger share of the voters supporting Democratic candidates. Similarly, hypothesis H4 tests if women have shifted to supply a larger share of the overall support for Democratic candidates. Hypotheses H5 and H6 evaluate if Black elected officials and women have become a larger share of Democratic officeholders elected to statewide positions, U.S. House, state House, and state Senate. Hypotheses H7 and H8 test if racial and gender polarization have increased in the electorate. Lastly, as part of the initial series tested in the case study states, hypotheses H9 and H10 evaluate whether racial and gender polarization have increased among officeholders.

Although the hypotheses related to an increase in racial and gender polarization in the electorate from 2008 to 2024 are generally disconfirmed (H7 and H8)—as are hypotheses that Democrats have generated an increasingly large share of support from Black voters and women during this 16-year period (H3 and H4)—statistically significant support is found for a dramatic

increase in racial polarization among officeholders. With respect to the share of Black officeholders elected among Southern Democrats (H5) and whether racial polarization has increased among officeholders (H9), statistically significant support is found in all three case studies to confirm both hypotheses. However, with respect to hypothesis H6, which posits that the share of women among Democratic officeholders has increased—and that gender polarization has also increased (H10)—statistically significant support is only found in Georgia, with some support in South Carolina, and modest gender de-polarization in Louisiana, as women remain highly underrepresented in the ranks of both parties across these two states.

The final series of three hypotheses is designed to test if Donald Trump's role atop the Republican Party has coincided with an increase in two-party political competition in the Growth States and a decrease in two-party political competition in the Stagnant South, lending greater importance to primary elections as determinative contests for selecting officeholders. Hypotheses H11, H12, and H13 expand from the three case study states to consider political developments across the full 11-state South. To compare the types of Republicans elected between the Stagnant South and the Growth South, H13 tests whether Trump's influence has helped MAGA Republicans obtain a greater share of leadership positions in the Stagnant South relative to Sometimes Trump or Anti-Trump Republicans. As charted by this chapter, the effects of Trump's rise on two-party competition are more prominent in the Growth South than the Stagnant South, while the full region offers a relatively cohesive view into the contemporary identity of the GOP after more than a decade of intraparty growing pains.

HYPOTHESIS H1, H1A, AND H1B

This series of hypotheses tests the notion that Republican candidates and officeholders can be categorized based on their level of support for Trump (H1), that maintaining some level of support for Trump is an electoral requirement for Republicans (H1A), and that, since 2016, the party has mostly elected Trump-backed candidates to Congress and governorships, embedding support for Trump into the fabric of the GOP (H1B). Appendix B lists all Southern Republican officeholders elected to governorships, U.S. Senate, and U.S. House between 2016 to 2024 and indicates if candidates were endorsed by Trump in a recent campaign, whether they endorsed Trump ahead of voting in their state's 2024 presidential primary, if House members signed on to Mike Johnson's Supreme Court amicus brief to halt the certification of the 2020 election, and whether members of the House and Senate voted to object to the certification of Biden's Electoral College victory in 2020. Applying these criteria in the same way as in chapters three through five, Appendix B classifies Republican officeholders as either MAGA Republicans, Sometimes Trump Republicans, or Anti-Trump Republicans.

Republicans who supported Trump's impeachment or endorsed Clinton (2016), Biden (2020, 2024), or Harris (2024) are categorized as Anti-Trump Republicans. MAGA Republicans are those who meet three criteria: (1) endorsing Trump's 2024 primary campaign before their state's presidential primary, (2) receiving Trump's endorsement in a recent primary or general election (and not having that endorsement rescinded), and (3) supporting Trump's claims of a stolen 2020 election.

In terms of assessing support for Trump's claims of a stolen election, for those who were serving in Congress, this study tracks whether members (1) signed on to the 2020 amicus brief asking the U.S. Supreme Court to intervene or (2) voted to object to the certification of the 2020

Electoral College vote. For those who were not serving in Congress, I evaluate whether they made public statements or otherwise acted in support of Trump's claims. Considering a third criteria for members of Congress, eight Southern House Republicans and one Southern Senate Republican (Cassidy) voted against Trump's wishes and in support of establishing a joint commission to investigate the January 6 attack on the Capitol. This vote alone is not sufficient to categorize these members as Anti-Trump but shifts several Republicans who would otherwise fit into the MAGA Republican category into the Sometimes Trump Republican category. Outside of these instances, Sometimes Trump Republicans include those who do not meet the criteria necessary for inclusion as either MAGA Republicans or Anti-Trump Republican. These distinctions are incorporated as part of testing H1 regionwide in the South.

Table 6.2 Distribution of GOP According to Hypothesis H1: Most Southern Republican Elected Officials Loyal to Trump							
Office	Total Rs	MAGA Rs	Sometimes Trump Rs	Anti- Trump Rs	Share of MAGA Rs	Share of Sometimes Trump Rs	Share of Anti- Trump Rs
U.S. House	166	94	67	5	57%	40%	3%
U.S. Senate	28	13	14	1	46%	50%	4%
Govs.	15	7	7	1	47%	47%	7%
Growth South	148	82	62	4	55%	42%	3%
U.S. House (Growth South)	129	73	52	4	57%	40%	3%
U.S. Senate (Growth South)	12	7	5	0	58%	42%	0%
Govs. (Growth South)	7	2	5	0	29%	71%	0%
Stagnant South	61	32	26	3	52%	43%	5%
U.S. House (Stagnant South)	37	21	15	1	57%	41%	3%
U.S. Senate (Stagnant South)	16	6	9	1	38%	56%	6%
Govs. (Stagnant South)	8	5	2	1	63%	25%	13%
Total	209	114	88	7	55%	42%	3%
<i>Source: Ballotpedia; The Washington Post; Supreme Court of the United States; United States Congress; Compiled by author.</i>							

Table 6.2 summarizes these statistics to show the share of MAGA Republicans, Sometimes Trump Republicans, and Anti-Trump Republicans elected throughout the 11-state South during the period of this study (2016-2024), while identifying differences between the six Growth South states and five Stagnant South States. Overall, 55% of Republicans are categorized as MAGA Republicans, 42% as Sometimes Republicans, and three percent as Anti-Trump Republicans. Of

the 127 Republicans serving in Congress, the U.S. Senate, and governorships after the 2024 election, 96 (78%) are classified as MAGA Republicans, 30 (23%) as Sometimes Trump Republicans, and one (<1%) as an Anti-Trump Republican. Among 82 officeholders elected in 2016 or later who have since exited office, 18 (22%) are classified as MAGA Republicans, 58 (70%) are Sometimes Trump Republicans, and six (7%) are Anti-Trump Republicans. Among current officeholders, 29 Stagnant South Republicans (74%) and 67 Growth South Republicans (76%) are classified as MAGA Republicans. These statistics demonstrate support for H1B, as a greater share of Republicans running with Trump's endorsement have replaced those previously serving in office without Trump's support (see Appendix B).

Among 90 Southern House Republicans serving in the House in 2020, 66 (73%) signed on to Mike Johnson's amicus brief seeking to disqualify Biden's Electoral College victory. Among this group, 52 (79%) are classified as MAGA Republicans in Appendix B, while 13 (20%) are Sometimes Trump Republicans, and one (2%) is an Anti-Trump Republican. The outlier is South Carolina's Tom Rice, an Anti-Trump Republican who voted in favor of impeaching Trump and subsequently disavowed his support for overturning the election results. Among the 24 Southerners who did not sign on, 18 (75%) are categorized as Sometimes Trump Republicans, whereas three (13) are MAGA Republicans (due to later votes to object to the Electoral College certification), and two (8%)—Virginia's Denver Riggleman and Texas's Will Hurd—are Anti-Trump Republicans.

At the time of the January 2021 vote to certify the Electoral College result, 90 Southern Republicans were serving in the House.¹⁹ Among these members, 72 representatives voted to object to the 2020 Electoral College certification in at least one state. Of the 72 who voted in-line

¹⁹ The GOP House conference grew to include 91 Southern members after special elections were held in Louisiana's 5th District to elect Julia Letlow.

with Trump's position, 65 (90%) are classified as MAGA Republicans in Appendix B, while six (8%) are Sometimes Trump Republicans and one (Tom Rice) is an Anti-Trump Republican. Four Southern Republicans did not vote and 14 voted in favor of certifying Biden's 2020 victory. Among those 14, one (Michael Walz, who was later appointed as Trump's second term National Security Advisor) is categorized as a MAGA Republican, and the 13 (93%) others are Sometimes Trump Republicans.

During the past 16-years, Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina have each experienced considerable turnover in the ranks of top elected officials. Overall, down ballot Republicans in Louisiana and South Carolina have shifted considerably toward the party's Trump wing, with few notable exceptions who have found themselves at odds with the GOP base as a result—including Mark Sanford, Tom Rice, and Charles Boustany—generally offering support for H1A. H1B is supported by the fact that, among 127 Republicans serving in the U.S. House, U.S. Senate, and governorships as of 2024, 117 (92%) were endorsed by Trump in a recent campaign and 107 (84%) returned the favor by endorsing his comeback bid ahead of the 2024 Republican presidential primary in their state.

On the other hand, between 2020 to 2022 in Georgia, several statewide officials and congressional candidates proved that it is possible to defeat Trump-backed opponents in Republican primary elections. Still, the Republicans who defeated Trump-endorsed challengers largely refrained from criticizing Trump, providing some support for H1A. Further, Republican criticism of Trump from Southern officeholders is almost always reserved for those exiting office. Another relatively common occurrence is for Republican officeholders who defeat Trump-backed primary opponents to align themselves with Trump after winning. As recorded in Appendix B, in most cases, these officeholders eventually earn Trump's endorsement. This aligns with the broader

theory offered as part of hypotheses H1, H1A, and H1B, which suggest that overwhelming support for Trump within the Republican Party has created an environment in which members who dissent will find themselves visibly out-of-step with the Trump-supporting super-majority of elected Southern Republicans.

As competition from Louisiana Democrats became less of a threat, a governing alliance between moderate Democrats and Republicans gave way to one-party rule by a GOP supermajority. At the federal level, the period evaluated by this study saw members of Congress like Charles Boustany replaced with further right members like Representative Clay Higgins. After serving six terms in Congress—during which he defeated Jeff Landry in a GOP primary when the two had their districts combined in 2012—Boustany narrowly came in the third slot in the state’s jungle primary for U.S. Senate in 2016, a race that was eventually won by Trump loyalist John Kennedy. While Higgins became a top lieutenant of Speaker Johnson’s in trying to engage conservatives as part of the budget process during the 118th Congress, Boustany broke with his party and endorsed Kamala Harris over Trump in the 2024 presidential election (Bridges, 2024).

As of 2024, the Republican members of Louisiana’s congressional delegation are uniformly pro-Trump, save for Senator Bill Cassidy—with all members both endorsing Trump ahead of the state’s 2024 primary and recently getting elected with his support. At the state level, Trump-endorsed Governor Jeff Landry took office with a new set of state legislative leaders elected in 2023, including newly elevated state Senate president Cameron Henry. Eight years earlier, in 2016, Henry finished as the runner-up in the race for House speaker to Clay Schexnayder and explained his defeat by remarking that he was seen as too conservative to be elected to the position by his colleagues (Ballard, 2016A). As Louisiana has swung to the right, the two most consistent factors that define the state’s political environment are first, strong support for Trump

among Republicans, and two, the overwhelming share of Black Democrats. Recent election changes have made Cassidy vulnerable to a GOP primary challenger, as he will have to run in a closed primary instead of the jungle primary system that was previously in effect. Louisiana's previous election system could have aided Cassidy by allowing him to attract support from those registered as Democrats or political independents, rather than being solely at the mercy of registered Republicans and unaffiliated voters.

Eight of South Carolina's nine top Republican officeholders meet the dual criteria of having endorsed Trump ahead of the state's 2024 primary and being endorsed by Trump in their own races. The only odd man out was Congressman Ralph Norman, who served as Nikki Haley's highest profile in-state endorser before announcing his support for Trump the day after the presidential primary. Following his election in 2016, Trump played a prominent role in elevating Henry McMaster to the governorship by appointing Haley in 2017 as United States Ambassador to the United Nations. In 2022, Trump campaigned on behalf of 7th District Congressman Russell Fry to unseat Tom Rice in 2022, after Rice cast the lone Southern vote in favor of his impeachment.²⁰

Although Trump's endorsement has been an important factor in numerous competitive Republican primaries, elevating candidates such as South Carolina governor Henry McMaster and 7th District congressman Russell Fry, some of Trump's strongest allies are pre-Trump Republicans who have embraced the 45th President and campaigned for reelection with his support. South Carolina offers one of the clearest illustrations of how Republicans who were elected prior to

²⁰ Ten U.S. House Republicans voted in favor of impeaching Trump: Liz Cheney (Wyoming), Jaime Herrera Beutler (Washington), Anothony Gonzalez (Ohio), John Katko (New York), Adam Kinzinger (Illinois), Peter Meijer (Michigan), Dan Newhouse (Washington), Tom Rice (South Carolina), David Valadao (California), and Fred Upton (Michigan). Among this group, only two members (Newhouse and Valadao) remained in Congress at the start of Trump's second term in 2025.

Trump's rise and who once opposed him can shift to join the ranks of Trump's strongest boosters. For example, after ending his bid for the GOP's 2024 presidential nomination, Tim Scott endorsed Trump over Nikki Haley—his home state governor who had played a key role in Scott's political career by appointing him to fill the U.S. Senate seat vacated by Jim DeMint in 2013.

Alternatively, Joe Wilson, who has served in Congress since 2001, was among the earliest endorsers of Trump's comeback bid in 2023 as part of his critically important South Carolina state leadership team. Despite Trump's support not making a meaningful difference for his electoral prospects, Wilson nonetheless remains in lockstep with Trump. These Republicans are representative of the fact that, amidst considerable turnover in the elected offices tracked by this study across Southern states, almost all of the longest-serving GOP elected officials have closely aligned themselves with Trump.

There are three plausible explanations for the trend at play for members who are similarly situated to Wilson and Graham that align with the findings reported. First, at least a plurality of GOP voters support Trump, and therefore, part of representing the interests of Republican voters means supporting Trump. As such, long-tenured members seeking re-election who were not previously supportive of Trump may see value in holding back perceptions that they are out of touch with the party's Trump-supporting base or in making space for a Trump-supported alternative. Second, members who outlast their colleagues by continuing to seek re-election with Trump's endorsement are among those who are more supportive of the direction of the GOP under Trump's leadership. Third, maintaining support for and from Trump is simply the path of least resistance. GOP members who are singularly focused on reelection and who do not have a personal preference on whether to align with Trump would face an easier, more straightforward path to

holding their seats by supporting Trump. In any of these instances, there is value in recognizing endorsements from and for Trump even among candidates in races that are not competitive.

Aside from these motivations for down ballot candidates, is also worth noting that Trump often tends to wait and see which candidate is most likely to win before issuing an endorsement. This practice increases his batting average and results in more elected officials being tallied as having Trump endorsements. While this behavior is difficult to control for, it requires drilling down into the specific circumstances of each election to assess the factors driving endorsements from Trump.

In Georgia, nine-out-of-12 Republicans were both, endorsed by Trump in either 2022 or 2024, and endorsed his comeback bid for president ahead of the state's March 2024 primary. The only member of Congress who did not endorse Trump ahead of the primary was Drew Ferguson, who retired in the next cycle. Ferguson was also among a group of three House and Senate Republicans who did not vote to object to the certification of the 2020 election, which also included Kelly Loeffler and Austin Scott. The Peach State is home to several of the 45th President's most ardent defenders in the U.S. House, including Marjorie Taylor Greene, Andrew Clyde, and Mike Collins. Among the 10 Republicans serving in top positions after the 2024 election, Brian Kemp and Austin Scott are the only two Republicans elected without a recent endorsement from Trump.

Although Trump endorsed Vernon Jones in 2022, his primary opponent, Mike Collins situated himself firmly in Trump's camp from the point he launched his campaign and was rewarded with the 45th President's endorsement in his 2024 reelection bid for the safe GOP seat despite having no serious opposition in his primary. As charted in Chapter Three, Jones received Trump's endorsement in exchange for clearing the field for David Perdue to challenge Brian Kemp for governor. Were Jones running without Trump's support, it is highly unlikely that he would

have even made it to the runoff due to the many barriers facing his candidacy from his scandal-plagued years of former service as a Democrat.

In the case of Jake Evans' loss to Rich McCormick in the 2022 race for Georgia's 7th District, Evans was outraised in the GOP primary by a margin of two-to-one. Further, Trump did little to boost his candidacy and did not campaign in the state on his behalf. The clearest connection that Trump had to Evans was appointing his father, veteran Georgia GOP attorney and former Republican National Committee Member, Randy Evans, as ambassador to Luxembourg in 2022. This suggests that Trump's preference for Evans over McCormick was not necessarily a reflection on McCormick, who campaigned as an "America First" conservative (McCormick, 2022). Rather than disproving hypotheses H1, H1A, and H1B because of the losses recorded by Jones and Evans, the embrace of Trump by Collins and McCormick after defeating the candidates who Trump initially favored offers evidence to support the notion that signing on with Trump is an important element of representing Georgia Republicans in Congress.

The Peach State, however, is unique for featuring four statewide primaries in 2022, in which incumbents Governor Brian Kemp, Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, Attorney General Chris Carr, and Insurance Commissioner John King all beat-back GOP primary challenges from Trump-endorsed candidates. As discussed in Chapter Three, without exception, there was a massive gap in candidate and campaign quality between the incumbents and their challengers. Brian Kemp deftly navigated a primary challenge from David Perdue through a combination of careful political maneuvering, avoiding criticism of Trump, and leaning into his status as a popular governor who made Georgia a national leader in scaling-down Covid-19 restrictions that became a flashpoint in GOP politics (Bluestein, 2022B.)

Kemp did not go nearly as far as Collins or McCormick in his efforts to present himself as supportive of Trump, offering token support that focused on the benefits of having any Republican in the White House over a Democrat. However, ahead of the primary, Kemp successfully leveraged his position as governor to shepherd through conservative measures restricting abortion, expanding gun rights, and cutting the state's income tax. Moreover, Kemp led the General Assembly to pass campaign finance legislation that allowed him to raise unlimited funds and coordinate directly with his campaign through a new apparatus, dubbed "The Georgians First Leadership Committee," which he promoted as an alternative to the Trump-controlled state Republican Party (Bluestein, 2023B). Meanwhile, Perdue ran a lackluster campaign that "went dark" in advertising during the final weeks of the primary race, leading pollster Matt Towry to comment that, "It's almost impossible to win a major race when a popular governor is bombarding you on TV and you're dark" (Caputo et al., 2022).

Raffensperger remarked that Hice was "just sitting back, waiting for a runoff," which he avoided by winning 52% in the May primary (Montellaro, 2022). Hice was widely regarded to have run a poor campaign, centered around "small-scale GOP gatherings and far-right talk shows where he continually preached to the choir" about Trump's stolen 2020 election claims (Murphy & Mitchell, 2022). Chris Carr won an even larger landslide than Raffensperger, claiming 74% of 1.1 million ballots cast against "Stop-the-Steal volunteer attorney" John Gordon (Ibid). Had he been running without Trump's endorsement, Gordon's long-shot candidacy would have been unremarkable. Media reports noted that Gordon "might not have enough years with the State Bar of Georgia to meet the Constitutional eligibility to be on the ballot" and that "He launched his campaign with a broken website and a typo that claimed the 2022 elections – which had not yet happened – were fraught with fraud" (Fowler, 2022C).

In the race for Insurance Commissioner, Trump's pick was Patrick Witt, a former Yale University quarterback who was also part of the 2020 "Stop the Steal" effort. Witt, however, found himself playing second fiddle to Vernon Jones, dropping out of the 10th Congressional District primary race when Trump issued his endorsement for Jones. Presumably, Witt received the endorsement in exchange for switching races, however, with little rationale for his candidacy against a low-profile incumbent who had no involvement in the 2020 election, he struggled to break through and won just 17% of the vote.

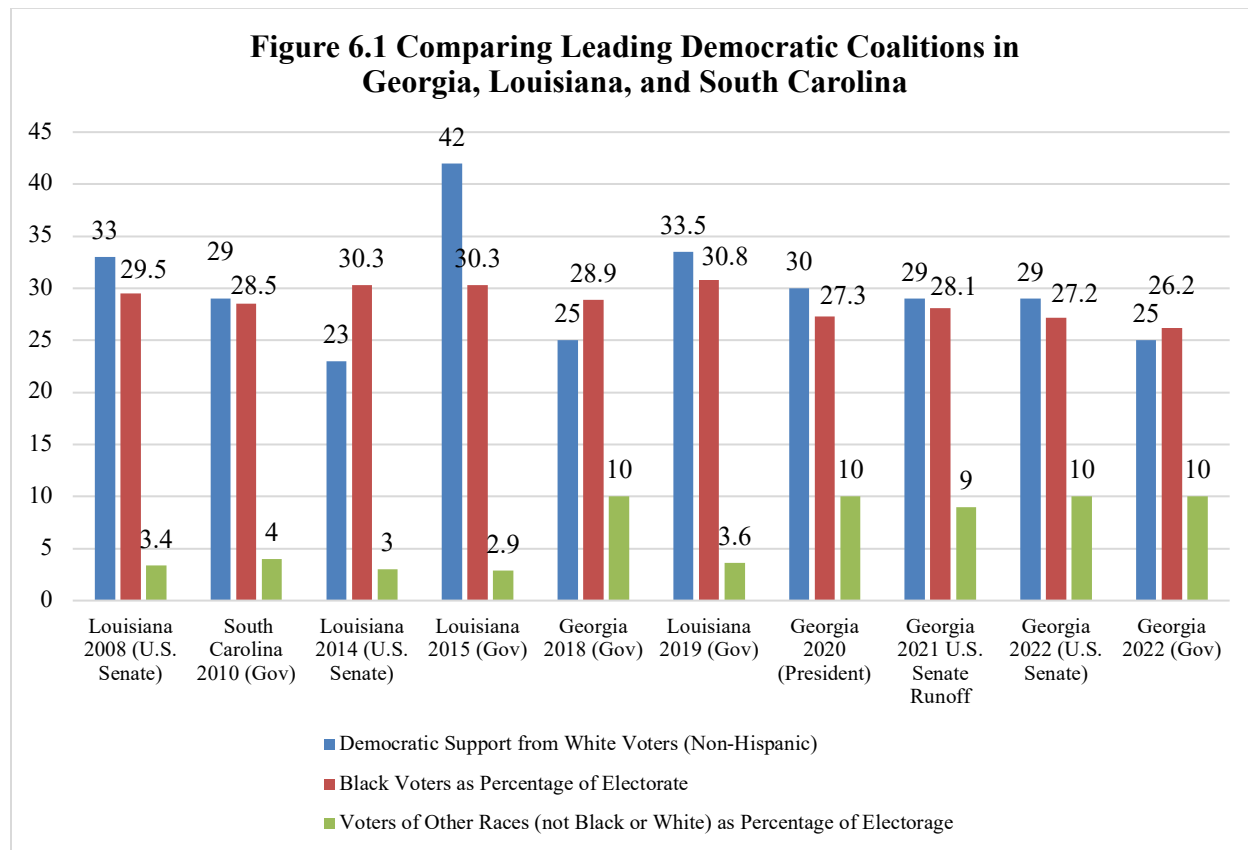
As posited by Hood and McKee (2023), had the four Trump-backed GOP primary challengers assembled stronger campaigns that were more effective in communicating to Republicans that they were running with Trump's support, then the outcome may have been different. However, as this summary reflects, all four candidates ran deeply flawed campaigns, with three-out-of-four also competing in relatively low-profile races. Looking ahead, Georgia will be home to marquee races for U.S. Senate and governor in 2026, where Trump's influence will loom large. With potential lessons learned from 2022 and the opportunity to endorse in multiple GOP primaries for open statewide contests, 2026 offers a strong opportunity to test the extent of Trump's influence over down ballot races in his second term.

All three case studies present evidence to support elements of hypotheses H1, H1A, and H1B. Throughout the three case studies, I also evaluate other factors that may have played a role in prominent examples that challenge notions of Trump's influence in the GOP, the frequency with which down ballot Republicans align with Trump in their own races, and assessments of how the number of Trump supporters in leadership positions has changed since 2016. Sections on fiscal policy and the 2020 election are also included in this chapter to demonstrate how Trump has

uniquely situated himself at the center of two issues that are poised to remain foundational dividing lines within the Republican Party.

HYPOTHESIS H2

The viability of a 30-30 Democratic Party coalition came to life during the period tracked by this study. As outlined in Figure 6.1, all seven instances of Democratic success in Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina between 2008 and 2024 involved winning at least 29% of support from white voters and turning out Black voters to represent close to 30% of the electorate. However, as the period of this study progressed into the 2022 and 2023 cycles, both South Carolina and Louisiana have seen their electorates become whiter, as turnout among Black voters dipped from levels observed between 2008 to 2019.



Source: National Election Pool 2008-2022; Georgia Secretary of State, Louisiana Secretary of State, South Carolina Elections Commission, University of New Orleans Polling, 2014-2015.

Georgia displays a unique pattern of growth that has put the most diverse and wide-ranging set of electoral coalitions into range for Democrats. With a population that is growing naturally, along with a voter pool that has become younger and more suburban, on average, Georgia's electorate presents significantly different demographics than those seen in either Louisiana or South Carolina. As Asian and Hispanic voters have grown to comprise upwards of 10% of Georgia's electorate, these residents have made their voices heard by electing more diverse legislators to the state's General Assembly and in helping successful statewide Democrats to secure narrow margins of victory in 2020, 2021, and 2022. In all these instances, Democrats secured between 29-30% of support from white Georgians, in addition to turning out Black voters to comprise between 27-29% of the electorate, offering support for hypothesis H2.

In South Carolina, Democrats did not win a single statewide race over the 16-year period measured by this study, as Republicans consistently maintained levels of support north of 70% with white voters. Unusual patterns in the state's electorate, which differ from most other Growth States, also saw South Carolina's electorate become significantly whiter and older, despite sustaining significant levels of growth through in-migration. About 412,000 of 754,000 new residents (55%) added to the Palmetto State's population from 2008 to 2022 were over the age 65—ranking South Carolina second to Florida in terms of maintaining the South's largest population of elderly residents.

Louisiana, with a political environment that continues to revolve around the traditional Black-white dichotomy long observed in the Deep South, is the strongest example in which a 30-30 election is essentially required for a statewide Democratic victory. Both Mary Landrieu and John Bel Edwards hit these markers in their successful 2008, 2015, and 2019 campaigns. However, weak Democratic support among voters of other races and the still-substantial share of white voters

represented in the electorate means that Democratic candidates must treat the 30-30 framework as a true minimum versus in Georgia, where there is room for variance such that a 29-29 election could suffice.

Table 6.3 Black Turnout in Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina (Percentage of Electorate)									
Office	2008	2010-11	2012	2014-15	2016	2018-19	2020	2022-23	2024
Georgia									
President	30		30		30		29		29
Gov.		28		29		30		28	
Sen.	28	28		29	30		30	28	
South Carolina									
President	25				19		26		23
Gov.		27		27				22	
Sen.	25	25		26	19		26	22	
Louisiana									
President	30		31		29		28		29
Gov.		26		30		31		25	
Sen.	30	27		29	29		28	25	
<i>Source: Data for Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina as compiled by author. See Table 3.6, Table 4.6, and Table 5.8 for original sources.</i>									

Table 6.3 sets a baseline for the importance of the 30-30 framework by recording the share of the electorate comprised by Black voters in the three case study states over a 16-year period. In 32-out-of-44 elections for president, U.S. Senate, and governor, Black voters have made up at least 28% of the electorate. This is true in Georgia across every cycle (16 of 16) and in most instances in Louisiana (11 of 15). However, no Democratic candidate in South Carolina saw an electorate in which Black voters comprised more than 27% of those casting ballots.

When Obama achieved a Black turnout level of 30% in both Georgia and Louisiana in 2008, South Carolina lagged back at 25% (National Election Pool, 2008B, 2008C, 2008D). Sixteen years later, in 2024, Harris saw turnout among Black voters reach 29% in Georgia, 29% in

Louisiana, and 23% in South Carolina (*Fox News*, 2024). This gap is emblematic of the trend at play in Table 6.3, in which Black turnout as a share of South Carolina’s electorate peaked in the 2010 and 2014 gubernatorial contests at 27%.

Table 6.4 White Vote Share for Democratic Candidate in Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina									
Office	2008	2010-11	2012	2014-15	2016	2018-19	2020	2022-23	2024
Georgia									
President	23%		24%		21%		30%		28%
Gov.		21%		23%		25%		25%	
Sen.	26%	15%		23%	19%		29%	30%	
South Carolina									
President	26%				24%		26%		26%
Gov.		29%		22%				28%	
Sen.	26%	9%		19%	22%		27%	23%	
Louisiana									
President	14%		16%		15%		22%		20%
Gov.				42%		34%			
Sen.	33%	22%		18%	22%		25%	22%	
<i>Source: Data for Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina as compiled by author. See Table 3.7, Table 4.7, and Table 5.9 for original sources. Democratic candidate totals are aggregated for the 2016, 2020, and 2022 U.S. Senate elections due to Louisiana’s jungle primary.</i>									

Table 6.4 shows the share of support for Democratic candidates among white voters in races for president, U.S. Senate, and governor from the three case study states. During the 16-year period of this study, Democratic candidates have notched support from more than 28% of white voters in nine cycles, including five instances in Georgia (2020 presidential, 2021 U.S. Senate runoffs, 2022 U.S. Senate, 2024 presidential), two in South Carolina (2010 and 2022 gubernatorial), and three in Louisiana (2008 U.S. Senate, 2015 gubernatorial, 2019 gubernatorial). Whereas Black turnout is a major source of weakness for Democratic candidates in South Carolina, Table 6.4 shows that Louisiana Democratic candidates have fared comparatively poorly among white voters in the 10 elections that were lost to Republicans, maxing out at a vote share of 25%.

Table 6.5 Testing Hypothesis H2 by Adjusting Black Turnout to 30% and White Democratic Support to 30% in Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina									
Office	2008	2010-11	2012	2014-15	2016	2018-19	2020	2022-23	2024
Georgia									
Pres.	52%		49%		51%		50%		51%
Gov.		50%		50%		52%		51%	
Sen.	51%	50%		51%	48%		51%	53%	
South Carolina									
Pres.	51%				51%		48%		47%
Gov.		50%		49%				46%	
Sen.	48%	45%		48%	49%		49%	46%	
Louisiana									
Pres.	51%		49%		49%		46%		46%
Gov.				49%		49%			
Sen.	49%	46%		50%	40%		45%	46%	
<i>Source: Data for Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina as compiled by author. See Table 3.12, Table 4.12, and Table 5.10 for original sources.</i>									

Table 6.5 tests hypothesis H2 by adjusting Democratic support to 30% of white voters and Black turnout to reflect 30% of the electorate, simulating the conditions of a 30-30 election. As reported in chapters three through five, a 30-30 election would have produced at-least a Democratic plurality in 15 of 16 elections tested in Georgia (results are averaged for the 2020 Senate races), as compared to seven of 13 in South Carolina, and seven of 13 elections in Louisiana. In assessing these findings, it is important to note that, outside of presidential elections, a majority is required to win statewide in Georgia or Louisiana. Still, this analysis offers mixed but generally positive results for Louisiana and South Carolina, and strong support for hypothesis H2 in Georgia. Although the three case studies generally support the notion that a 30-30 election would usually yield a statewide Democratic victory, these figures show how weakness in Black vote share or in support from voters of other races affects the total share of the vote won in each cycle.

The most important factors in determining if Democrats would win under a simulated scenario of a 30/30 election are the percentage of support won from Black voters and the share of the electorate comprised of voters from other races. In Louisiana, the six instances in which Democrats would lose a 30-30 election are all cycles in which Republican candidates won at least 10% of support from Black voters. Similarly, in four of six instances in which South Carolina Democrats would not have won under the conditions of a 30-30 election, Republican candidates won support from at least 13% of Black voters (2008 U.S. Senate, 2022 gubernatorial, 2022 U.S. Senate, 2024 presidential). Another simulated Democratic loss, in the 2010 U.S. Senate race, can be explained by the fact that the Democratic candidate Alvin Greene won just 80% of support from Black voters. Finally, in the 2020 presidential race, under the conditions of a 30-30 election, Joe Biden would have finished less than a point behind Trump in South Carolina. During that cycle, *Fox News* exit polls recorded Trump winning 68% support from voters of other races who are not white or Black, nearly identical to the 69% share he won among white voters.

Table 6.5 also reflects the consequences of the share of support generated from voters of other races for Democratic candidates. The fact that more than five percent of the electorate is comprised of Asian and Hispanic voters is part of what distinguishes the formula for Democrats in Georgia from South Carolina and Louisiana. In 2008, voters of other races comprised four to five percent of Georgia's electorate. That figure steadily increased to reach 12% in 2024, while never again dipping below five percent during the period of this study. However, the share of voters of other races has never exceeded five percent in Louisiana. Likewise, in South Carolina, voters of other races only surpassed five percent in four of 13 elections considered as part of this study (2016 presidential, 2016 U.S. Senate, 2020 presidential, 2020 U.S. Senate). In a less diverse

electorate, Democratic candidates have a smaller margin for error and depend on generating near unanimous support from Black voters.

HYPOTHESIS H3

Results from the three case studies all disconfirm hypothesis H3, which states that Black voters have become a larger share of those supporting Democratic candidates. In Georgia, Democrats have gained significantly by improving their margins among white voters, although Black remain highly important to achieve a majority. Moreover, significant growth in the share of ballots cast by Asian and Hispanic Georgians is the leading contributor to improving Democratic prospects for two-party competition statewide in Georgia. In Louisiana and South Carolina, a drop off in turnout among Black voters has been accompanied by improvements from historically poor Democratic performances among white voters, leading to double-digit GOP victories in most statewide contests. Table 6.6 demonstrates the role of Black voters as a share of total support won by Democratic candidates for president, U.S. Senate, and governor in the three case study states between 2008 and 2024.

Table 6.6 Share of Total Democratic Support from Black Voters in Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina									
Office	2008	2010-11	2012	2014-15	2016	2018-19	2020	2022-23	2024
Georgia									
Pres.	63%		58%		58%		52%		53%
Gov.		58%		57%		57%		55%	
Sen.	56%	62%		59%	58%		54%	52%	
South Carolina									
Pres.	53%				44%		54%		48%
Gov.		54%		60%				45%	
Sen.	51%	72%		61%	46%		55%	49%	
Louisiana									
Pres.	69%		66%		64%		62%		58%
Gov.				49%		55%			
Sen.	54%	61%		66%	50%		65%	68%	
<i>Source: Data for Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina as compiled by author. See Table 3.9, Table 4.9, and Table 5.11 for original sources.</i>									

As is the case nationally, Black voters comprise the base constituency of the Democratic Party in the South. However, the growth in Asian and Hispanic populations is one of the key factors that has helped to lay the foundation for renewed political competition in the Growth South states. As shown in Table 6.6, presidential candidates saw the most significant shift, with Black voters comprising 63% of Obama's support in Georgia, 53% in South Carolina, and 69% in Louisiana in 2008. As of 2024, Black voters contributed 53% of Harris' vote share in Georgia, 48% in South Carolina, and 58% in Louisiana. Black voters as a share of Democratic support in gubernatorial races hovered between 54% in South Carolina to 58% in Georgia in 2010, but dropped to 45% and 53%, respectively, in the 2022 cycle. In Louisiana, as Jon Bel Edwards saw his astronomical 2015 numbers among white voters drop down from 42% to 34% in 2019, the share of support he won from Black voters increased slightly to comprise 55% of his vote share from 49% in 2015. That cycle is the only instance in which a statewide Democrat in Louisiana was recorded winning less than 50% of their vote share from Black voters during the 16-year period observed.

As support for Democratic U.S. Senate candidates in Louisiana cratered, the share of votes supplied from Black voters increased from 54% in 2008 to 68% in 2022. This is in contrast to Georgia, where the share of Black voters fell from 56% to 52% and South Carolina, where the share of Black voters as a percentage of Democratic totals fell from 51% in 2008 to 49% in 2022. Taken together, the figures reported in Table 6.6 serve to disconfirm hypothesis H3.

Notwithstanding the disconfirmation of H3, Black voters delivered a majority of the votes received by Democratic candidates in 36 of 42 cycles observed as part of this study. This includes all 16 cycles examined for Georgia, 12 of 13 cycles for Louisiana, and eight of 13 cycles in South Carolina, where Black support as a share of overall Democratic votes dipped into the mid-to-high 40s for gubernatorial, U.S. Senate, and presidential candidates in the 2022 and 2024 cycles.

HYPOTHESIS H4

Hypothesis H4 posits that women have become a larger share of those supporting Democratic candidates. Table 6.7 shows the share of support for Democrats represented by women in elections for president, governor, and U.S. Senate in the three case study states between 2008 and 2024. These results offer support to disconfirm H4 for Georgia and Louisiana, as there is no notable increase in the share of support from women for Democrats in Louisiana and a narrowing of the gender gap for Democrats in Georgia. Mixed results are found for South Carolina.

Table 6.7 Share of Total Democratic Support from Women Voters in Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina									
Office	2008	2010-11	2012	2014-15	2016	2018-19	2020	2022-23	2024
Georgia									
Pres.	62%		55%		65%		61%		59%
Gov.		47%		60%		56%		59%	
Sen.	62%	45%		61%	64%		60%	57%	
South Carolina									
Pres.	58%				60%		57%		64%
Gov.		59%		65%				57%	
Sen.	56%	61%		64%	61%		57%	59%	
Louisiana									
Pres.	61%		53%		60%		59%		63%
Gov.				56%		55%			
Sen.	63%	52%		61%	54%		68%	54%	
<i>Source: Data for Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina as compiled by author. See Table 3.13, Table 4.13, and Table 5.14 for original sources.</i>									

There are categories of officeholding in which there has been a small shift in gender polarization that supports H4. For example, in presidential races in South Carolina women moved from comprising 58% of Democratic voters to 64% in 2024, with a narrower positive shift also recorded in Louisiana (61% to 63%). Georgia, however, shifted in the opposite direction, dropping from women casting 62% of votes won by Obama in 2008 to 59% of those claimed by Harris in 2024.

Although there has not been a major shift in the share of Democratic support comprised by women in Georgia, which ranged from 57% to 59% of candidate totals over the past two cycles according to exit polls, if it were up to women voters alone, Georgia would be a blue state. The last statewide Republican candidate to win a majority of women voters in Georgia was Johnny Isakson in 2010, when the popular senior senator won support from 60% of women casting ballots. Between 2020 to 2022, successful Democratic candidates (Biden, Ossoff, and Warnock) generally won support from between 54% to 56% of women casting ballots. In all these contests, the Democratic candidate's gender gap was between nine-to-11 percentage points. From 2008 to 2022, women comprised a larger share of the electorate than men in every cycle, representing between 52% to 56% of voters.

Meanwhile, the proportion of Georgia's electorate comprised by white voters fell from 64% in the 2008 presidential race to 55% in 2024 and from 66% in the 2010 midterm to less than 60% in 2022. Although Democratic candidates benefit disproportionately from an increasing share of non-white voters casting ballots—regularly winning majorities among Asian and Hispanic voters—successful Democrats have also narrowed GOP margins among white voters. Republican margins slipped from McCain (2008) and Isakson (2010) winning 76% of support from white Georgians to Trump (2020) and Walker (2022) winning 69% of support from white Peach State voters. Biden also improved on the 21% of white men and 26% of white women won by Obama to win support from 27% of white men and 32% of white women in 2020. In recent history, the 16% of white men won by Hillary Clinton in 2016 and the 25% of ballots cast by white women for Stacey Abrams in 2018 rank as the Democratic Party's worse performance among these groups in Georgia.

In South Carolina, despite winning support from at least 29% of white women in 2008, 2010, 2016, and 2022, Democrats lagged considerably among white men—winning just 23% of support in 2008, 18% in 2016, and 26% in 2020. During this period, Black voters have also slipped from 30% of the electorate in 2008 and 28% in 2010 to 22% in 2020 and less than 23% in 2022. However, Black women have consistently delivered support in the range of 90-plus support percent to Democrats. The cumulative effects of these trends can be observed in Table 6.7, offering mixed support for Hypothesis H4 as the share of votes generated for Democratic candidates from women increased in presidential elections and slightly in U.S. Senate elections, but decreased in gubernatorial elections over the 16-year period tracked.

Over the period of this study, the GOP's gender gap in Louisiana has narrowed among white voters and expanded among Black voters, with Republicans presidential candidates gaining ground among Black men to improve from winning a vote share of seven percent in 2008 to 29% in 2024 (National Election Pool, 2008D; *Fox News*, 2024). This was an improvement on Trump's dominant 2020 performance, in which he won 17% of Black men and 6% of Black women (up from 2% in 2008), in addition to 77% of white voters from both genders. In 2024, Trump continued this trend by winning 80% of white men and 78% of white women.

Despite the inroads made among Black men in Louisiana, Trump won just 10% of Black women—a gender gap of 19 percentage points. In 2008, just 13% of white men and 15% of white women supported Obama's 2008 presidential campaign in Louisiana. Although Harris improved on this abysmal performance to win 19% of support from white men and 21% from white women in 2024, Democratic losses among Black men helped to drive her overall margin down to 38% from the 40% won by Obama statewide in 2008.

HYPOTHESIS H5

Hypothesis H5 tests if Black elected officials have become a larger share of Democratic Party at the state level, in Congress, state Senate, and state House between 2008 and 2024. Table 6.8 charts the share of Black Democratic officeholders at two-year intervals in Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina. Statewide, these three states collectively had five Democrats serving in 2008 and two in 2024, giving that category little weight. However, difference of proportion tests show significance at a 95% confidence interval for the increase in the share of Black Democrats as a percentage of the party's officeholders at the state Senate, state House, and General Assembly levels in all three states. Looking at the South as a whole, statistical significance is also found for the shift in the percentage of Democratic officeholders who are Black at the congressional level.

The figures in Table 6.8 demonstrate the massive scale of demographic transition seen for elected Democrats in the case study states as the South's decades-long realignment has progressed into the contemporary era. Further, these data encapsulate the intertwined trends of Black political progress and Republican advancement that have simultaneously occurred across the South, echoing the findings of Hood et al. (2012) and Bullock et al. (2024) that increased Black representation has coincided with these states electing a greater proportion of Republican lawmakers. All three states have seen consistent and considerable shifts at the congressional, state Senate, and state House levels.

Table 6.8 Percent Black among Democratic Officeholders in Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina After Election									
Georgia									
Office	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
Statewide	66%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	50%	50%	50%
Congress	67%	67%	80%	100%	100%	100%	100%	83%	100%
St. Senate	55%	65%	72%	78%	83%	67%	73%	74%	74%
St. House	55%	67%	78%	78%	76%	68%	67%	71%	74%
South Carolina									
Statewide	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Congress	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	50%	100%	100%	100%
St. Senate	47%	47%	61%	61%	67%	67%	75%	75%	67%
St. House	55%	60%	61%	60%	70%	73%	79%	75%	71%
Louisiana									
Office	2008	2011	2012	2015	2016	2019	2020	2023	2024
Statewide	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Congress	0%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
St. Senate	33%	53%	53%	57%	57%	75%	75%	82%	82%
St. House	38%	51%	51%	57%	57%	74%	74%	84%	84%
<i>Source: Georgia General Assembly; Louisiana General Assembly; South Carolina General Assembly, compiled by author. Statewide officers include those elected to U.S. Senate, governor, and constitutional officers.</i>									

Despite these states sharing a common trend of an increase in the share of Democratic elected officials who are Black, Georgia is the only state where Democrats recorded an increase in their total number of General Assembly seats between 2008 and 2024, going from 97 to 103. Over the same period, South Carolina Democrats receded from holding 72 seats to 47, and Louisiana Democrats saw their membership decrease from 77 to 43. The number of white Democrats dropped significantly in all three states over the 16-year period tested, going from 43 to 17 in Georgia, from 34 to 14 in South Carolina, and from 48 to seven in Louisiana.

While the number of Black Democrats increased from 53 to 76 in Georgia and from 28 to 36 in Louisiana over the same period, the number of Black Democrats in South Carolina's General Assembly decreased from 38 to 33 between 2008 and 2024. This can be explained in part by

changes in the demographics of South Carolina’s electorate, in which the share of the electorate that is non-white has dropped from between 28% to 29% between 2008 and 2018 to between 21% to 23% in the 2020, 2022, and 2024 cycles (South Carolina Election Commission). With Black Democrats generally representing safer seats, South Carolina’s Legislative Black Caucus started to see significant casualties as Republican power approached its contemporary height. After the 2020 election, the number of Black Democrats in the South Carolina General Assembly peaked at 46 before declining to 39 in 2022 and 33 in 2024.

Furthermore, the declining number of Black Democrats in South Carolina’s General Assembly may also be explained by the absence of Section 5 reviews of state redistricting plans under the Voting Rights Act, which were eliminated by the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in *Shelby County v. Holder* in 2013. Whereas the number of majority Black legislative districts increased in both Georgia (from 62 to 70) and Louisiana (from 39 to 40) between the 2010 and 2020 U.S. Census, the number of majority Black districts in South Carolina decreased from 39 to 20. This change occurred even as the number of majority-minority state legislative districts in the Palmetto State increased from 43 to 45, reflecting a dilution of Black political power in favor of creating more diverse majority-minority districts. During the same period, Georgia’s lawmakers increased the number of majority-minority districts from 77 to 103, while Louisiana increased the number of majority-minority districts from 42 to 44.

Overall, changes in all three states reflect an important observation made by Bullock et al. (2024) that: “To the extent the Democratic Party would be seen as the Black party and Republicans as the White party, the GOP would maintain its hold on the South and with it the region’s plurality in the Electoral College, which is critical for GOP viability in presidential elections” (43). As these changes have occurred in the Democratic Party, Republicans have also seen considerable levels of

turnover over the same nine election cycles. However, rather than race serving as the distinguishing factor, GOP hopefuls were seeking office in an era where the most vivid dividing line between Republicans became their level of support for—and from—Donald Trump.

HYPOTHESIS H6

Hypothesis H6 puts forward that women have become a larger share of Democratic Party officeholders and is tested similarly to H5. Table 6.9 lists the share of positions held by women in Congress, state Senate, state House, and statewide. To provide a basis for comparison in assessing hypothesis H10 on whether gender polarization has increased among elected officials, Table 6.9 lists share of Republican and Democratic women elected to major positions relative to men.

Table 6.9 Percent Women among Officeholders in Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina After Election									
Georgia Democrats									
Office	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
Statewide	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Congress	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	20%	40%	50%	40%
St. Senate	27%	40%	39%	44%	61%	62%	68%	61%	52%
St. House	37%	48%	48%	47%	52%	57%	61%	59%	60%
Georgia Republicans									
Statewide	29%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Congress	0%	0%	0%	0%	10%	0%	11%	13%	11%
St. Senate	3%	3%	3%	5%	5%	6%	6%	6%	3%
St. House	12%	15%	14%	15%	16%	14%	17%	19%	20%
South Carolina Democrats									
Statewide	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Congress	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
St. Senate	0%	0%	0%	0%	11%	11%	13%	13%	17%
St. House	17%	17%	24%	26%	25%	27%	30%	22%	23%
South Carolina Republicans									
Statewide	0%	9%	9%	18%	18%	20%	20%	20%	20%
Congress	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	17%	17%	33%
St. Senate	0%	0%	4%	4%	7%	7%	10%	10%	0%
St. House	11%	11%	13%	13%	11%	15%	14%	14%	14%
Louisiana Democrats									
Office	2008	2011	2012	2015	2016	2019	2020	2023	2024
Statewide	33%	100%	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Congress	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
St. Senate	33%	20%	20%	21%	21%	25%	25%	18%	18%
St. House	17%	18%	18%	21%	21%	23%	23%	34%	34%
Louisiana Republicans									
Statewide	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	22%
Congress	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	20%	20%	25%
St. Senate	13%	4%	4%	8%	8%	11%	11%	11%	11%
St. House	10%	7%	7%	15%	15%	18%	18%	25%	25%
<i>Source: Georgia General Assembly; Louisiana General Assembly; South Carolina General Assembly, compiled by author. Statewide officers include those elected to U.S. Senate, governor, and constitutional officers.</i>									

As shown in Table 6.9, Democrats have not elected women to statewide posts in the three states examined for case studies in recent election cycles. Moreover, South Carolina and Louisiana Democrats did not elect a female member of Congress during the 16-year period observed by this study. In these categories, Republicans maintained an edge in representation by gender. After the 2024 elections, two female House Republicans were elected to serve South Carolina (Mace and Biggs), with Representatives Greene and Letlow serving as the lone Republican women from Georgia and Louisiana, respectively. Georgia's delegation also included two female Democrats, Nikema Williams and Lucy McBath. In 2023, women also represented two of seven Louisiana Republicans elected to statewide constitutional offices, including Attorney General, Liz Murrill and Secretary of State Nancy Landry. Although it is no longer an independently elected office, South Carolina's female lieutenant governor, Pamela Evette has served since 2019. In 2022, South Carolina elected Ellen Weaver to serve as Superintendent of Education, bringing its number of female officials to two-out-of-eight Republicans elected to statewide constitutional positions (and two of 10 statewide elected officials including those serving in the U.S. Senate).

At the legislative level, strong support is found for H6 in Georgia, with a significant increase documented in the share of female Democratic officeholders in Congress and in both chambers of the state's General Assembly. Some support is found in South Carolina and mixed results are found in Louisiana. Between 2008 and 2024, the share of women among Democratic Party officeholders in Georgia increased from 27% to 52% in the state Senate, and from 37% to 60% in the state House. During the same period, the share of Democratic women in Louisiana fell from 33% in the state Senate to 18%, while doubling from 17% in the state House to 34%. In South Carolina, the worst state examined for female representation at the state legislative level, the share

of Democratic women in the state Senate increased from none in 2008 to 17% in 2024, and from 17% to 23% in the state House.

During the 16-year period observed, the reticence of Southerners to elect women to major political offices has persisted in South Carolina and Louisiana, although progress has been made in Georgia. At the state legislative level, Republicans have traded dominant levels of strength with suburban voters to build the party's geographic base of support around rural and exurban voters. In Georgia, for example, almost all the state legislative seats flipped by Democrats in recent years were won in the Metro Atlanta suburbs. Even as the party bottomed out to include just one rural legislative seat held by a white Democrat, Georgia Democrats gained a net of 25 General Assembly seats from the GOP's peak in officeholding in 2014 through the 2024 cycle. On the other hand, in both Louisiana and South Carolina, Republicans achieved their peak levels of officeholding at the state level in 2023 and 2024, respectively.

The difference in geographic distribution and the unique importance of suburban Metro Atlanta districts relative to South Carolina and Louisiana may partially explain the difference in the share of women officeholders in those states. Proportionally, the Metro Atlanta area—which represents 56% of Georgia's overall population—is 3.5 times larger than the Metro Columbia area (16% of South Carolina's population) and 2.6 times larger than the Metro Orleans area (21% of Louisiana's population) (U.S. Census 2024A, 2024B, 2024C). In Georgia, as of the 2024 election, state House Democrats include 48 women and 32 men, while Senate Democrats were comprised of 12 women and 11 men. Among these 60 Democratic women, 50 (83%) were elected across the 29-county Metro Atlanta region. This compares to 20 women serving alongside 80 men in the House GOP Caucus and one Republican woman serving with 32 men in the Senate. Further, the 60 Democratic women elected in 2024 was almost double the 34 in elected in 2008, while the 21

Republican women elected was up from the 14 elected the same year. This level of gender diversity and growth in representation of women among Democratic officeholders sets Georgia apart from South Carolina and Louisiana in testing hypotheses H6 and H10.

In South Carolina, as charted in Chapter Four, all three incumbent Republican female state senators lost their primaries to men in 2024—amidst backlash in response to the legislative debate over banning abortion and perceptions that they were insufficiently conservative—leading to an all-male 34-member Senate majority serving alongside two of 12 women in the Democratic Caucus. Similarly, 12 women were elected to serve alongside 76 men in the House Republican majority, in comparison to eight Democratic women serving with 27 Democratic men. Although Democrats saw greater representation proportionally in the House and some representation versus none for Republicans in the Senate, South Carolina uniquely remains imbalanced in the gender of its state officeholders in comparison to its electorate.

Louisiana's General Assembly reflects a similar but less extreme pattern to South Carolina, where women maintain low levels of representation that is proportionally higher among Democrats who are far outnumbered in the legislature. In the most recent election cycle for state House (2023), women won 18 of 73 seats claimed by Republicans and 11 of 32 seats won by Democrats. In the Senate, just three of 28 Republican members elected are women, in comparison to two out of 11 Democrats. Part of the explanation for why these two states—in contrast to Georgia—do not support hypothesis H10 is that Democrats have lost ground over the period of this study, limiting the potential for growth in the number of women officeholders relative to 2009.

Regardless of party, the electorates in Louisiana and South Carolina are generally hostile toward electing women, with Black Democrats generally being the most likely to include women, followed by white Democrats, followed by Republicans. As of the 2024 election cycle, among 33

Black Democrats serving in South Carolina’s General Assembly, seven are women (21%). This compares to three Democratic women among 14 white Democrats (21%), and 12 Republican women among 122 GOP members (10%). Similarly, in Louisiana, among 36 Black Democratic legislators, 11 are women (31%). Between the seven white Democrats serving in the General Assembly, two are women (29%), while 21 out of 101 Republicans are women (21%). These two states present a stark comparison to Georgia, where among 76 Black state legislators, 40 are women (53%) and out of just 17 white Democrats, 14 are women (82%). Within the 133 member Peach State GOP majority, 21 are women (16%). As of 2025, South Carolina ranks 49th of 50 in overall female representation in its General Assembly and Louisiana ranks 43rd, whereas Georgia ranks 24th (CAWP, 2025).

HYPOTHESIS H7

Hypothesis H7 tests if racial polarization has increased in the electorate, as measured by the gap in the share of ballots cast for Republican candidates between white and Black voters. Table 6.10 records the average level of racial polarization measured over the 16-year period studied in Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina. All three case studies offer support to disconfirm H7. This is further demonstrated by the trend shown across most categories of officeholders in Table 6.10.

Table 6.10 Racial Polarization in the Electorate (GOP): Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina									
Office	2008	2010-11	2012	2014-15	2016	2018-19	2020	2022-23	2024
Georgia									
Pres.	74%		63%		66%		58%		60%
Gov.		58%		63%		68%		65%	
Sen.	66%	62%		67%	58%		63%	66%	
South Carolina									
Pres.	69%				66%		66%		60%
Gov.		66%		70%				56%	
Sen.	61%	73%		70%	69%		66%	61%	
Louisiana									
Pres.	80%		71%		63%		67%		62%
Gov.				42%		64%			
Sen.	63%	61%		56%	48%		61%	62%	
<i>Source: Data for Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina as compiled by author. See Table 3.14, Table 4.14, and Table 5.15 for original sources. Figures show GOP share of support from Black voters subtracted from share of voter support from white voters.</i>									

Although the South is highly polarized by race, Democrats have become competitive in the Growth South by both improving their margins with white voters and relying on strong support from people of color. At the same time, Republicans have been successful in making modest inroads to regularly exceed double-digit support among Black voters and to capture upwards of 37% of support from Hispanic voters in Georgia and South Carolina in recent cycles (National Election Pool). In addition to assessing the role of race and ethnicity in voter choice and political competition, chapters three through five also evaluate the role of education, gender, and geography.

Exit poll data are available for 16 cycles in Georgia and 13 cycles in both Louisiana and South Carolina. During this period, on average, statewide Democratic candidates won support from 91% of Black voters. This margin varies slightly from state to state and by candidate, however, in all three states Democratic support among Black voters has generally dipped from the possibly-anomalous mid-90s levels seen in 2008 when Barack Obama inspired record levels of

Black turnout, sinking into the low 90s and mid-80s in recent cycles. Notwithstanding limited gains made by Republican candidates, Black voters remain the bedrock of the Democratic electorate in all three states. Similarly, although Democrats have improved their margins to become more competitive with white voters in states like Georgia, white men continue to serve as the most reliable demographic constituency won by Republican candidates during the 16-year period observed.

Table 6.10 demonstrates that, between the 2008 and 2024 election cycles, the GOP's racial gap between white and Black voters, on average, moved from 74 percentage points to 61 percentage points in presidential races. Racial polarization shifted less, from 62 to 61 percentage points, in gubernatorial races, and remained at an average of 63 percent in U.S. Senate contests. Taken together with observations on the electoral coalitions assembled by Democrats and Republicans in the three case studies, these figures provide support to disconfirm hypothesis H7.

HYPOTHESIS H8

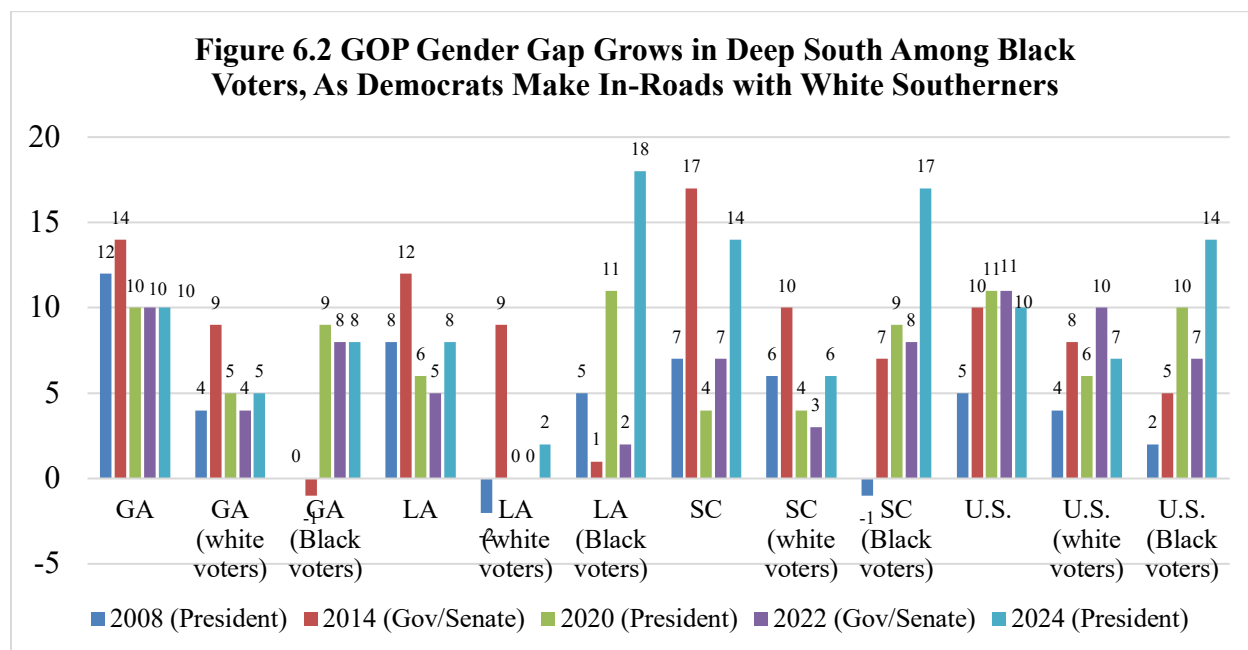
Hypothesis H8 posits that, between the 2008 and 2024 cycles, gender polarization has increased in the electorate. Case studies in Georgia and Louisiana generally disconfirm H8, with support found in South Carolina. However, across the three states examined, Republicans consistently performed far better with men than women. This gap is most pronounced on a consistent basis in Georgia, averaging nine percentage points in recent statewide elections for governor, U.S. Senate, and president when the percent female support is subtracted from the percent male support won by Republicans. Over the same period, this compares to an average of eight percentage points in South Carolina and six percentage points in Louisiana. Table 6.11 shows the level of gender polarization for GOP candidates between men and women.

Table 6.11 Gender Polarization in the Electorate (GOP): Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina									
Office	2008	2010-11	2012	2014-15	2016	2018-19	2020	2022-23	2024
Georgia									
Pres.	12%		4%		17%		10%		10%
Gov.		-3%		14%		3%		10%	
Sen.	17%	-4%		16%	16%		9%	10%	
South Carolina									
Pres.	7%				8%		4%		14%
Gov.		6%		17%				7%	
Sen.	4%	-4%		13%	8%		3%	8%	
Louisiana									
Pres.	8%		7%		12%		6%		8%
Gov.				5%		14%			
Sen.	9%	1%		12%	9%		11%	5%	
<i>Source: Data for Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina as compiled by author. See Table 3.15, Table 4.15, and Table 5.16 for original sources. Figures show GOP share of support from women subtracted from share of voter support from men.</i>									

As demonstrated in Table 6.11, across elections for president, governor, and U.S. Senate, gender polarization has remained relatively consistent, recording a slight increase in races for president and a slight decrease in races for president. Results from 2010 stand out as an outlier, with Republican gubernatorial candidate Nathan Deal winning more support from women than men and a relatively narrow gap in Louisiana's U.S. blowout victory for David Vitter. However, cycles in 2014-15, 2018-19, and 2022 are more consistent and in line with figures tracked for other offices. These results summarize why hypothesis H8 is disconfirmed, as originally put forward, in Georgia and Louisiana.

However, analyzing variation in the GOP gender gap between Black and white voters reveals that, since 2008, the gap in support for Republican candidates between Black men and women has grown larger than the gap between white men and women in Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina. Figure 6.2 displays the gap in support between men and women for Republican

candidates among all voters, white voters, and Black voters for the three states examined by case studies and, for comparison, national figures.



Source: Exit Polls (2008-2024 for Georgia and nationally); Fox News Voter Analysis (2020, 2022, and 2024 for Louisiana, and South Carolina). Figures show support for Republican candidate from men subtracted by support for from women. 2014 includes gubernatorial races in Georgia and South Carolina and U.S. Senate in Louisiana; 2022 includes gubernatorial contests in Georgia and South Carolina and Louisiana's U.S. Senate election.

Despite the overall results shown in Table 6.11, which generally disconfirm hypothesis H8 in Georgia and Louisiana, Figure 6.2 demonstrates evidence that gender polarization has increased among Black voters and narrowed among white voters in all three states. While the level of gender polarization in support for GOP candidates was initially driven by the gulf in support between white men and white women, as the study carried forward into the Trump era, the gap between Black men and Black women grew to exceed that among white voters in all three case study states.

As shown in Figure 6.2, at the national level, outside of the 2020 and 2024 presidential cycles, the GOP's gender gap among white voters has consistently registered slightly larger than the gap between Black men and women. Part of what is driving this trend is that support for Democratic candidates has consistently remained higher among Black women than Black men.

Exit polls record national Democrats capturing support from more than 90% of Black men only twice during the nine election cycles held between 2008 to 2024, winning 95% in 2008 and 92% in 2016. Among Black women nationally, Democratic candidates fell short of the 90% threshold only once during this period, winning 88% of ballots cast in 2022 House races.

At the start of the period observed by this study, Obama won between 90% (Louisiana) to 98% (Georgia) of support from Black men, averaging 95% nationally. Among Black women, Obama averaged 96% nationally and recorded support from 96% to 97% of Black women in all three states. In the 2010 and 2014 mid-terms, Democrats saw their support dip slightly among Black voters nationally, falling into the mid-80s among men and to the low 90s among women. Similar trends were recorded in the three states examined by case studies.

In 2020 and 2022, the gender gap among Black voters expanded significantly, as national Democratic support among Black men dropped to 79% in the 2020 presidential race and to 82% for U.S. House candidates in 2022. Although more Black women cast votes for Republicans in these cycles than in years past, support from Black women for Democrats nationally averaged 90% in 2020 and 88% in 2022. In the states selected for case studies, Democrats registered similar performances during these two cycles and saw a gender gap among Black voters of eight-to-nine percentage points in both Georgia and South Carolina. In Louisiana, Democrats recorded a gender gap of 11% in 2020 and 2% in 2022 among Black voters.

In the 2024 presidential election, this trend took hold nationally, as Donald Trump recorded a gender gap of 14 percentage points among Black voters, in comparison to an overall GOP gender gap of 10 percentage points and a gap among white men and women of just seven percentage points. Of the three case study states examined, Georgia is the only one that slightly bucked this trend. According to exit polls, the Peach State maintained a gender gap of eight percentage points

among Black voters in 2024, as 16% of Black men supported Trump in comparison to eight percent of Black women. This compared to a 10-percentage point gender gap statewide and a five-percentage point gender gap between white men and women.

Both South Carolina and Louisiana set exit poll records in 2024 for the gap in support generated for a Republican candidate from Black men and women, hitting 17 and 18 percentage points, respectively. This compared to a statewide gender gap among of 14 percentage points in South Carolina and eight percentage points in Louisiana, in comparison to a GOP gender gap of six percentage points and two percentage points between white men and women. In Louisiana, the GOP's gender gap between voters of all races has usually been lower than in the other two states examined. However, the gap reached its previous all-time high of 11-percentage points among Black Bayou State voters in 2020, as an equal share of male and female white voters (77%) supported Trump.

HYPOTHESIS H9

Following confirmation of H5 with respect to the increasing share of Black officeholders among Democratic Party officeholders, this section reports findings on hypothesis H9, which posits that racial polarization has increased in the ranks of public officeholders. Racial polarization is defined as the gap in the percentage of elected officials between the Republican and Democratic parties who are white and non-white. Table 6.12 shows the share of each party's elected members who are white and non-white at two-year intervals between 2008 and 2024. Although hypothesis H9 achieves face validity through the data reported, this section also applies a chi square test to evaluate the association between political party and the number of white and non-white officeholders in state general assemblies. Figures are calculated in Table 6.13 using data from the three states of Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina.

Table 6.12 Racial Polarization among Officeholders: Share of Non-White Officeholders by Political Party in Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina After Election									
Office	2008	2010-11	2012	2014-15	2016	2018-19	2020	2022-23	2024
Georgia (Republicans)									
Statewide	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	13%	13%
Congress	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
St. Sen.	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	3%	3%	3%
St. House	2%	2%	3%	3%	3%	2%	2%	5%	4%
Georgia (Democrats)									
Statewide	66%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	50%	50%	50%
Congress	67%	67%	80%	100%	100%	100%	100%	83%	100%
St. Sen.	55%	65%	72%	78%	83%	71%	82%	83%	83%
St. House	56%	68%	80%	80%	81%	73%	74%	79%	84%
South Carolina (Republicans)									
Statewide	0%	9%	9%	18%	18%	10%	10%	10%	10%
Congress	20%	20%	14%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
St. Sen.	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	3%
St. House	3%	0%	0%	1%	1%	1%	2%	2%	3%
South Carolina (Democrats)									
Statewide	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Congress	50%	100%	100%	100%	100%	50%	100%	100%	100%
St. Sen.	47%	47%	61%	61%	67%	67%	75%	75%	67%
St. House	55%	60%	61%	60%	70%	73%	79%	75%	71%
Louisiana (Republicans)									
Statewide	13%	13%	13%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Congress	17%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
St. Sen.	0%	4%	4%	8%	8%	4%	4%	4%	0%
St. House	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Louisiana (Democrats)									
Statewide	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Congress	0%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
St. Sen.	33%	53%	53%	57%	57%	75%	75%	82%	82%
St. House	40%	51%	51%	57%	57%	74%	74%	84%	84%
<i>Source: Data for Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina as compiled by author. Statewide officers include those elected to U.S. Senate, governor, and other constitutional officers.</i>									

Despite some amelioration within the electorate, racial polarization remains at or near all-time highs in terms of the demographics of members of Congress and state legislators elected across the 11-state South during the period of this study. As such, the data shown in Table 6.12 offers clear support for hypothesis H9. One of two Democratic statewide elected officials from these three states is white (Jon Ossoff) and the other is Black (Raphael Warnock), both from Georgia. Among Republicans, two of 26 statewide elected officials (8%) elected through the 2022-23 election cycle were non-white, including Georgia Insurance Commissioner John King and South Carolina U.S. Senator Tim Scott. This compares to two non-white statewide elected officials out of 29 Republicans serving after the 2010-11 election cycle—South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley and Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal. That year there was just one statewide elected official on the Democratic side from the three case study states, Louisiana U.S. Senator Mary Landrieu.

In terms of the U.S. House, Democrats from these three states elected five non-white members among nine members in 2008, while Republicans elected one non-white member (Joseph Cao) and 16 white representatives. After the 2024 election, Democrats from these states held eight House seats, all of which were represented by Black members, including two women. Republicans held 20 House seats, with all held by white members, including 16 men.

Table 6.13 Chi Square Test: Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina General Assemblies, Non-White and White Members by Political Party			
	Georgia	South Carolina	Louisiana
Number of White Democrats (2008)	43	34	48
Number of White Republicans (2008)	137	96	65
Number of Non-White Democrats (2008)	54	38	29
Number of Non-White Republicans (2008)	2	2	0
Number of White Democrats (2024)	17	14	7
Number of White Republicans (2024)	128	118	101
Number of Non-White Democrats (2024)	86	33	36
Number of Non-White Republicans (2024)	5	4	0
Chi Squared (White legislators by party)	7.9	10.6	38.3
P Value (White legislators by party)	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01
Significance (White legislators by party)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Chi Squared (Non-White legislators by party)	0.28	0.9	0.023
P Value (Non-White legislators by party)	0.29	0.17	0.44
Significance (Non-White legislators by party)	No	No	No
<i>Source: Georgia General Assembly; Louisiana General Assembly; South Carolina General Assembly, compiled by author.</i>			

Reenforcing findings from the three case studies that show significance for racial polarization among white and non-white elected officials, Table 6.13 calculates chi squares for the members of general assemblies in Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina. These data show that the change in the share of white legislators by party is statistically significant, as the number of white Democrats precipitously decreased in all three states. Despite an increase in the share of non-white Democrats shown in Table 6.12, statistical significance is not found by applying chi squared tests to the share of non-white legislators by party. This is likely because of the relatively stark levels of racial polarization recorded in 2008, as well as the challenging electoral environment faced by Democrats in general, making the observational results reported in Table 6.12 a better measure to confirm hypothesis H9.

South-wide, recent election cycles have also shown promise for the willingness of GOP voters to nominate non-white candidates, following in the mold of Bobby Jindal, Nikki Haley, and Tim Scott. In North Carolina, with Donald Trump's blessing, Republicans nominated the state's Black Lieutenant Governor Mark Robinson for governor in 2024. Ultimately, Robinson lost badly amidst a scandal-plagued candidacy, coming up short to Democrat Josh Stein by a margin of 55% to 40%. In Virginia, Lieutenant Governor Winsome Earle-Sears has positioned herself as the presumptive GOP nominee for the 2025 gubernatorial contest. If successful, Earle-Sears would be the first Black woman ever elected to a state governorship.

Although the partisan and demographic shifts occurring among elected officials at the state and federal levels shed insight into the broader trends of racial polarization occurring across the South, statistics alone offer a limited window into the changes occurring on the ground in individual states and districts. To capture the implications of these changes for representation and policymaking, it is also important to dive into how the changing politics of the South have been manifested through voting patterns and the behavior of candidates and elected officials. Further, partisanship and demographics only tell part of the South's larger story. During this period, what it means to identify as a Democrat or Republican has also changed considerably, as the GOP became the party of Trump and Democrats worked to cobble together an increasingly diverse electoral coalition.

HYPOTHESIS H10

Hypothesis H10 puts forward that gender polarization increased among public officeholders between 2008 and 2024, including statewide officials, members of Congress, and members of state general assemblies. In 2008, female Democratic state legislators held 60 seats (24%) among 246 Democrats serving in the three state general assemblies, in comparison to 29

Republican women (10%) serving among a total of 302 GOP legislators. Put another way, of the 89 women serving in these general assemblies, 60 (67%) were Democrats. After the 2024 elections, women made up 83 (43%) of 193 Democratic legislators, and 54 (15%) of 356 Republican legislators. During the 16-year period evaluated, the total number of female Republican legislators increased by 25, in comparison to an increase of 23 Democratic women. As of 2025, among 137 women serving in the state House and state Senate in Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina, 83 (61%) are Democrats.

Table 6.14 Chi Square Test: Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina General Assemblies, Men and Women Elected by Political Party			
	Georgia	South Carolina	Louisiana
Number of Female Democrats (2008)	34	9	17
Number of Female Republicans (2008)	14	8	7
Number of Male Democrats (2008)	63	63	60
Number of Male Republicans (2008)	125	90	58
Number of Female Democrats (2024)	60	10	13
Number of Female Republicans (2024)	21	12	21
Number of Male Democrats (2024)	43	37	30
Number of Male Republicans (2024)	112	110	80
Chi Squared (Female legislators by party)	0.16	0.21	5.9
P Value (Female legislators by party)	0.34	0.32	<0.01
Significance (Female legislators by party)	No	No	Yes
Chi Squared (Male legislators by party)	1.32	8.64	13.24
P Value (Male legislators by party)	0.12	<0.01	<0.01
Significance (Male legislators by party)	No	Yes	Yes
<i>Source: Georgia General Assembly; Louisiana General Assembly; South Carolina General Assembly, compiled by author.</i>			

Table 6.9 offers a more detailed window that contrasts the share of female officeholders in the Democratic and Republican parties across statewide officeholders, Congress, state House, and state Senate. Building on these data, Table 6.14 presents chi squares calculated for election cycles between 2008 to 2024 to evaluate if gender polarization has increased between Democrats and

Republicans in general assemblies in Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina. The data in Table 6.9 and Table 6.14 provide support to confirm hypothesis H10 in Georgia, while offering mixed support in South Carolina and serving to disconfirm notions of an increase in gender polarization among elected officials in Louisiana.

In Georgia, between 2008 and 2024, the gap in the share of female members of Congress between Democrats and Republicans went from none to 29 percentage points, while increasing from 24 percentage points to 49 percentage points in the state Senate and from 25 percentage points to 40 percentage points in the state House. In South Carolina, aside from Republicans gaining an advantage in female representation statewide and in Congress, the gap in the share of Democratic and Republican women in the state Senate increased from three percentage points in 2008 to 17 percentage points in 2024, while going from six to nine percentage points in the state House. In Louisiana, over the same 16-year period, Republicans surpassed Democrats in female representation statewide and in Congress, while cutting the Democratic advantage in the state Senate from 20 percentage points to seven percentage points. The gap between the share of female Democrats and Republicans in Louisiana's state House also increased slightly from seven percentage to nine percentage points over the period observed. These data further demonstrate that Georgia is distinct from South Carolina and Louisiana in confirming H10, with mixed results found for the Palmetto State and Louisiana disconfirming the hypothesis.

HYPOTHESIS H11

Hypothesis H11 posits that, since Trump's takeover of the GOP in 2016, two-party competition has increased in the Growth South. Overall, due to population increases, the number of the U.S. House seats represented by these six states has increased by four to 112. Among these districts, Republicans represented 75 seats (67%) at the start of the 119th Congress (2025-2027).

On the U.S. Senate side, during the same period, Republicans controlled eight out of 12 seats (67%). Table 6.15 charts two-party political competition in congressional races over five cycles between 2016 and 2024, which is similarly recorded for the Stagnant South in Table 6.17.

Table 6.15 Two-Party Political Competition in the Growth South (Congress)					
Percentage of:	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
Marginal Contests	4%	22%	21%	13%	9%
Landslide Victories	96%	78%	79%	88%	91%
Republican Victories	69%	60%	60%	64%	67%
<i>Source: Ballotpedia, compiled by author.</i>					

As analyzed in Tables 6.15, 6.16, 6.17, and 6.18, marginal contests for Congress, U.S. Senate, and state executive offices are those decided by less than 10 percentage points, while landslide victories are those that fall beyond this boundary. For a brief four-year period, in 2018 and 2020, Growth South districts saw heightened political competition, with the number of marginal contests increasing from four percent (four) in 2016 to 22% (24) in 2018 and 21% (23) in 2020, before receding to 13% (14) in 2022 and, finally, nine percent (10) after new district lines were implemented throughout the region. Beyond narrower margins and in terms of Republicans losing ground in representation, there was a brief period in which the number of GOP seats decreased from 74 in 2016 to 65 (2019-2023), before rebounding to 72 in 2022 and 75 in 2024.

From 2016 forward, Donald Trump’s leadership over the Republican Party has coincided with gradual Democratic political advancement in the Growth South—with South Carolina as an outlier. As in the five states of the Stagnant South, GOP primary races between Republicans are usually the determinative elections for selecting top officeholders. Outside of South Carolina, results from the Growth South states generally offer support for H11, as demonstrated in Table 6.15 and Table 6.16. Whereas Trump’s endorsement is critical for Republicans competing in primaries, it has limited utility in general election contests. While Trump may stimulate

Republican turnout in primaries, his involvement can have an even greater effect on Democratic turnout, as demonstrated in Georgia.

Among others, Trump’s endorsement in open primaries helped to nominate losing GOP candidates including Mark Robinson (North Carolina governor, 2024), Herschel Walker (Georgia Senate, 2022), and Katie Arrington (South Carolina 1st District, 2018). Remarking on this trend, Chris Christie lambasted the former president, saying “As long as Donald Trump is your recruiting agent for candidates in swing states, we’re going to continue to get our rear ends handed to us” (Rupar 2024B). In this respect, while Trump’s support is widely coveted within the GOP, his standing among the wider electorate has varied considerably.

During the early months of the 2024 presidential campaign, down ballot candidate requests for joint appearances with Trump were “conspicuously few and far between” (Alberta, 2024). However, “by the middle of October, Trump was being hounded with requests” (Ibid). *What changed?* Paradoxically, according to Tim Alberta, when Trump is not the national political focal point, he is more popular. Alberta reports that, “Trump’s allies marveled at how simple it had all been. Keeping voters’ attention on Harris—while, to the extent they could, keeping Trump out of his own way—had produced the most significant movement in his direction since her entry into the race” (Ibid). This finding suggests an ominous outlook for the GOP in the 2026 mid-term cycle, as down ballot races appear primed to revolve around Trump once again.

Table 6.16 Two-Party Political Competition in the Growth South (Statewide)				
Percentage of:	2009-2010	2013-2014	2017-2018	2021- 2022
Marginal Contests	30%	33%	79%	55%
Landslide Victories	70%	67%	21%	45%
Republican Victories	86%	83%	79%	86%
<i>Source: Ballotpedia, compiled by author. Note: NC is the only state out of sync in its election cycles, which are two years ahead of the other five states in 2012, 2016, 2020, 2024.</i>				

Table 6.16 tracks marginal contests, landslide victories, and the share of Republican victories in the 42 statewide contests for constitutional officers, U.S. Senate, and governorships. In the 2009-2010 cycle, 30% (13) of 44 contests were decided by less than 10 points, electing 38 Republicans and six Democrats. In the 2021-2022 cycle, 23 (45%) of 42 races were within the marginal range, however, Republicans still won 36 of these races.

Despite some blown opportunities and numerous close calls, GOP gains from the Growth South in the U.S. House—a net increase of 19 seats between 2009 (56 seats) and 2025 (75 seats)—have been decisive in helping to determine the partisan balance of Congress. However, between 2017 and 2025, Republicans have recorded a net gain of one seat in the Growth South and Democrats have netted three seats, offering modest support for H11 at the congressional level. Nevertheless, in the 2024 cycle, Republicans offset the loss of two seats in Alabama and Louisiana by gaining three seats in North Carolina, after the state’s GOP supermajority enacted a redistricting plan over the objections of Democratic governor Roy Cooper. Winning three seats in North Carolina gave House Republicans control of 99 seats from across the full 11-state South to comprise 45% of the entire GOP Caucus—the largest share made up by Southern Republicans observed during the 16-year period of this study.

HYPOTHESIS H12

Hypothesis H12 posits that, between 2016 and 2024, political competition has decreased in the Stagnant South states, elevating intra-party GOP contests as the determinative elections for selecting top officeholders in these states. Table 6.17 tracks the share of marginal contests, landslide elections, and Republican victories in the five cycles of congressional elections from 2016 to 2026. Although support is found at the statewide level, hypothesis H12 is disconfirmed in races for Congress.

Table 6.17 Two-Party Political Competition in the Stagnant South (Congress)					
Percentage of:	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
Marginal Contests	3%	7%	0%	0%	3%
Landslide Victories	97%	93%	100%	100%	97%
Republican Victories	83%	83%	83%	87%	80%
<i>Source: Ballotpedia, compiled by author.</i>					

As shown, and in contrast to the Growth South, Stagnant South states rarely if ever see a competitive general election for U.S. House. In 2016, just one of 30 races was decided by a margin inside of 10 percentage points. Among these contests, Republicans won 25 seats (83%). In 2024, just one of the 30 House races was decided by less than 10 percentage points, and Republicans won 24 contests (80%). These results demonstrate how an already ruby red region has been under near-total GOP control over the eight years tracked by this study. However, due in large part to the Supreme Court’s decision in *Robinson v. Callais*, Democrats were afforded two additional majority Black seats in Alabama and Louisiana, narrowing GOP’s advantage from 25-out-of-30 in 2017 to 24-out-of-30 in 2025. This change disconfirms hypothesis H12 for congressional races.

Table 6.18 Two-Party Political Competition in the Stagnant South (Statewide)				
Percentage of:	2010-2011	2014-2015	2018-2019	2022-2023
Marginal Contests	12%	6%	9%	3%
Landslide Victories	88%	94%	91%	97%
Republican Victories	85%	94%	97%	100%
<i>Source: Ballotpedia, compiled by author.</i>				

Table 6.18 records the share of marginal contests and Republican victories across the five Stagnant South states in statewide races (U.S. Senate, governor, constitutional officers). Among 33 contests, in the 2010 cycle, four resulted in marginal races with Republicans winning 28 contests. By 2024, that figure was down to just a single race, as Republicans swept all 33 elections. Taken together, these figures provide support statewide for hypothesis H12. From top to bottom,

the ranks of Stagnant South elected officials are dominated by Trump loyalists. With little competition between Democrats and Republicans in these states, Trump’s fingerprints extend from helping to elect former staffers like Arkansas Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders to offering his stamp of approval to candidates like Tommy Tuberville and Cindy Hyde-Smith who have defined themselves as fitting squarely within the Trump-centric GOP.

HYPOTHESIS H13

Hypothesis H13 puts forward the idea that, as a result of the trends evaluated as part of H11 and H12, Trump’s influence has helped his supporters obtain a greater share of leadership positions in the Stagnant South than in the Growth South. H13 is offered to evaluate if Trump’s influence varies between the states of the Growth South and Stagnant South in helping his supporters to obtain leadership positions. Receiving Trump’s endorsement and issuing an endorsement of Trump in the 2024 GOP presidential primary are cues by GOP candidates that they are in-line with Trump’s agenda and lane of Republican politics. While it is true that many of the endorsements issued by Trump may have had little visible political impact—including those provided to safe-seat Republicans ahead of general elections—the gesture remains an important signal of Trump’s support. Furthermore, identifying the candidates that Trump chooses not to endorse can be revealing.

Table 6.19 demonstrates an analysis of the 175 leaders elected to serve in the U.S. House, U.S. Senate, and governorships across the full 11-state South as of December 2024. This group includes 142 members of the House, 22 U.S. senators, and 11 governors. Republicans were elected to hold 39 out of 45 (87%) of these positions in the Stagnant South and 88 of 130 (68%) of these offices in the Growth South. As shown in Table 6.19, in the Stagnant South, 33 of 39 (85%) of these Republicans were either recently endorsed by Trump in their races or endorsed him ahead of

the 2024 presidential primary in their state. In the Growth South, 84 of 88 top Republican elected officials met the same criteria (95%). Narrowing it down to the most Trump-loyal Republicans who checked both of these boxes, that the percentage drops to 79% (31) in the Stagnant South and 86% in the Growth South (76). However, among all leaders elected in 2024 (including Democrats), 69% of 45 elected officials from the Stagnant South and 58% of 130 elected officials from the Growth South met the dual endorsement criteria.

Over the full five cycle period evaluated by this study (2016-2024), as shown in Table 6.2, among 148 Growth South Republicans, 82 (55%) are classified as MAGA Republicans. Whereas, among 61 Stagnant South Republicans, 32 (52%) are categorized as MAGA Republicans. These figures do not support hypothesis H13, as a larger number—and share—of pro-Trump Republicans have been elected from the six Growth South states than from the five Stagnant South states. In terms of supporting Trump’s claims of a stolen election, among House Republicans, those from the Stagnant South both signed on to Johnson’s amicus brief at a higher rate (80% to 71%) and voted to object to the certification of Biden’s 2020 Electoral College victory with greater frequency than Growth South Republicans (88% to 77%). These statistics are interrogated further in Table 6.23. Taken together, this analysis offers mixed results for hypothesis H13.

Table 6.19 Region-wide, Pro-Trump Republicans Rule Southern GOP		
	Stagnant South	Growth South
Number of leaders elected to top positions (U.S. House, U.S. Senate, Governor)	45	130
Republicans elected to top positions in 2024 (U.S. House, U.S. Senate, Governor)	39 (87%)	88 (68%)
Share of Republicans endorsed by Trump*	33 (85%)	84 (95%)
Share of Republicans both endorsed by and endorsing Trump (%)	31 (79%)	76 (86%)
<i>Source: Compiled by author via Ballotpedia, 538/ABC News, X, Truth Social, and other sources. *Indicates an endorsement from Trump in 2024, 2022, or the most recent election cycle. For endorsements of Trump, an affirmative response indicates an endorsement announced prior to the primary election in that official's state.</i>		

During the period of this study, the Southern wing of the Republican Party has undergone a significant process of transformation that aided Trump's rise and saw GOP voters and elected officials residing in the South become among the 45th President's highest intensity and most loyal supporters. As of 2025, Republicans held 99 out of 142 U.S. House seats (70%), 18 of 22 Senate seats (82%), and 10 governorships (91%) representing 11-Southern states. Just 14 of these Southern GOP members of the House were elected to their current position prior to 2008, as a new political generation of Republicans claimed these seats during the period observed by this study.

This analysis reveals that only three Southern Republicans serving in major elected offices after the 2024 election meet the criteria of neither receiving Trump's endorsement in a recent cycle, nor endorsing Trump ahead of the 2024 presidential primary in their state: Representative French Hill (Arkansas), Senator Bill Cassidy (Louisiana), and Governor Brian Kemp (Georgia). Among this group, Trump rescinded his endorsement of Cassidy and declared him a top target in 2026 after he voted in favor of convicting the former president in his second Senate impeachment trial. Trump also attempted to defeat Kemp in Georgia's 2022 primary by endorsing David Perdue, who lost badly to the popular governor. Hill and Cassidy were also among nine Southern House and Senate Republicans (of 41) who voted in favor of creating a national commission to investigate the January 6 Attack on the United States Capitol Complex (H.R. 3233).²¹

Appendix B provides the full listing of elected officials representing the 11-states of the Growth South and Stagnant South in 2024 and indicates if Trump endorsed them in their most recent election and if they endorsed his candidacy ahead of the 2024 GOP primary vote, as compared to the elected officials who preceded them. As Trump picked up greater political

²¹ Southern Republicans supporting the measure (among 35 House and 6 Senate Republicans) included: Carlos Giménez (Florida), Tony Gonzales (Texas), Michael Guest (Mississippi), French Hill (Arkansas), Tom Rice (South Carolina), Maria Elvira Salazar (Florida), Van Taylor (Texas), Steve Womack (Arkansas), and Bill Cassidy (Louisiana).

momentum in his 2024 campaign, he started to take on an aura of inevitability. Some down ballot politicians, such as 5th District Virginia Congressman Bob Good, first endorsed another presidential candidate before supporting Trump. In Good's case, his support for Ron DeSantis prompted Trump to endorse his primary opponent, John McGuire, who narrowly defeated him. Attempting to preserve his seat, Good flipped his endorsement to Trump in January of 2024 ahead of Virginia's March presidential primary, but the damage had already been done (Good 2024). Firing a warning shot to others within the GOP, Trump attacked Good for being insufficiently loyal, saying that he was "constantly attacking and fighting me until recently, when he gave me a warm and 'loving' Endorsement – But really, it was too late!" (Irwin, 2024). Ultimately, the sitting Freedom Caucus chairman was defeated by a margin of 375 votes—indicating that Trump's involvement was decisive.

Identifying the instances in which support is mutual—with endorsements to and from Trump—offers a reliable way of determining which down ballot candidates and officeholders can credibly be classified as belonging to the GOP's pro-Trump faction. To demonstrate this point, one does not need to look further than the GOP candidates who were initially successful without Trump's endorsement but pursued a closer association with Trump after being elected. On this front, several examples are presented in chapters three through five.

In one such instance, Nancy Mace mended fences with Trump after winning the race for South Carolina's 1st District in 2020 as the only U.S. House Republican candidate to both defeat a Trump-endorsed opponent and claim a Biden-won district. In Georgia, Rich McCormick pulled off a similar act to what Bob Good tried unsuccessfully, flipping his endorsement of Ron DeSantis to Trump ahead of Georgia's presidential primary in January—when it became clear that Trump was running away with the GOP nomination (Parker, 2024). This differs from the approach taken

by Trump-skeptical Republicans like Brian Kemp, who told reporters that he left his 2024 primary ballot blank before his wife, Georgia First Lady Marty Kemp, said in an interview that she wrote in her husband's name for president because Trump had so-far failed to earn her support (Gringlas, 2024). Still, Kemp stuck by Trump even after he attacked his wife for her statements and remained supportive of his campaign during the 2024 general election (VandeHei & Allen, 2024).

Unlike the other states of the Growth South where two-party competition has reemerged, such as Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia, and in contrast to the second series of hypotheses put forward (H11 and H13), South Carolina Republicans reached their maximum strength in officeholding at the very tail-end of this study. Because of patterns of in-state migration and demographic changes, South Carolina's experience shows Democrats continuing to lose ground in rural and exurban areas, while Republicans have also made inroads in population centers statewide.

Between 2008 and 2020, the number of Palmetto State residents under 18 decreased by 300,000 to comprise 15% of the state's population, as the number of residents between 18-64 increased by 642,000 (U.S. Census). South Carolina was one of six Southern states—along with the Stagnant South states of Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Tennessee, and the Growth South state of Florida—to record more deaths than births between 2020 and 2023, losing a net of 18,068 residents (Biernacka-Lievstro & Fall, 2024). Alternatively, Georgia added a net of 59,887 residents born in-state during the same period, while Louisiana's population was completely flat (Ibid).

Another explanation is that growth among Asian and Hispanic voters in the Palmetto State has trailed that of Georgia, although data from the U.S. Census Current Population Survey shows a budding Hispanic population, which made up 2.5% of the electorate in 2020 and nearly two

percent in 2024. Furthermore, unlike Georgia, the scant exit poll data available from *Fox News* shows Hispanic voters were evenly split in South Carolina's 2022 gubernatorial election, with Democrats narrowly prevailing 48% to 47%. In Georgia, exit polls show that Democrats have consistently won 53% to 59% of support from Hispanic voters between 2014 and 2024.

Like South Carolina, voters who are neither Black nor white represented fewer than five percent of the Louisiana's electorate in every cycle evaluated during the period of this study, averaging 3.3%. In Georgia, the share of the electorate comprised of voters of other races has exceeded five percent in 15-out-of-16 cycles recorded by this study. The comparative lack of diversity in South Carolina is one major factor that explains the state's continued shift away from two-party competition.

In 2008, white voters made up 67% of Louisiana's electorate—a figure that remained the same in 2020 and 2024. In U.S. Senate contests, white voters comprised 70% of the electorate in 2010 and 71% in 2022, while representing 74% of voters turning out for the 2007 gubernatorial election and 72% in 2023. During this period Louisiana Democrats captured support from 86% to 95% of Black voters, who comprised at least 29.5% of the electorate in all three Democratic statewide victories. During the period observed by this study, the percentage of white Bayou State voters registered as Republicans climbed from 40% in 2008 to 59% in 2023 (Louisiana Secretary of State). Although this indicator lags voting patterns, it is a stark demonstration of how Democratic prospects have generally worsened among white Bayou State residents. Democratic victories in 2008, 2015, and 2019 involved winning at least 33% of white voters. As elections have become less competitive, voter participation has also dropped, with recent electorates skewing to include a larger proportion of white voters despite the Black voters remaining consistent at 31% of those registered.

If a state's electorate is 70% white and the Republican candidate wins support from 72% of white voters, that is sufficient to produce a majority of 50.4% of ballots cast. In part, this benchmark illustrates why the 30-30 minima tested by hypothesis H2 is function differently in South Carolina and Louisiana from Georgia, where white voters generally represent a smaller proportion of the electorate. In addition to meeting the standards of a 30-30 election, to remain competitive in these states, it is important for Democratic candidates to hold upwards of 90% of support from Black voters and to perform strongly among voters who do not fit into the traditional Black-white dichotomy.

In 2024, exit polls reported Trump winning 58% of suburban voters in South Carolina, who comprised 44% of the electorate in comparison to 46% of voters residing in small towns and rural areas (*Fox News*, 2024). This figure was nearly identical to Louisiana, where 60% of suburban voters supported Trump over Harris, and suburban voters made up 36% of those turning out as small town and rural voters comprised 46% of the electorate (Ibid). On the other hand, in Georgia, Harris won 51% of suburban voters, who represented 48% of those casting ballots in contrast to 36% of residents from small towns and rural areas (Ibid). Beyond density, the difference in South Carolina's political environment can be explained by both historical factors, including the early growth of the GOP starting with Thurmond's conversion in 1964, in addition to unique demographic trends such as the Palmetto State's status as a destination for retirees.

Each case study also charts the GOP's education gap between white college and white non-college educated voters. In this respect, South Carolina fits in-between Georgia and Louisiana. In Louisiana, McCain won 80% of white college educated voters who represented 38% of the electorate in 2008 and 87% of those with no degree who made up 38% of all voters (National Election Pool, 2008D). In 2024, Trump matched this 87% figure among white non-college voters,

who represented 43% of the electorate, along with 64% of white Louisiana voters with a college degree who made up 24% of the electorate (*Fox News*, 2024).

In South Carolina, McCain won support from 68% of white college graduates who comprised 34% of the electorate and 78% of white voters without a college degree, who made up 37% of those casting ballots (National Election Pool, 2008C). In 2024, Trump won the same 78% share among white non-college voters, who represented 34% of the electorate, along with 59% of white college voters who represented 27% of those turning out (*Fox News*, 2024). Meanwhile, in Georgia, the landscape among white college educated voters was more favorable towards Democrats. In 2008, 73% of white college graduates who represented 31% of the electorate cast their ballots for McCain over Obama, while 78% of white voters without a four-year degree (34% of the electorate) voted the same way (National Election Pool, 2008B). In 2024, Trump won 57% of white voters with a college degree, who made up 25% of those casting ballots, and 82% among the 34% of the electorate comprised of white voters without a college degree (National Election Pool, 2024).

CHANGES IN REPUBLICAN POLITICS AND POLICY PRIORITIES

FROM THE TEA PARTY'S RISE TO TRUMP'S GOP

As the ideological and demographic makeup of both parties has changed in recent years, so too have the policy priorities championed by Democrats and Republicans alike. Two major policy areas, which uniquely reflect Southern political influence, have taken center stage in dividing Democrats and Republicans nationally. An analysis of these issues is included to further demonstrate how Southern Republicans have influenced the party's stance on key issues as part of the Southernization of the GOP and as a consequence of shifts in Republican leadership (H1, H1A, and H1B).

The first area assessed is major fiscal policy legislation, analyzed through Republican congressional support for legislative agreements to fund the federal government and, relatedly, to increase the nation's debt ceiling or borrowing limit. Since the Obama era, the share of congressional Republicans voting in opposition to must-pass fiscal legislation has increased considerably, a trend led by the party's Southern delegation. Overall, the majority of Southern House Republicans have voted against seven out of the past 13 major spending and debt ceiling bills enacted by Congress. The second issue covered is GOP support for Trump's claims of a stolen 2020 election and the implications for American politics and Democracy. This analysis finds that the GOP's Southern wing was most likely to support Trump's effort to contest the 2020 election in the U.S. House.

FISCAL POLICY

Budgetary policy is central to governing and implementing a policy agenda. However, disfunction with respect to the management of the federal government entered a new phase in 2011, after Republicans took control of the House and began using the debt limit as leverage to extract policy concessions from the Obama White House. On five separate occasions, the Obama administration entered a standoff with GOP congressional leaders over extensions of the debt limit and related budget negotiations. In 2011, the first of these battles resulted in the first ever downgrade of the U.S. credit rating by S&P from AAA to AA+. Table 6.20 charts major battles over fiscal policy during the period of this study, from 2008 to 2024. Table 6.21 identifies GOP voting patterns between the region of the South and the rest of the House conference, in addition to disaggregating between the Growth South and the Stagnant South, while Table 6.22 shows differences between MAGA Republicans, Sometimes Trump Republicans, and Anti-Trump Republicans in the three case study states.

As detailed in Appendix C, Congress has voted to increase the limit on federal borrowing a total of 13-times between 2008 and 2025. Most of these instances saw increases to the debt ceiling paired with bipartisan compromises over the federal budget. During this period, there have been three partial government shutdowns due to the expiration of federal funding plans and the nation's credit rating has been downgraded by major ratings agencies twice. These standoffs have become centrally important to fiscal policymaking in the contemporary era, with the Southern wing of the congressional GOP Caucus pushing the party writ large to embrace brinksmanship as a strategy to negotiate conservative priorities in the federal budget process.

In 2013, freshman Senator Ted Cruz of Texas led an attempt to defund the Affordable Care Act by refusing to authorize an increase to the nation's \$16.7 trillion debt limit that resulted in a 16-day partial government shutdown. Speaker John Boehner, who led the House GOP from 2007-2015, described Cruz's gambit as a "dumbass idea," in which the apparent strategy "was to make the White House destroy their prized legacy legislative accomplishment in exchange for Republicans taking a routine vote to keep the government running" (Boehner, 2021, 170). For his part, after the shutdown, Cruz blamed his fellow Senate Republicans for showing insufficient resolve, charging: "What we did not anticipate was that... the GOP leadership team would decide to publicly, directly and aggressively lead the fight against the House Republicans and in favor of Obamacare" (Farenthold et al., 2016). Boehner characterized the event as "one the most bizarre events I've seen in politics," describing the scene from his vantage point at the helm of the House GOP conference:

At least twice... I had talked to our members to try to convince them that this was a bad idea. But Cruz and company took advantage of the recess to convince Republicans around the country that this suicide mission was the only way to get rid of Obamacare... When we got to the open-mic portion of the [conference] meeting, member after member, including some of the practical, down-to-earth folks who I had known for years, were speaking in support of this fight... I knew this had truly become the will of the conference... Ted Cruz

may have been the leader of this effort in Congress, but there were plenty of forces at work pushing him from the outside. These would be the so-called conservative outside groups, and that was where the big payday came in. There was Jim DeMint's Senate Conservatives Fund. Another was FreedomWorks... One of the worst was Heritage Action for America... So, finally, I was the one who caved. Sometimes you have to let people blow themselves up to make a point... And sure enough, when I did come on board I was treated like a hero. I was finally a "true conservative," whatever that meant to them... What kamikaze stunts like this had to do with conservatism, I never quite figured out, and I don't think they did either. I knew how this was going to end. We were on the Titanic playing chicken with an iceberg—and a loudmouthed jerk from Texas was at the helm, grinning like a damn fool, as the water started filling up the boat. (Boehner, 2021, 173-74)

The 2013 shutdown exposed a new fault line in the Republican Party, with 80% of white Southern Republicans voting against funding the government, in contrast to 50% of non-Southern white Republicans (Maxwell & Shields, 2019). Ultimately, Boehner announced his resignation from the speakership in September 2015, after a group of 30 House Republicans threatened to force a no-confidence vote on the floor. These threats came after Boehner announced that the House would vote on a clean spending bill to keep the government open and lift the debt ceiling (DeBonis & Kane, 2015). Since this rift was exposed, House Republican leaders have continued to struggle to rein in rank-and-file members who often appear at odds with their leadership.

In March of 2017, Speaker Paul Ryan described the challenges of governing, saying: "We were a 10-year opposition party where being against things was easy to do. You just had to be against it. And now, in three months' time, we have to go to a governing party where we actually have to get 216 people to agree with each other on how we do things" (Diamond, 2017). Four months later, the GOP's years-long effort to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act failed on a 49-51 vote in the Senate after Republicans publicly struggled to present a credible alternative that could obtain comparable public support (Cohn, 2021).

Table 6.20 shows how Republicans from the South have voted across 13 major proposals related to the debt ceiling and federal spending that ultimately achieved passage between 2008 and

2024. In all but two instances—outside of the Continuing Appropriations Act of 2018 and the Joint Resolution to increase the debt limit in 2021—Southern House Republicans were significantly more likely to oppose increases to the debt ceiling or federal spending compromises than the full House GOP Caucus. Under Democratic presidencies, Southern Republicans are also more likely to vote against these measures. On the Senate side, voting patterns between the GOP’s Southern delegation and the full caucus do not meaningfully differ on as consistent of a basis, as Senate Republicans are more likely to support these measures than House members.

Table 6.20 Southern Republicans Most likely to Oppose Increases to Debt Ceiling, Bipartisan Budget Compromises					
Roll Call Vote (Issue)	Date	Non-Southern House GOP Against Measure (%)	Southern House GOP Against Measure (%)	Non-Southern Senate GOP Against Measure (%)	Southern Senate GOP Against Measure (%)
Budget and Control Act of 2011	2011	24%	33%	39%	44%
No Budget, No Pay Act of 2013	2013	13%	16%	72%	75%
Continuing Appropriations Act of 2014	2013	51%	77%	38%	44%
Temporary Debt Limit Extension Act	2014	79%	94%	97%	94%
Bipartisan Budget Act of 2015	2015	61%	77%	66%	63%
Continuing Appropriations Act of 2018	2017	39%	35%	45%	11%
Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018	2018	26%	30%	36%	21%
Bipartisan Budget Act of 2019	2019	64%	69%	42%	47%
Joint Resolution to increase the debt limit	2021	100%	96%	94%	100%
Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023	2023	21%	46%	55%	78%
Supplemental Appropriations for 2023	2023	44%	64%	19%	17%
Continuing Appropriations Act of 2024	2023	28%	56%	19%	17%
Continuing Appropriations and Extensions Act, 2025	2024	32%	44%	15%	33%
<i>Source: Congressional Record, compiled by author.</i>					

Two decades ago, the Tom DeLay-led GOP declared victory over the federal budget, with the House Republican leader declaring that “government was running at peak efficiency” saying “after 11 years of Republican majority we’ve pared it down pretty good” (*Washington Times*, 2005). By the early 2010s, Tea Party inspired Republicans, such as Jeff Duncan and Mick Mulvaney of South Carolina, were among the early backers of GOP efforts to weaponize the debt ceiling as a negotiating tool and to castigate Republican congressional leadership for being weak-kneed on fiscal policy (Duncan, 2014; Mulvaney, 2014). Now, in the modern era, it is a feat for Republicans to whip a majority of the party’s members to support federal spending legislation. As reflected in Table 6.20, the GOP’s Southern wing has regularly led the resistance to funding the government or raising the debt ceiling. Until recently, threats to shut down the government over partisan policy disagreements were rare and, if they surfaced, were often led by those outside of leadership. More recently, it has been Trump driving this push and helping to give cover to conservatives unwilling to support any viable spending agreement.

Table 6.21 demonstrates that, in nine-out-of-13 instances in which the House voted on final passage of a legislative measure to raise the debt ceiling, Growth South Republicans have voted more conservatively than Stagnant South Republicans. This observation is complimented by Table 6.22, which charts voting patterns for the 18 to 21 House Republicans representing the three case study states between 2017 to 2024. On seven-out-of-eight occasions, representatives categorized as MAGA Republicans vote against these measures at a higher frequency than those categorized as Sometimes Trump Republicans.

Table 6.21 Growth South Republicans Tend to Oppose Budgetary Measures at Higher Frequency than Stagnant South Republicans				
Roll Call Vote (Issue)	Year	Regionwide GOP Opposition	Growth South GOP Opposition	Stagnant South GOP Opposition
Budget and Control Act of 2011	2011	33%	35%	28%
No Budget, No Pay Act of 2013	2013	16%	18%	9%
Continuing Appropriations Act of 2014	2013	77%	81%	64%
Temporary Debt Limit Extension Act	2014	94%	93%	96%
Bipartisan Budget Act of 2015	2015	77%	75%	84%
Continuing Appropriations Act of 2018	2017	35%	31%	48%
Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018	2018	30%	32%	24%
Bipartisan Budget Act of 2019	2019	69%	71%	64%
Joint Resolution to increase the debt limit of 2021	2021	96%	95%	96%
Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023	2023	46%	49%	38%
Supplemental Appropriations for 2023	2023	64%	67%	58%
Continuing Appropriations Act of 2024	2023	56%	57%	54%
Continuing Appropriations and Extensions Act, 2025	2024	44%	46%	38%
<i>Source: Clerk, United States House of Representatives, compiled by author.</i>				

Table 6.22 Among House Representatives from Georgia, South Carolina, and Louisiana, MAGA Republicans Oppose Most Fiscal Policy Measures				
Roll Call Vote (Issue)	Year	MAGA Republicans	Sometimes Trump Republicans	Anti-Trump Republicans
Continuing Appropriations Act of 2018	2017	40%	0%	50%
Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018	2018	27%	25%	100%
Bipartisan Budget Act of 2019	2019	75%	67%	100%
Joint Resolution to increase the debt limit of 2021	2021	100%	100%	100%
Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023	2023	43%	33%	N/A
Supplemental Appropriations for 2023	2023	71%	67%	N/A
Continuing Appropriations Act of 2024	2023	71%	33%	N/A
Continuing Appropriations and Extensions Act, 2025	2024	53%	33%	N/A
<i>Source: Clerk, United States House of Representatives, compiled by author.</i>				

The trends observed in Table 6.22 for U.S. House representatives across the three case study states indicates that MAGA Republicans are likelier than the more-establishment class of Sometimes Trump Republicans to oppose agreements to fund the government or increase the debt ceiling. Furthermore, MAGA Republicans opposed fiscal policy legislation at the highest rate recorded of any group, surpassing Growth South Republicans in the share of votes against six of eight (75%) measures brought to the House floor since 2017. This finding is particularly relevant as Trump works to enact his second-term fiscal policy agenda, which will require near unanimous support among Republicans to reach the president’s desk. If, in fact, Trump holds the greatest sway among members who tend to take fiscally conservative stances, then leveraging these relationships will be an essential part of securing passage of his policy priorities. Further, Trump may hold unique power to push the congressional GOP to pass fiscal policy measures they might otherwise be inclined to resist based on previous flashpoints.

In October of 2023, internal GOP party tensions once again boiled over when eight GOP House members voted to remove Speaker Kevin McCarthy through a motion to vacate after he led negotiations to approve a two-year debt limit suspension and advanced a clean funding bill to avoid a government shutdown. Prior to the debt ceiling agreement, Texas Representative Chip Roy who served as chief of staff to Senator Ted Cruz during the 2013 government shutdown, encouraged the GOP to lean into the standoff over the debt limit to repeal Democratic priorities achieved during the previous Congress. Roy asked, “What are Republicans doing? Running away! Saying what? ‘Oh they’ll never give up their signature Inflation Reduction Act bill.’ Bull. They’ll give it up if we take it to them and hold the line” (Kapur, 2023B).

Following his removal as speaker of the House, McCarthy remarked, “My fear is the institution fell today,” and questioned the path forward for Republicans, asking: “How do you govern?” (CSPAN, 2023). McCarthy took office as House Majority Whip during the first debt limit standoff of the Obama era in 2011, when House Republicans extracted concessions in exchange for raising the nation’s then-\$14.3 trillion debt limit. In the final act of his career as the 55th Speaker of the U.S. House, McCarthy kept the government open by bringing a short-term, clean funding bill to the floor, four months after passing a bipartisan agreement to suspend the \$31.4 trillion debt limit reached in 2023 through January of 2025.

After McCarthy’s fall in 2023, changes in the GOP coalition contributed to the election of Mike Johnson as the first Southern Speaker of the U.S. House since Newt Gingrich, who was elevated in 1995 after helping to build the modern Republican coalition. In the years since the watershed victories of the 1990s, the House GOP conference has only become more reliant on maintaining Southern regional political domination to achieve a majority, generating 40% to 45% of its total membership from the 11 Southern states from 2009 to 2025. As the composition of the

Republican congressional conference has changed, shifting intra-party dynamics have also produced challenges in governing—particularly in the U.S. House.

These internal conflicts were on full display during the 118th Congress, as the House GOP majority demonstrated an inability to pass its budget proposals, requiring the chamber’s leaders to govern in cooperation with House Democratic leadership. This was in stark contrast to the strong level of unity seen from the almost identically narrow, Pelosi-led Democratic majority of the 117th Congress. After nearing government shut downs at various intervals during 2023 and 2024, GOP leaders secured federal spending compromises that consistently garnered more votes from Democrats than Republicans.²² Beyond policymaking, Republican legislative leaders have also faced internal disfunction due to difficulties in meeting the demands of a divided membership, tilted to the populist right by its Southern delegation. From Paul Ryan as Speaker (2015-2019) and Liz Cheney as Chair of the House Republican Conference (2019-2021) to Speaker Johnson (2023-2024) and Conference Chairwoman Elise Stefanik (2021-2024), the House GOP saw a sea change in its leadership, which reflected similar changes among rank-and-file Republicans between the 111th and 118th Congresses in favor of elevating leaders closely aligned with the GOP’s Trump-wing.

During the 2024 campaign, Trump encouraged House Republicans to shut down the government ahead of the 2024 general election unless Democrats agreed to advance the SAVE Act, which would have required proof of citizenship for Americans to register to vote. Over Truth Social, Trump demanded, “If Republicans don’t get the SAVE Act, and every ounce of it, they should not agree to a Continuing Resolution in any way, shape, or form” (Ramirez, 2024). With

²² See Roll Call Vote 118th Congress, 1st session January 18, 2024, “On Motion to Suspend the Rules and Concur in the Senate Amendment,” H.R. 2872, in which 207 Democrats voted with 107 Republicans on a short-term funding extension to keep the government open, followed by Roll Call 64 on March 6, 2024, for H.R. 1061 in which 207 Democrats voted alongside 132 Republicans to fund the federal government through September of 2024.

Trump's support, the GOP House Conference voted to sink the funding bill put forward by their own leadership.

Asked to make sense of the gambit, Speaker Johnson said, "President Trump fully understands the situation, he understands our margins and he's frustrated as I am that we couldn't get that done" (Grayer et al., 2024). After the House GOP's partisan budget failed twice in the House with the SAVE Act attached, a bipartisan continuing resolution passed under a suspension of the chamber's rules, requiring a two-thirds majority and support from Democratic leadership to pass a stop gap measure and avoid a government shut down. However, Trump rewarded Johnson for going along with the stunt, offering his unqualified support to the newly minted Speaker—saying in October of 2024, "He's going to be around for a longtime I predict" (Collins, 2024). Journalist Jake Sherman characterized his comments as, "the strongest backing of a Hill GOP leader I think I've ever heard from Trump" (Sherman, 2024).

After entering the 118th Congress with promises of returning the appropriations process to regular order and passing 12 individual spending bills, Speaker Johnson's congressional leadership team presided over the most dysfunctional budgetary session in recent decades. Still, Johnson claimed the speakership in a single vote, despite starting the 119th Congress with an even slimmer 219-seat majority. Due in significant part to his support from Trump, Johnson secured near unanimous support from the GOP Caucus to open his first full session of Congress as Speaker of the House.

DEMOCRACY

By the 2022 midterm campaign, most Republican nominees for U.S. Congress, denied or cast doubt on the outcome of the 2020 presidential election, including most federally elected leaders from Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina (Gardner, 2022). Trump's relentless focus

on his claim that the 2020 election was stolen—including his pledge to intervene in the cases of his 1,000+ supporters who were criminally convicted after storming the U.S. Capitol—continued from November of 2020 throughout his 2025 inauguration when he issued a blanket pardon for the vast majority of those involved (Reilly, 2024). In some states, including Georgia and North Carolina, GOP officials channeled Trump’s claims to call for and attempt to implement changes to election laws (Carter et al., 2024).

These efforts contributed to validating the position that the 2020 election was stolen or unfairly conducted as an expected policy stance for Republican candidates. The extraordinary level of alignment among the GOP electorate, candidates, and officeholders behind the suggestion that Trump was the rightful winner of the 2020 presidential election—despite an abundance of evidence to the contrary—is the clearest demonstration of the extent of Trump’s hold over the Republican voter base, and, as a result, the party writ large in support of hypothesis H1 (*The Washington Post*, 2021). Further, Southern Republicans were at the leading edge of advancing Trump’s claims of a stolen 2020 election (Johnson, 2021).

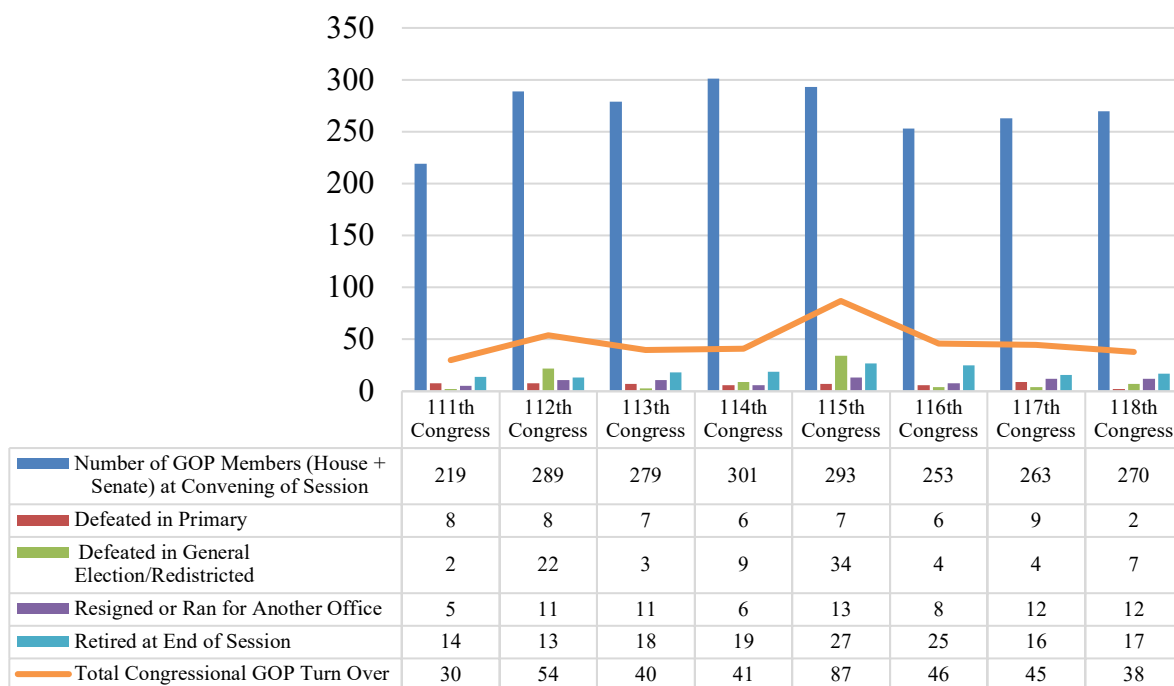
The 45th President’s efforts to deny the results of the 2020 presidential election resulted in both immediate and long-term consequences for perceptions of American democracy, including sparking the events of January 6, 2021. As reported by the *Washington Post*, in an attempt to stop the certification of the Electoral College results, “a pro-Trump mob came within seconds of encountering Vice President Mike Pence, trapped lawmakers and vandalized the home of Congress in the worst desecration of the complex since British forces burned it in 1814” with five people killed and approximately 140 police officers harmed (2021). When the vote to certify the 2020 election was held, 139 House Republicans and seven GOP senators voted to object.²³

²³ Roll Call Vote 117th Congress, 1st session, January 7, 2021, “On the Objection (Shall the Objection submitted by the Gentleman from Pennsylvania, Mr. Perry, and the Senator from Missouri, Mr. Hawley, Be Sustained?)”

Trump's role in encouraging the Capitol attack by sowing doubt on the integrity of the U.S. electoral system also served as the basis for a second impeachment where a handful of Republicans joined all Democrats to impeach Trump in the House. That led to a trial which fell 10-votes short of the 67-member threshold needed for conviction in the Senate. Following the unsuccessful impeachment, and with the support of 35 House Republicans (including six Southern members), Speaker Nancy Pelosi appointed the U.S. House of Representatives of the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th attack on the United States Capitol, including Republicans Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger. Both members served their final term during the 117th Congress, before endorsing Kamala Harris against Trump in the 2024 general election.

After the attack occurred, more than 1,500 people were criminally charged for their actions on January 6th, and detailed accounts were published detailing the former president's role in the events leading up to his supporters storming Congress in an attempt to keep him in power (Martin & Burns, 2023). Although the long-term consequences of these events are less clear, the response among leadership and rank-and-file Republicans alike was—almost uniformly—to reaffirm their support of Trump between 2021 and 2024. Further, muted reactions from Republican leaders after Trump's blanket pardon of nearly all the individuals charged criminally for their involvement in the attack on the Capitol demonstrated that, by winning the 2024 general election, Trump had also succeeded in at-least his short-term efforts to uphold his narrative around the 2020 election.

**Figure 6.3 Charting GOP Congressional Turnover in the Trump Era:
Most Republicans in 118th Congress Elected After Trump**



Source: U.S. House Press Gallery, casualty list, compiled by author.

Between 2017 and 2025, 197 (67%) of 293 congressional Republicans who were serving in either the House or Senate prior to Trump’s inauguration had left office, turning over 23 of 52 seats (44%) in the U.S. Senate and 174 of 241 House districts (72%). Figure 6.3 charts turnover among Republican congressional incumbents from the 111th to the 118th Congresses, demonstrating the high level of turnover seen in recent years as the party has been reshaped under Trump. Notably, the GOP turnover rate in Trump’s first session of Congress between 2017 to 2019 was 30% overall—about twice the average turnover rate of 15% seen over the previous eight years between the 111th and 114th sessions of Congress. This was followed by a GOP turnover rate of 18% in the 116th Congress and 17% in the 117th Congress, before settling back down at 14% for the 118th Congress.

The distinction of congressional seniority is also important because Republicans elected prior to Trump were more likely to vote in favor of certifying the 2020 presidential election.

Overall, 139 of 209 House Republicans voted to object to the certification of the Electoral College votes from at least one state. Among the 116 GOP members elected before 2016, 56% voted to object to certifying the results of the 2020 presidential election, while 72% of 103 Republicans serving in the 117th Congress who were elected in 2016 or later voted in Trump’s favor. Of the 65-out-of-209 House Republicans who voted to certify the results of the 2020 presidential election, 38 of these members (58%) were elected prior to 2016. Over the next four years, 24 (37%) of these representatives exited Congress, leaving 41 House Republicans who voted to certify Biden’s 2020 Electoral College victory at the start of the 119th Congress.

Table 6.23 Southern Republicans Lead GOP in Voting to Object to 2020 Certification of Biden Electoral College Victory					
Category of Republicans:	All House GOP	Non-Southern House GOP	Southern House GOP:	Growth South GOP	Stagnant South GOP
Number of Members in House GOP Conference (2020-21):	209	119	90	65-66	24-25
Share of those present voting to object to at least one state (2021):	67%	56%	80%	77%	88%
Number voting to object to at least one state (2021):	139	67	72	51	21
Number signed on to Johnson SCOTUS Amicus Brief (2020):	126	60	66	46	20
Share signed on to Johnson SCOTUS Amicus Brief (2020):	63%	55%	73%	71%	80%
Number voting in favor of Joint Jan. 6 Commission (2021):	35	27	8	5	3
Share voting in favor of Joint Jan. 6 Commission (2021):	17%	23%	9%	8%	12%
<i>Source: U.S. House of Representatives; The Washington Post (2021); compiled by author. In fall of 2020, the House GOP caucus included 199 members (90 Southerners) and in January 2021 included 209 members (90 Southerners), which increased to 211 after special elections (91 Southerners). There were 24 Stagnant South House members at the time of the 2021 vote, and 65 Growth South Republicans in 2020 at the time of the amicus brief filing.</i>					

As shown in Table 6.23, Republicans representing House districts based in the South tended to support Trump’s objection to results of the 2020 presidential election at significantly

higher rates. Among 90 GOP members representing the 11-Southern states at the time of the vote, 72 (80%) voted to challenge the outcome of the 2020 presidential election in at least one state. Of the 119 GOP members representing the rest of the nation, just 67 (56%) voted the same way. Five of the eight Republican U.S. senators (63%) voting to contest the election also represent Southern states. Approximately 88% of Stagnant South House Republicans voted to object to the certification of Biden's Electoral College victory, with 80% signing on to Johnson's 2020 amicus brief. In the Growth South, these figures were slightly lower, at 77% and 71%, respectively.

As the composition of the congressional Republican conference has changed, the result has been to shift towards a more Trump-centered GOP (H1A and H1B). Among members of the House GOP conference who were elected prior to the 2008 general election, just 22 won reelection in 2024. In the Senate, just 10 Republicans entered 119th congress with more than 16-years of seniority. Of the 22 longest-tenured Republican members of the House, all but one has recently been endorsed by Donald Trump, reflecting the fact that even for those with political careers that precede Trump's own, most of these members have positioned themselves in the Trump-wing of the GOP.

While Trump could not anoint his first choice as speaker—with Jim Jordan unable to secure the 217-votes needed from the slim 221-seat GOP Majority—the former president demonstrated his ability to block candidates he opposed when House Republicans were searching for a speaker in Fall of 2023. Trump was quoted saying he “killed” Tom Emmer's speaker bid, taking retribution on the only member of Republican House leadership who voted in favor of certifying the 2020 Electoral College vote count. Over Truth Social, Trump called Emmer a “Globalist RINO” and called members of Congress to campaign against him (McGraw & Isenstadt, 2023). Later, Trump backed Mike Johnson's insurgent campaign for speaker, elevating the first signer on the amicus

brief filed with the U.S. Supreme Court from 126 Republican members of Congress in support of invalidating the results of the 2020 presidential election in Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.

Among the 126 Republican House members who signed on to the amicus brief, seven were from Georgia (all but the two retiring members Graves and Woodall), all five South Carolina Republicans joined, and Johnson was accompanied by three members of the Louisiana delegation, all aside from Garret Graves who was preparing to exit his seat after the GOP-led redistricting plan targeted his district in 2024. Among the 126 sitting House members who signed the 2020 amicus brief, there were 66 representatives (52%) from the full 11-state South.

All other members of House GOP leadership, including Majority Leader Steve Scalise, Conference Chair Elise Stefanik, Republican Policy Committee Chairman Gary Palmer, and National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC) Chair Richard Hudson, voted to object to certifying the Electoral College results for the 2020 presidential election and signed on to the amicus brief. By January of 2024, ahead of the Iowa caucus, all six House Republican leaders endorsed Trump's 2024 comeback presidential bid, including Emmer. After the election, Trump returned the favor and supported the leadership slate for reelection—apart from Stefanik, who he nominated as the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations. On the Senate side, National Republican Senatorial Committee (NRSC) Chairman Steve Daines joined his House counterpart as one of Trump's first congressional endorsements in 2023—demonstrating the importance GOP leaders placed in aligning the party's down ballot apparatus with Trump. Daines was succeeded at the NRSC by South Carolina Senator Tim Scott in 2025, who notably supported Trump over Nikki Haley after exiting the race for the 2024 GOP presidential nomination.

CONCLUSION

Central to the phenomenon observed throughout this study and tested by hypotheses H1, H1A, and H1B is that, since 2015, Trump has worked to remake the Republican Party in his image—driving this change outward from the GOP’s Southern base. In doing so, he has simultaneously cast himself at the center of a deeply divisive national debate over the future of American government and democracy. At first, Trump was buoyed by Southernization of the GOP cultivated by his political forerunners, including Georgia’s Newt Gingrich, as he initially won the GOP nomination, in part, by engineering a near-sweep of the 2016 SEC Primary. After his election as President of the United States, Trump then became a force in accelerating the next phase of the South’s regional political evolution. Now, Trump’s second term will be defined by his ability to govern alongside a Republican majority in the House and Senate that are likely to be more deferential than ever to him, with the number of his congressional supporters increasing significantly from his first term when Republicans enjoyed their previous trifecta from 2017 to - 2019.

Most Republican members of Congress representing the South have been elected since 2008. Overall, 67 members (30%) of the 220 member House GOP Caucus serving in the 119th Congress had experience serving prior to Trump’s 2017 inauguration, with just 22 (10%) serving prior to Obama taking office in 2009. On the Senate side, 29 members (55%) of the 53-member Senate Republican Caucus was elected prior to 2017, while just 10 (19%) were elected prior to 2009. This chapter’s analysis of fiscal policy and the 2020 election offer evidence in favor of hypotheses H1, H1A, and H1B, supporting the notion that Republicans elected in the Trump era (2017 forward), and MAGA Republicans in particular, are less likely to uphold traditional

governing norms or to support incremental approaches to policymaking, while generally attaching themselves to Trump and deferring to his position on core issues.

In statewide elections—but not congressional campaigns—I find support for hypothesis H12, in which two-party competition has decreased in the Stagnant South between 2016 and 2024. I find modest support in statewide and congressional races for hypothesis H11, support for H12 in statewide but not congressional races, and mixed results for H13. While the share of marginal races (within 10 percentage points) for U.S. Senate and statewide constitutional officers across the six Growth South states has increased from 33% of 46 races held in the 2013 to 2014 cycle to 55% of 42 of races in the 2021 to 2022 cycle, Democrats won just 17% of elections in the former and 14% in the latter cycle. Congressional races record a similar trend. Democrats won 31% of Growth South seats in 2016 and 33% in 2024, while the number of marginal races increased slightly from four (four percent) of 108 in 2016 to 10 (nine percent) of 112 in 2024.

I also observe a trend, demonstrated in Table 6.21, Table 6.22, and Table 6.23, in which Growth South Republicans in the House tend to vote more conservatively than Stagnant South members on budgetary measures (9/13 instances recorded from 2011 to 2024), while Stagnant South Republicans have been likeliest to support Trump’s claims of a stolen election. Whereas 67% of all 209 GOP House members voted to object to Biden’s Electoral College victory and 63% (126 of 199 serving in 2020) signed on to Johnson’s amicus brief on the subject, a significantly higher share of Southerners supported both efforts. In the Stagnant South, 88% of House Republicans voted to object and 80% signed the amicus brief, supporting Trump at a slightly higher rate than the 77% of Growth South Republicans who voted against the Electoral College certification and the 71% who signed on to Johnson’s amicus brief to the U.S. Supreme Court.

As charted in this chapter, Georgia, South Carolina, and Louisiana generally provide confirmation for hypothesis H2, indicating that Democrats would win most elections under a 30-30 scenario in all three states. Aside from this general confirmation, Georgia clearly offers the most hospitable environment for two party-competition and a 30-30 election (or a 29-29 election, as put forward by Bullock, 2022). Particularly when looking ahead to the next election cycle in 2026, a 30-30 election is a real possibility that would result in a statewide Democratic victory in the vast majority of scenarios tested for Georgia. As discussed in chapters three through five, and under findings for H2, Bayou State Democrats have also proven the viability of a 30-30 election through recent victories in 2019, 2015, and 2008. Among these three states, it is only in South Carolina that the prospect of a genuine 30-30 election remains un-realized in the contemporary era.

Nationally, the share of the electorate comprised by white voters decreased from 74% in 2008 to 67% in 2020. In 2024, white voters slightly rebounded to make up 71% of the electorate. While a similar trend is clearly at play in Georgia, South Carolina's voter pool shifted in the opposite direction to include a greater share of white voters between 2008 and 2024, reflecting changes in the state's population that also saw older voters grow to represent a larger share of ballots cast. Louisiana has seen more of an unsteady pattern in recent cycles, in which less competitive races tend to inspire lower levels of turnout among Black voters, which fell to 25% in the 2023 statewide elections.

All three case studies, along with the findings recorded in this chapter, generally serve to disconfirm hypotheses H3 and H4, which posit that Democratic candidates for president, governor, and U.S. Senate shifted to generate a greater share of their support from Black voters (H3) and women (H4) over the cycles tracked between 2008 to 2024. Moreover, consistent disconfirmation

is found for hypotheses H7 and H8 (aside from South Carolina), which follow H3 and H4 by testing whether racial (H7) and gender polarization (H8) increased within the electorate over the 16-year period assessed. However, consistently strong support is found for hypothesis H5, with Black elected officials becoming an observably larger share of Democratic Party officeholders from 2008 to 2024 in all three states at the congressional, state House, and state Senate levels. Further, statistically significant evidence of an increase in racial polarization (H9) among officeholders is found over the full period of this study, and across most two-year intervals, in all three case study states.

With respect to H6, which tests whether women have become a larger share of Democratic Party officeholders, and H10, which evaluates if gender polarization among elected officials has increased, strong support is found to support both hypotheses in Georgia. Mixed results are presented for Louisiana (H6) and South Carolina (H10), with the Palmetto State offering support for H6 and Louisiana disconfirming H10. In large part, the distinction between these two states and Georgia comes down to long-standing historical inequities in female representation in political offices, in addition to the fact that Democrats have consistently lost ground politically across most areas of officeholding, whittling the parties down to bare-bones status.

Although Republicans have made modest inroads among Black voters, it is not clear that this improved standing is a result of specific efforts to increase Black representation in the GOP. Rather, as discussed under the section for H7, which tests changes in racial polarization in the electorate, these gains may be arising as a byproduct of broader cultural and economic attitudes and the inherent challenge of maintaining near-unanimous levels of support among Black voters. Digging deeper, as he improved from winning 8% of Black voters in 2016 to 13% in 2024, Trump's overtures to the Black community—although often attracting media attention—have

produced questionable results (National Election Pool). As an example, in a February 2024 speech to the Black Conservative Federation in Columbia, South Carolina, Trump, attempted to draw a favorable comparison by bringing up his ability to negotiate government contracts relative to that of his predecessor. Trump made his case by asking the crowd: “Would you rather have the Black president or the white president who got \$1.7 billion off the price [of Air Force One]? I think they want the white guy right now” (Jackson, 2024).

Later in the campaign, Trump attracted even more widespread negative attention when he attended the National Association of Black Journalists convention. Sparking an instant firestorm, he questioned when Kamala Harris “happened to turn Black,” repeatedly asking, “is she Indian or is she Black?” (Fowler, 2024). Whatever credit Trump might have received for showing up before more diverse audiences that GOP candidates had not prioritized in previous cycles was diminished by the role that these events had in amplifying racially divisive comments made by the former and future president.

Although Trump is *sui generis*, the Republican Party has been remade in his image and his populist, working-class base has become increasingly important in down ballot elections. As the party remains reliant on Southern domination, Republicans must contend with patterns of growth that are producing an electorate that is more highly educated and becoming more diverse beyond the traditional Black-white dichotomy. With increasing levels of in-migration in response to economic growth, Republicans also face challenges in maintaining outsized levels of support from white residents that hail from a more geographically varied footprint and who are likely to reside in sprawling suburban areas. As the electorate of the Growth South continues changing to reflect broader population trends, GOP candidates will look to build on recent inroads made with non-white and working-class voters throughout the Trump era.

CHAPTER 7:

CONCLUSION: 2024 AND BEYOND

The decades long realignment toward the GOP saw the bulk of Southern white voters embrace Republican candidates, with male, evangelical, and populist voters taking hold as the party's base constituencies. On the other hand, Black Democrats and women also saw major gains in political representation on the Democratic side of the aisle, along with emerging Asian and Hispanic communities that have made Georgia a leader among Growth South states—and nationally—in diverse representation. As demonstrated throughout this dissertation in the process of testing the 15 hypotheses put forward, the changing of the GOP guard in the Trump era has followed the progression of the South's decades-long realignment.

All three of the states selected for case studies are part of the Deep South, sharing a lineage of historically agrarian economies and large Black populations that set the table for unique patterns of political transformation as they progressed into the modern era. Two of these states, Georgia and South Carolina, are part of Growth South, while Louisiana is firmly entrenched as part of the Stagnant South. Despite arguments that Southern political identity is fleeting, the political environments explored in chapters three through five demonstrate that racial polarization continues to hold a distinct—albeit continually evolving—role in the South. Further, as chronicled in the case studies and recounted as part of analyzing the hypotheses tested, issues originating from the hallmarks of Southern polarization—across race, gender, and one-party rule—have only grown more salient and interconnected to national politics.

While remaining the nation's most important political region, the politics of the South have changed in recent years to position the region as uniquely reflective of the base of both political parties. Moreover, the states of the South have played decisive roles in enabling both parties to win the presidency and control of the House and Senate—including six federal governing trifectas between 1992 and 2025. Still, dominating electorally across the South remains uniquely important to the GOP. Chapters one through six serve to illuminate how political trends occurring between the Growth South and the Stagnant South have influenced the political character of the Republican Party, along with notions of racial polarization among voters and elected officials, while shaping the next frontier of two-party political competition for years to come.

Despite finding support that Democrats could win seven-out-of-13 elections for president, U.S. Senate, and governor held over the 16-year period tracked, South Carolina is the state where a 30-30 election feels the furthest out of reach for Democrats. This contrasts with Georgia, where Democrats would have won at least a plurality in 15 out of 16 cycles tested from 2008 to 2024 with a 30-30 electorate. Moreover, as Black turnout has continued to dip to reach contemporary lows, and the state's population has grown older and whiter, South Carolina seems to be at-least on par with—if not behind—Louisiana for Democratic chances in the present environment. However, although demographics alone will not bail out Palmetto State Democrats, as made clear by Teixeira and Judis (2023), state Republicans have reached an all-time peak in officeholding, which could present modest opportunities to recoup some recent close losses suffered by Democrats. Indeed, South Carolina Democrats may have reached bottom after losing eight legislative seats held by Black Democrats to seven white Republicans and one Black Republican between the 2022 and 2024 cycles, which featured three races decided by less than 1,000 votes.

Evidence presented in the case studies also suggests that white South Carolinians may be more inclined to support statewide Democrats than in Louisiana, where Bayou State Democrats have suffered overwhelming defeats in recent cycles to lose much of the positive ground held during the 16-year period tracked by this study. In most measures, South Carolina is less rural than Louisiana, and the share of college educated white voters in its electorate has fallen in-between Georgia and Louisiana. In 2024, Trump won 62% of white college educated voters casting ballots in the Palmetto State, who represented 31% of the state's electorate (*Fox News*, 2024). This figure is not far off from the 59% of white college educated voters won by Trump in Georgia, who represented 27% of the electorate in 2024 (*Ibid*). Whereas, in Louisiana Trump won support from 64% percent of white voters with college degrees, who represented 24% of the electorate (*Ibid*). This suggests a potential path for South Carolina Democrats to make in-roads from their currently diminished officeholding position. However, to become competitive statewide, the most glaring weakness is elevating the share of the electorate comprised by Black voters, which has dropped from a high of 27% (2014) to 22% (2020) to 23% (2024) in recent election cycles (National Election Pool 2014C; Fox News 2020, 2024). To become more competitive, Democratic candidates in South Carolina would also have to improve their performance among those of other races, which has been weaker than in Georgia and Louisiana.

Alternatively, Louisiana presents a textbook example of the trends of a Deep South state in the tail-end stages of realignment, while simultaneously reflecting the broader political and economic trends of a Stagnant South state. In 2008, 2015, and 2019, Democrats were aided by disunity from Republicans that created openings for strong candidates to assemble the conditions of a 30-30 election. However, winning candidates usually attracted a vote share approximating 33% of white voters. Although such a coalition appears unlikely to materialize in the near term,

the diversity of Louisiana’s electorate and the potential for Republican over-reach, particularly as a likely 2026 GOP primary heats up for Bill Cassidy’s U.S. Senate seat, could keep Democratic prospects for a resurgence within distant reach.

Between 2008 and 2024, two-thirds of Americans across the ideological spectrum grew to question whether the nation’s democracy is in danger of collapse and trust in core institutions dropped to all-time lows.²⁴ These sixteen years are bookended at first by the watershed 2008 election of President Barack Obama, which saw the nation’s first Black chief executive govern during a period of continued political realignment shaped by major shifts in technology and popular culture. At the opposite end of this study is the 2022 midterm campaign, during which most Republican nominees for U.S. Congress—291 general election candidates for House and Senate—denied or cast doubt on the outcome of the 2020 presidential election in an extreme act of allegiance to the former president (Gardner, 2022). That cycle was followed by 2024, when Trump was elected to serve his second non-consecutive term alongside a GOP majority in both the House and Senate and a six-three conservative majority on the U.S. Supreme Court, which was in part the result of three appointments made during Trump’s first term.

The 16-year period between 2008 and 2024 ushered in the most significant wave of political transition felt across the South in a generation, as Republicans experienced a sea change in membership that transformed the party’s political identity. As detailed in the case studies presented in chapters three through five, this period saw Trump’s takeover of the Republican Party

²⁴ As surveyed by Quinnipiac in August of 2022, which asked: “Do you think the nation’s democracy is in danger of collapse, or don’t you think so?” to a sample of 1,584 U.S. adults nationwide, surveyed from August 25 –29 with a margin of error of +/- 2.5 percentage points. Equally, 69% of both Democrats and Republicans answered “yes.” See Quinnipiac University Polling Institute. (2022A). Quinnipiac University Poll, Question 22. Prior to this poll, Quinnipiac previously asked the same question once in a survey conducted from January 7 – 10, 2022, in which 58% of those sampled answered in the affirmative, see Quinnipiac University Polling Institute. (2022B). Quinnipiac University National Poll, Question 21; also see Thiess-Morse et al. (2018, p. 15).

during a period when the region was experiencing increasing levels of racial polarization that shattered the Democratic Party's previous bi-racial electoral coalition after Southern white voters flocked to the GOP in droves. Trump's rise, which followed breakthrough cycles of GOP expansion in 2010 and 2014, was perfectly timed to follow the GOP's crest across the South. Since Trump's election in 2016, the effects of economic and population growth have been accompanied by a wave of demographic change that has put new paths to victory within reach for Democrats in states and localities across the South, with Asian and Hispanic residents expanding possible electoral coalitions beyond the traditional Black-white dichotomy to include those previously at the margins of political activity.

Through his election to the United States presidency, Trump redefined the GOP ideologically and culturally, achieving a seemingly interminable grip on Republican politics that captivated his supporters and galvanized his critics. Using his platform as the nation's chief executive, Trump exercised control over the GOP through both conventional and unprecedented uses of political power, media, and leveraging his status as one of 45-Americans to ever hold the nation's highest office. By issuing endorsements in competitive primaries and amplifying his connection to Republican candidates through televised rallies and social media posts aimed at increasing election turnout and willing favored candidates to victory, Trump's personal ownership over down ballot electoral outcomes rivals any president in the modern era. Chiefly, to gain the 45th president's endorsement after the 2020 election, and to avoid provoking Trump's ire, Republican candidates were pressured to embrace claims of a stolen 2020 election. These efforts were spearheaded by an outsized share of mostly Southern Republicans relative to the full GOP conference, both, in the December 2020 amicus brief to the Supreme Court (52% of all GOP House

signatories), and in the January 2021 congressional votes to object to the certification of Biden's Electoral College victory (52% of all GOP House votes).

Between 2016 and 2024, Trump's political strategy evolved from primarily stoking white racial anxiety to also exploiting other ideological differences within the Democratic coalition. This allowed Republicans to simultaneously cater to racially motivated white voters, while appealing to some people of color who were uneasy about the Democratic Party's leftward shift and immigration policies. During the 2024 campaign, this approach took center stage through Trump's television advertising strategy. Approximately \$37 million—an estimated 20% of the campaign's overall television ad budget—was spent on ads focused on transgender issues, which also evoked Trump's broader messaging strategy and sought to exploit the high levels of racial and gender polarization recorded throughout this study in Republicans' favor (Nagourney & Nehamas, 2024).

The most politically salient spot from Trump during the 2024 cycle, which ran heavily during national broadcasts of major athletic events, took on two iterations. In its first version, the ad was built around Kamala Harris highlighting a California program in 2019, under which, “every transgender inmate in the prison system would have access” to gender affirming surgeries (Trump for President, 2024A). The second and final version, which was updated shortly after the ad first ran, was edited to open with the popular radio host Charlamagne—who is a Black man—saying, incredulously, “Kamala supports taxpayer-funded sex changes for prisoners,” before cutting to the original clip of Harris describing the program (Trump for President, 2024B). The ad ended with the tagline, “Kamala is for they/them, President Trump is for you” (Ibid). After facing heavy criticism for failing to respond to the ad, Harris deputy campaign manager Quentin Fulks described the campaign's internal thinking:

On the trans attack, one, obviously it was a very effective ad at the end. I ultimately don't believe that it was about the issue of trans. I think that it made her seem out of touch and it

was sort of a pseudo-economic ad underneath it, because he was saying you're going to pay for it with taxpayer money. And it was in her own words—and that's something. But we tested a ton of responses to this, direct responses, and none of them ever tested as well as, basically her talking about what she would do... the future—the type of president that she would be. There were elements of it, where we did try to say—and we put ads on television of her saying, you know—"you've seen all the negative attacks against me" and try to ball it up because I also think you have to think about the entire sentiment when you're running a paid campaign (Pfeiffer et al., 2024).

From the Trump campaign's perspective, Chris LaCivita, co-manager and senior advisor to the 2024 Trump campaign, described the intent of the trans ad, saying: "When we aired the first ad... [Charlamagne] went on the air and said, 'I'm not for that, blah, blah, blah,' and we took that clip... and we targeted Black men, Hispanic families, white families, suburban women—we ran that ad everywhere because it also got to the point about boys in girls locker rooms, which suburban moms don't like" (Axelrod, 2024). The effectiveness and ubiquity of the campaign's advertising around transgender policies speaks to the larger strategy employed to great effect by Trump, in which he wields highly divisive cultural issues to attract attention to himself while communicating a political message that resonates differently depending on the identity and attitudes of his audience. These examples highlight the ways Trump has kept issues of race and identity at the forefront of national politics, while also taking advantage of heightened levels of polarization that have created sometimes uneasy political coalitions among Democrats.

In February of 2025, following the bipartisan passage of Senate Bill 1 to ban transgender athletes from school sports teams with support from five General Assembly Democrats, 22 Georgia Republican senators introduced legislation (Senate Bill 185) to prohibit inmates in state custody from receiving gender-affirming care, bringing the issue that Trump weaponized to the state level ahead of the 2026 cycle (Williams, 2025). Three House and four Senate Democrats supported the bill's passage, including Senator Sonya Halpern, who explained that it was "one of six—seven bills that have been... brought either on the floor or floating around this building this

session alone, and so, really, I see what my Republican colleagues are doing there” (Murphy & Bluestein, 2025). Continuing, Halpern quipped, “based on the number of bills, you would think that our prisons are about to become gender affirming care centers, which is absolutely not the case... But I could not in good conscience vote to allow prisoners to have gender reassignment surgeries in prison. That is just where I drew the line” (Ibid). Another Democratic leader who voted in favor of the legislation, Senate Minority Caucus Chair Elena Parent, was confronted by activists ahead of the vote, who recorded her responding that, “This issue has cost Democrats a ton of votes” (Seiler, 2025). When asked to explain, Parent responded, “The sports issue in particular and the prisoners, the sports and the prisoners” (Ibid). In 2022, both South Carolina and Louisiana enacted legislation to ban transgender students from competing in youth girls’ or college women’s sports.

David Plouffe, who served as senior advisor to the abbreviated Harris campaign in 2024, noted that for Democrats to win, “as we look ahead to 26’ and 28’, particularly where you have seen drift among those non-college voters generally... those of color specifically, you know, we obviously have to get some of that back [and] we can’t afford any more erosion there—the math just doesn’t fucking work” (Pfeiffer et al., 2024). Plouffe continued, “I don’t think this is a permanent realignment, but the point here is to win battleground states. Yes, of course, you have to maximize your turnout and your vote share amongst liberal voters if you’re a Democrat—that was a huge focus—[but] you’ve got to win the center” (Ibid). To this point, at the national level, Democratic presidential standard bearers have slid from winning 95% of Black voters in 2008 to 89% in 2016 to 86% in 2020 and 2024, as the share of the electorate comprised by Black voters declined from 13% to 11% over the same 16-year period. Among Hispanic voters, support has decreased from 67% in 2008 to 66% in 2016 to 51% in 2024, while the share of the electorate

made up of Hispanic Americans grew from nine percent in 2008 to 11% in 2024 (but was down from 13% in 2020). Similarly, among Asian voters, Democratic support fluctuated from 62% in 2008 to 65% in 2016 to 55% in 2024, as Asian Americans grew from two percent of the overall electorate in 2008 to four percent in 2020 and back down to three percent in 2024.

The detailed case studies presented as part of this dissertation provide support for the value of thinking about the long-run effects of the Southern political realignment that began approximately six decades ago. Combined with the strong pattern of regional growth observed over the past two decades, the political character of the South has transformed in ways that have likely contributed to increased racial and political polarization at the national level. Beyond measuring interparty competition and partisan change, this study tracks changes in racial and gender polarization between Republicans and Democrats in three of the nation's most racially polarized states, as well as the resulting implications for the electorate and officeholders at the state and national levels.

Trump's electoral success was made possible, at least in part, due to the timing of his rise at the GOP's Southern peak and his ability to transcend the Southernization of the Republican Party. As recorded in Chapter Three, former Lieutenant Governor Casey Cagle described the changes he witnessed during his political career between 2007 and 2019, in how social media helped to spark a groundswell within the GOP base around issues related to immigration. In a similar vein, former chief of staff to Tennessee U.S. Senator Lamar Alexander, Tom Ingram, remarked: "Immigration over foreign borders in Tennessee is just not that big of a problem... But if you ask most Republican voters in Tennessee today, they're scared to death of immigration. They're only thinking about it in terms of the hate and fear that they hear on *Fox News* or on social media" (Ingram, 2024).

Following this sentiment, another flashpoint of the 2024 campaign came during the only televised debate between Trump and Harris, held by *ABC News*, when Trump claimed, “In Springfield, they are eating the dogs. The people that came in, they are eating the cats. They’re eating – they are eating the pets of people that live there” (Thomas & Wendling, 2024). These unsubstantiated claims about Haitian immigrants were part of an effort that LaCivita said generated “over \$2.1 billion in earned media over the course of [the 2024] campaign” (Axelrod, 2024). LaCivita said that Trump’s comments alleging that immigrants were eating pets resulted in “the greatest meme ever” created and reignited the national debate over immigration. This was done in Trump’s signature style, whereby “he knows that to generate a conversation about a particular subject you probably have to push the boundaries” (Ibid).

American politics have been fundamentally reshaped during the period of this study. Looking ahead, the South is likely to remain the nation’s most electorally important region, in addition to the most evangelical and racially polarized of the states. Now that Trump’s White House comeback is complete, Republican voters have returned to the form seen during his first term, as reflected in Figure 1.2 and subsequent polling from *The Wall Street Journal*, expressing greater support for MAGA Republicanism than for the traditional GOP. Given the changes in the party’s membership and agenda—moving to hew closely in-line with Trump’s preferences—Trump has rooted out much of the intra-GOP resistance he faced during his first term. Indeed, Trump’s top-to-bottom takeover of the GOP can be clearly observed as a central throughline of this study, which is strongly reflected across the region of the South. Through at least 2028, down ballot Republicans will be judged by their closeness to Trump as part of determining their viability in primary and general elections.

Still, with Trump making history as the oldest president inaugurated, the GOP that Trump built is poised for new leadership the first time since the party's transformation at his behest. The early front-runner to take the helm after Trump's expected departure from the White House in 2029 is his vice president, JD Vance—who has cast himself firmly in Trump's wing of the party. Perhaps due to his reticence to imagine his reign over the party ending, Trump demurred when he was asked if he saw Vance as his heir apparent. Responding to Fox host Brett Baier in his 2025 Superbowl interview, who asked directly: "Do you view Vice President JD Vance as your successor, the Republican nominee in 2028?" Trump answered: "No. But he's very capable... it's too early" (*CBS News*, 2025).

Consistent with the pattern observed across the Southern GOP during the period of this study, voters in the South are poised to remain the most important constituency for future GOP hopefuls running to succeed Trump. However, future demographic projections continue to point in the direction of a majority-minority population nationally, a shift that is being led by the Growth South. Demographic shifts alone will not elect Democrats to major political positions in Southern states or nationally. However, the consequences of the down ballot GOP's near-complete alignment with Trump and favorable population shifts toward a more diverse electorate, combine to present an opening for Democrats that could allow future candidates to offset weakness in the Rustbelt by targeting the Growth South. Further, as population losses in Democratic-leaning states threatens to shake-up the Electoral College formula in ways that benefit Republicans, the South appears poised to take on even greater importance in future cycles.

In 2026, all three states included in this study will be home to major elections that will help to set the tone for the future political landscape nationally. In Georgia, along with Jon Ossoff's re-election campaign, the state will elect its next governor to succeed term-limited Brian Kemp, along

with seven statewide executive offices. Although Kemp was first elected with one of Trump's prototype endorsements in 2018, the Georgia governor has since built a successful political apparatus that is independent of the state's GOP, which is led by Trump loyalists.

Lieutenant Governor Burt Jones has positioned himself as the favorite to receive Trump's endorsement to succeed Kemp, who was Georgia's first governor to begin his political career as a Republican. Jones is poised to face off against three-term Attorney General Chris Carr, the first declared GOP gubernatorial candidate, who overcame a Trump-backed primary challenge in 2022. Jones previewed his message at the state Republican convention in June of 2025 by referencing his leading role championing Trump's claims during the previous cycle, remarking: "I've taken all the battle scars... I know who ran and hid during 2020 and everything else. The circle was small" (Bluestein, 2025C).

Wider open is the GOP nomination for U.S. Senate, for which NRSC chairman Tim Scott and others unsuccessfully recruited Kemp to pursue. With Kemp passing in favor of other opportunities including a potential presidential campaign in 2028, Georgia's congressional delegation may see a similar dynamic to the 2014 contest that elevated David Perdue when three House Republicans sought the nomination. The first candidates to announce campaigns were 1st District Congressman Buddy Carter and state insurance commissioner John King.

South Carolina has a parallel 2026 election calendar to Georgia, with elections for the open governor's office that will be vacated by Henry McMaster, along with Lindsey Graham's campaign for reelection to his fifth Senate term. With Republicans already positioning for Trump's endorsement, Attorney General Alan Wilson (and son of 2nd District Congressman Joe Wilson) and 1st District Congresswoman Nancy Mace have positioned themselves as contenders for the GOP nomination. On the Senate side, 5th District Congressman Ralph Norman has warned that he

may wage a primary challenge against Graham, who would be the heavy favorite and received Trump's endorsement in March of 2025. As the party sits at a historical low in officeholding and comes off consecutive cycles in which major candidates fallen far short of an electoral majority, Democrats appear unlikely to mount competitive campaigns for either U.S. Senate or governor.

Finally, Louisiana Senator Bill Cassidy's term expires in 2026, setting the stage for a marquee GOP race in Trump's second midterm. Since Cassidy's last campaign, the Bayou State's primary structure for U.S. Senate was changed under legislation championed by Trump loyalist and GOP governor Jeff Landry. Now, Cassidy will not have the benefit of a jungle primary as he did in 2014 and 2020 and is instead competing in a closed primary. Already, Cassidy has attracted a challenge from former Louisiana U.S. representative and current state treasurer John Fleming, with 3rd District Congressman Clay Higgins and 5th District Congresswoman Julia Letlow rumored as potential contenders (Beaumont, 2025). Cassidy's race presents a test of Trump's influence and the extent to which the president is motivated to take revenge against one of seven senators to support his impeachment. For Democrats, most relevant is the fate of the state's second majority Black congressional district that was claimed in 2024 by Cleo Fields.

Outside of these three states, both Democrats and Republicans face unique, if not opposing and equally daunting challenges to secure national electoral majorities in the contemporary political environment. As high Black turnout of the Obama era receded, Democratic victories became contingent on securing strong levels of support from Asian and Hispanic voters and making inroads with white college educated voters. For Republicans, the party has closely tethered its stock to Trump's ability to attract support from white working-class voters and in maintaining Southern domination. Further, the states of the Deep South continue to rank as America's most racially polarized political battlegrounds, along with the areas where Republicans regularly secure

the highest levels of vote share from white residents. As observed throughout this study, these states are strong venues to evaluate changes in the contemporary GOP political coalition and in two-party political competition, offering a window into how the effects of racial polarization manifest in the electorate and among officeholders.

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APPENDIX A: LIST OF PERSONAL INTERVIEWS

Date:	Name:
10/25/13	Swain Whitfield
10/25/13	Robert Adams
10/25/13	Tony Denny
10/25/13	John Pettigrew Jr.
11/3/13	Larry Martin
11/3/13	Whit Ayres (2014A)
8/5/14	Whit Ayres (2014B)
5/30/14	Michael Rentiers
6/2/14	Don Fowler (2014A)
7/16/14	Don Fowler (2014B)
6/3/14	Matt Moore
6/5/14	David Woodard
6/6/14	Greg Hembree
6/9/14	Joel Sawyer
6/10/14	James Edwards
6/10/14	Paul Campbell Jr.
6/13/14	Glenn McCall
6/18/14	Fred Carter (2014A)
6/24/14	Fred Carter (2014B)

6/18/14	Neil Thigpen and Gay Suber
6/23/14	Gary Simrill
6/23/14	Wes Hayes
6/24/14	Robert Rabon
6/25/14	Ray Cleary
6/26/14	Paul Thurmond
6/26/14	Sean Bennett
6/26/14	John Steinberger
6/27/14	Dwight Loftis
7/1/14	Tom Davis
7/1/14	John Napier
7/2/14	Chad Connelly
7/3/14	Roland Smith
7/3/14	Rodney Ashcraft
7/3/14	Mike Fair
7/7/14	Ross Turner
7/8/14	Cindy Costa
7/8/14	Chip Campsen
7/8/14	Chip Limehouse
7/9/14	Barry Wynn
7/10/14	Tommy Pope
7/11/14	Shane Massey
7/15/14	Garry Smith

7/16/14	Ronnie Cromer
7/17/14	Oran Smith
7/17/14	Bob McAllister
7/21/14	Todd Atwater
7/21/14	Joe Wilson
7/25/14	Henry McMaster
7/28/14	Bobby Hitt
8/4/14	Jim DeMint
8/5/14	Hastings Wyman
9/3/14	Jeff Duncan
9/17/14	Jeff Duncan
9/5/14	John Bourne
9/5/14	Arthur Ravenel
9/5/14	Tommy Hartnett
9/16/14	James Clyburn
9/17/14	Mick Mulvaney
9/18/14	Mark Sanford
11/10/14	Ken Powell
11/21/14	Moffatt Burriss
11/21/14	Jay McKay
12/15/14	Greg Shorey
12/17/14	Gene McCaskill
12/17/14	John Rainey

12/17/14	Scott English
12/19/14	Henry Chandler
12/19/14	Sherry Shealy Martschink
1/23/15	Ed Young
3/14/15	Howell Clyborne
3/30/15	Mark Buyck
5/13/15	David Beasley (2015)
1/8/16	David Beasley (2016)
	Bob Inglis and Charles S.
9/15/15	Bullock, III
12/17/15	Marshall Cain
12/28/15	Ron Reitdorf
1/7/16	Ann Love and Rusty DePass
4/20/16	Judge Michael Boggs
1/11/16	Mark Sanford (2016A)
3/5/16	Mark Sanford (2016B)
12/23/16	Mark Sanford (2016C)
4/13/20	James Salzer
6/28/21	Mark Sanford (2021)
1/11/22	Casey Cagle
9/15/22	Ralph Norman
9/15/22	Nancy Mace
9/16/22	Dan Hanlon

9/22/22	William Timmons
	Casey Cagle and Charles S.
2/1/23	Bullock, III
9/28/23	Taylor Schindler
1/3/24	Greg Bluestein
1/4/24	Josh McLaurin
3/13/24	Nabilah Islam Parkes
3/27/24	Michelle Au
6/24/24	Mike Bitzer
6/25/24	Whit Ayres (2024A)
6/26/24	Whit Ayres (2024B)
6/27/24	Theresa Wagner
6/27/24	Daniel Luongo
6/27/24	Pablo Cueto
6/27/24	Jonathan Martin
8/5/24	Krysta Harden
8/7/24	Dan Judy
8/14/24	Tom Ingram
11/13/24	Whit Ayres (2024C)
3/5/25	Nikki Merritt

APPENDIX B: TRUMP SUPPORT GROWS AS TOP ELECTED POSITIONS

TURNOVER IN SOUTHERN STATES

Office	Name	Class	Trump Endorsed	Endorsed Trump in 2024 Primary	2020 Amicus Brief (2020 Reps.)	EC Obj. Vote (Cong.)	H1:
Georgia							
GA-01	Buddy Carter	2014	Yes (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
GA-03	Brian Jack	2024	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican
GA-03	Drew Ferguson	2016	Yes (2022)	No	Yes	No	Sometimes Trump Republican
GA-03	Lynn Westmoreland	2004	No	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
GA-06	Rich McCormick	2022	Yes (2022)	Yes	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican
GA-06	Karen Handel	2017	Yes (2017)	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
GA-07	Rob Woodall	2010	No	No	No	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
GA-08	Austin Scott	2010	Yes (2020)	Yes	Yes	No	Sometimes Trump Republican
GA-09	Andrew Clyde	2020	Yes (2022)	Yes	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican
GA-09	Doug Collins	2012	No	Yes	Yes	N/A	MAGA Republican

GA-10	Mike Collins	2022	Yes (2022)	Yes	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican
GA-10	Jody Hice	2014	Yes (2022)	No	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
GA-11	Barry Loudermilk	2014	Yes (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
GA-12	Rick Allen	2014	Yes (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
GA-14	Marjorie Taylor Greene	2020	Yes (2022)	Yes	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican
GA-14	Tom Graves	2010	No	No	No	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
U.S. Sen.	David Perdue	2014	Yes (2020, 2022)	Yes	N/A	Said he would have	MAGA Republican
U.S. Sen.	Kelly Loeffler	2019	Yes (2020)	Yes	N/A	No, but spoke in favor at rally	MAGA Republican
U.S. Sen.	Johnny Isakson	2004	No	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
Gov.	Brian Kemp	2018	Yes (2018); No (2022)	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
Gov.	Nathan Deal	2010	No	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican

South Carolina							
Office	Name	Class	Trump Endorsed	Endorsed Trump in 2024 Primary	2020 Amicus Brief (2020 Reps.)	EC Obj. Vote (Cong.)	H1:
SC-01	Nancy Mace	2020	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	No	Sometimes Trump Republican
SC-01	Mark Sanford	2013	No	No	No	N/A	Anti-Trump Republican
SC-02	Joe Wilson	2001	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
SC-03	Jeff Duncan	2010	Yes (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
SC-03	Sheri Biggs	2024	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican
SC-04	William Timmons	2018	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
SC-04	Trey Gowdy	2010	No	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
SC-05	Ralph Norman	2017	Yes (2022)	No	Yes	Yes	Sometimes Trump Republican
SC-05	Mick Mulvaney	2010	No	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
SC-07	Russell Fry	2022	Yes (2022)	Yes	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican
SC-07	Tom Rice	2012	No	No	Yes	Yes	Anti-Trump Republican
U.S. Sen.	Lindsey Graham	2002	Yes (2020)	Yes	N/A	No	MAGA Republican
U.S. Sen.	Tim Scott	2013	Yes (2022)	Yes	N/A	No	MAGA Republican
Gov.	Henry McMaster	2017	Yes (2018, 2022)	Yes	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican

Gov.	Nikki Haley	2010	No	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
Louisiana							
Office	Name	Class	Trump Endorsed	Endorsed Trump in 2024 Primary	2020 Amicus Brief (2020 Reps.)	EC Obj. Vote (Cong.)	H1:
LA-01	Steve Scalise	2008	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
LA-03	Clay Higgins	2016	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
LA-03	Charles Boustany	2004	No	No	N/A	N/A	Anti-Trump Republican
LA-04	Mike Johnson	2016	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
LA-04	John Fleming	2008	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican
LA-05	Julia Letlow	2021	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
LA-05	Ralph Abraham	2014	No	No	Yes	N/A	MAGA Republican
LA-06	Garret Graves	2014	No	No	No	Yes	Sometimes Trump Republican
U.S. Senate	Bill Cassidy	2014	No	No	N/A	No	Anti-Trump Republican
U.S. Senate	John Kennedy	2016	Yes (2022)	Yes	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican
Gov	Jeff Landry	2023	Yes (2023)	Yes	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican

Alabama							
Office	Name	Class	Trump Endorsed	Endorsed Trump in 2024 Primary	2020 Amicus Brief (2020 Reps.)	EC Obj. Vote (Cong.)	H1:
AL-01	Jerry Carl	2020	Yes (2022)	Yes	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican
AL-01	Bradley Byrne	2014	No	No	Yes	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
AL-02 AL-01	Barry Moore	2020	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican
AL-02	Martha Roby	2010	Yes (2018)	No	No	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
AL-03	Mike Rogers	2002	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
AL-04	Robert Aderholt	1996	Yes (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
AL-05	Dale Strong	2022	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican
AL-05	Mo Brooks	2010	No	No	Yes	Yes	Sometimes Trump Republican
AL-06	Gary Palmer	2014	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
U.S. Sen.	Katie Britt	2022	Yes (2022)	Yes	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican
U.S. Sen.	Richard Shelby	1986	No	No	N/A	No	Sometimes Trump Republican
U.S. Sen.	Tommy Tuberville	2020	Yes (2020)	Yes	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican
U.S. Sen.	Luther Strange	2017	Yes (2017)	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican

U.S. Sen.	Jeff Sessions	1996	No	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
Gov.	Kay Ivey	2017	No	Yes	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican
Arkansas							
Office	Name	Class	Trump Endorsed	Endorsed Trump in 2024 Primary	2020 Amicus Brief (2020 Reps.)	EC Obj. Vote (Cong.)	H1:
AR-01	Rick Crawford	2010	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
AR-02	French Hill	2014	No	No	No	No	Sometimes Trump Republican
AR-03	Steve Womack	2010	No	Yes	No	No	Sometimes Trump Republican
AR-04	Bruce Westerman	2014	Yes (2022)	Yes	Yes	No	Sometimes Trump Republican
U.S. Sen.; AR-03	John Boozman	2010	Yes (2022)	No	N/A	No	Sometimes Trump Republican
U.S. Sen.; AR-4	Tom Cotton	2014	No	Yes	N/A	No	Sometimes Trump Republican
Gov.	Sarah Huckabee Sanders	2022	Yes (2022)	Yes	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican
Gov.	Asa Hutchinson	2014	No	No	N/A	N/A	Anti-Trump Republican

Florida							
Office	Name	Class	Trump Endorsed	Endorsed Trump in 2024 Primary	2020 Amicus Brief (2020 Reps.)	EC Obj. Vote (Cong.)	H1:
FL-01	Matt Gaetz	2016	Yes (2024)	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
FL-02	Neal Dunn	2016	Yes (2024)	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
FL-03	Kat Cammack	2020	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican
FL-03	Ted Yoho	2012	Yes (2020)	No	Yes	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
FL-04	Aaron Bean	2022	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican
FL-05 FL-04	John Rutherford	2022; 2016	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	N/A	MAGA Republican
FL-06	Michael Waltz	2018	Yes (2024)	Yes (2024)	Yes	No	MAGA Republican
FL-07	Cory Mills	2022	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican
FL-08	Mike Haridopolos	2024	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican
FL-08	Bill Posey	2008	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
FL-11	Daniel Webster	2016	Yes (2024)	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
FL-12	Gus Bilirakis	2006	Yes (2024)	Yes (2024)	Yes	No Vote	MAGA Republican
FL-13	Anna Paulina Luna	2022	Yes (2024)	Yes (2024)	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican
FL-15	Laurel Lee	2022	Yes (2024)	Yes (2024)	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican
FL-15 FL-18	Scott Franklin	2020	Yes (2024)	Yes (2024)	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican

FL-15	Dennis Ross	2010	No	No	No	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
FL-16	Vern Buchanan	2006	Yes (2024)	Yes	No	No	Sometimes Trump Republican
FL-17	Greg Steube	2018	Yes (2024)	Yes	No	Yes	MAGA Republican
FL-17	Tom Rooney	2008	No	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
FL-18 FL-15	Ross Spano	2018	Yes (2018)	No	Yes	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
FL-19	Byron Donalds	2020	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican
FL-19	Francis Rooney	2016	No	No	No	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
FL-21	Brian Mast	2016	Yes (2024)	Yes	No	Yes	MAGA Republican
FL-26	Mario Diaz-Balart	2002	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
FL-26	Curbelo	2014	No	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
FL-27	Maria Elvira Salazar	2020	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	No Vote	Sometimes Trump Republican
FL-27	Ileana Ros-Lehtinen	1988	No	No	No	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
FL-28	Carlos Giménez	2020	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican
U.S. Sen.	Rick Scott	2018	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican

U.S. Sen.	Marco Rubio	2010	Yes (2022)	Yes	N/A	No	Sometimes Trump Republican
Gov.; FL-06	Ron DeSantis	2018; 2012	Yes (2018)	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
North Carolina							
Office	Name	Class	Trump Endorsed	Endorsed Trump in 2024 Primary	2020 Amicus Brief (2020 Reps.)	EC Obj. Vote (Cong.)	H1:
NC-02	George Holding	2012	No	No	No	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
NC-03	Greg Murphy	2019	Yes (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
NC-03	Walter Jones	1994	No	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
NC-05	Virginia Foxx	2004	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
NC-06	Addison McDowell	2024	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican
NC-06	Mark Walker	2014	No	Yes	Yes	N/A	MAGA Republican
NC-07	David Rouzer	2014	Yes (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
NC-08	Mark Harris	2024	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican
NC-09 NC-08	Richard Hudson	2012	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
NC-09 NC-08	Dan Bishop	2018	Yes (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
NC-09	Robert Pittenger	2012	No	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican

NC-10	Pat Harrigan	2024	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican
NC-10	Patrick McHenry	2004	Yes (2022)	No	No	No	Sometimes Trump Republican
NC-11	Chuck Edwards	2022	No	Yes	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
NC-11	Madison Cawthorn	2020	Yes (2022)	Yes	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican
NC-11	Mark Meadows	2012	No	Yes	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican
NC-13	Brad Knott	2024	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican
NC-14	Tim Moore	2024	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican
U.S. Sen.	Thom Tillis	2014	Yes (2020)	No	N/A	No	Sometimes Trump Republican
U.S. Sen.; NC-13	Ted Budd	2022; 2016	Yes (2022)	Yes	Yes	N/A	MAGA Republican
U.S. Sen.	Richard Burr	2004	No	No	N/A	No	Sometimes Trump Republican
Mississippi							
Office	Name	Class	Trump Endorsed	Endorsed Trump in 2024 Primary	2020 Amicus Brief (2020 Reps.)	EC Obj. Vote (Cong.)	H1:
MS-01	Trent Kelly	2014	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
MS-03	Michael Guest	2018	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
MS-03	Gregg Harper	2008	No	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican

MS-04	Mike Ezell	2022	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican
MS-04	Steven Palazzo	2010	Yes (2020)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
U.S. Sen.	Cindy Hyde- Smith	2010	Yes (2020)	Yes	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican
U.S. Sen.	Thad Cochran	1978	No	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
U.S. Sen.	Roger Wicker	2007	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	No	Sometimes Trump Republican
Gov.	Tate Reeves	2019	Yes (2023)	Yes	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican
Gov.	Phil Bryant	2011	No	Yes	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
Tennessee							
Office	Name	Class	Trump Endorsed	Endorsed Trump in 2024 Primary	2020 Amicus Brief (2020 Reps.)	EC Obj. Vote (Cong.)	H1:
TN-01	Diana Harshbarger	2020	Yes (2022)	Yes	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican
TN-01	Phil Roe	2008	No	No	No	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
TN-02	Tim Burchett	2018	Yes (2024)	No	Yes	Yes	Sometimes Trump Republican
TN-02	Jimmy Duncan	1988	No	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
TN-03	Chuck Fleischmann	2010	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican

TN-04	Scott DesJarlais	2010	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
TN-05	Andy Ogles	2022	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican
TN-06	John Rose	2018	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
TN-06	Diane Black	2010	No	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
TN-07	Mark Green	2018	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
TN-08	David Kustoff	2016	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
U.S. Sen.; TN-07	Marsha Blackburn	2018; 2002	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	No	Sometimes Trump Republican
U.S. Sen.	Bob Corker	2006	No	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
U.S. Sen.	Bill Hagerty	2020	Yes (2020)	Yes	N/A	No	MAGA Republican
U.S. Sen.	Lamar Alexander	2002	No	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
Gov.	Bill Lee	2018	Yes (2022)	Yes	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican
Gov.	Bill Haslam	2010	No	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
Texas							
Office	Name	Class	Trump Endorsed	Endorsed Trump in 2024 Primary	2020 Amicus Brief (2020 Reps.)	EC Obj. Vote (Cong.)	H1:
TX-01	Nathaniel Moran	2022	Yes (2022)	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican

TX-01	Louie Gohmert	2004	Yes (2020)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
TX-02	Dan Crenshaw	2018	No	Yes	Yes	No	Sometimes Trump Republican
TX-02	Ted Poe	2004	No	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
TX-03	Keith Self	2022	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
TX-03	Van Taylor	2018	No	No	No	No	Sometimes Trump Republican
TX-03	Sam Johnson	1990	No	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
TX-04	Pat Fallon	2020	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican
TX-04	John Ratcliffe	2015	No	No	No	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
TX-05	Lance Gooden	2018	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
TX-05	Jeb Hensarling	2002	No	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
TX-06	Jake Ellzey	2021	Yes (2022)	Yes	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican
TX-06	Ron Wright	2018	No	No	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
TX-06	Joe Barton	1984	No	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
TX-07	John Culbertson	2000	No	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican

TX-08	Morgan Luttrell	2022	Yes (2022)	Yes	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican
TX-08	Kevin Brady	1996	Yes (2020)	Yes	Yes	No Vote	MAGA Republican
TX-10	Michael McCaul	2004	Yes (2022)	No	No	No	Sometimes Trump Republican
TX-11	August Pfluger	2020	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican
TX-11	Mike Conaway	2004	No	No	Yes	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
TX-12	Craig Goldman	2024	No	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
TX-12	Kay Granger	1996	Yes (2022)	No	No	No Vote	Sometimes Trump Republican
TX-13	Ronny Jackson	2020	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican
TX-13	Mac Thornberry	1994	No	No	No	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
TX-14	Randy Weber	2012	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
TX-15	Monica De La Cruz	2022	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican
TX-17	Bill Flores	2010	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Sometimes Trump Republican
TX-19	Jodey Arrington	2016	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
TX-13; TX-32	Pete Sessions	2020; 1996	Yes (2024)	Yes	No	Yes	MAGA Republican
TX-21	Chip Roy	2018	No	No	No	No	Sometimes Trump Republican

TX-21	Lamar Smith	1986	No	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
TX-22	Troy Nehls	2020	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican
TX-22	Pete Olson	2008	No	No	No	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
TX-23	Tony Gonzales	2020	Yes (2020)	Yes	N/A	No	Sometimes Trump Republican
TX-23	Will Hurd	2014	No	No	No	N/A	Anti-Trump Republican
TX-24	Beth Van Duyne	2020	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican
TX-24	Kenny Marchant	2004	No	No	Yes	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
TX-25	Roger Williams	2012	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
TX-26	Brandon Gill	2024	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican
TX-26	Michael Burgess	2002	Yes (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
TX-27	Michael Cloud	2018	Yes (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
TX-27	Blake Farenthold	2010	No	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
TX-31	John Carter	2002	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican
TX-34	Maya Flores	2022	No	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
TX-36	Brian Babin	2014	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican

TX-38	Wesley Hunt	2022	Yes (2024, 2022)	Yes	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican
U.S. Sen.	Ted Cruz	2012	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	Yes	MAGA Republican
U.S. Sen.	John Cornyn	2002	Yes (2020)	Yes	N/A	No	Sometimes Trump Republican
Gov.	Greg Abbott	2014	Yes (2022, 2018)	Yes	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican
Virginia							
Office	Name	Class	Trump Endorsed	Endorsed Trump in 2024 Primary	2020 Amicus Brief (2020 Reps.)	EC Obj. Vote (Cong.)	H1:
VA-01	Rob Wittman	2007	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
VA-02	Jen Kiggans	2022	Yes (2024)	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
VA-05	John McGuire	2024	Yes (2024)	Yes	N/A	N/A	MAGA Republican
VA-05	Bob Good	2020	No	Yes	No	Yes	Sometimes Trump Republican
VA-05	Denver Rigglesman	2018	No	No	No	N/A	Anti- Trump Republican
VA-06	Ben Cline	2018	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican
VA-06	Bob Goodlatte	1992	No	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
VA-07	Dave Brat	2014	Yes (2018)	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
VA-09	Morgan Griffith	2010	Yes (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	MAGA Republican

VA-10	Barbara Comstock	2014	No	No	N/A	N/A	Anti-Trump Republican
Gov.	Glenn Youngkin	2021	Yes (2021)	No	N/A	N/A	Sometimes Trump Republican
<i>Source: Ballotpedia; The Washington Post; Supreme Court of the United States; United States Congress; compiled by author.</i>							

APPENDIX C

TIMELINE: U.S. DEBT INCREASES FROM \$14.3 TRILLION IN 2011 TO \$36.1 TRILLION BY 2025

Date	Event
May 2011	The U.S. reaches debt limit of \$14.3 trillion, Treasury estimates it will run out of cash on hand in August of 2011.
August 2011	Obama signs the Budget and Control Act of 2011 into law, authorizing a two-stage increase in the debt limit up to \$16.4 trillion. S&P downgrades the U.S. credit rating from AAA to AA+.
December 2012	The U.S. reaches debt limit of \$16.4 trillion established by the Budget and Control Act of 2013, Treasury estimates it will run out of resources in February 2013.
February 2013	Obama signs the No Budget, No Pay Act of 2013 into law, suspending the debt limit through May 2013. This marks the first time the debt limit is addressed through a temporary suspension rather than with a dollar-amount increase.
May 2013	The debt limit is reinstated at \$16.7 trillion after the expiration of the suspension approved under the No Budget, No Pay Act of 2013.
October 2013	Obama ends a 16-day partial government shutdown led by Sen. Ted Cruz and House Republicans by signing the Continuing Appropriations Act of 2014, which suspends the debt limit until February 7, 2014. No changes are made to the ACA.
February 2014	Obama signs the Temporary Debt Limit Extension Act, suspending the debt limit through March 15, 2015.
March 2015	The debt limit is reinstated at \$18.1 trillion after suspension expires.
November 2015	Obama signs Bipartisan Budget Act of 2015 into law, suspending the debt limit through March of 2017 and adjusting spending caps on defense and domestic discretionary budgets.
March 2017	The debt limit suspension expires, and the debt limit is reinstated at \$19.8 trillion.
September 2017	Congress enacts a three-month budget deal to keep the government open and suspend the debt-limit through December 8, 2017.
December 2017	The debt limit suspension expires, and the debt limit is reinstated at \$20.5 trillion, and the government is projected to run out of funding in March of 2018.

February 2018	After a brief government shutdown, Trump signs the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018, suspending the debt limit through March 1, 2019.
March 2019	The debt limit is reinstated at \$22 trillion, forcing Treasury to deploy extraordinary measures to finance the government with cash on hand.
August 2019	After a 35-day partial government shut down, Trump signs the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2019, suspending the debt limit through the end of July 2021 and raising discretionary spending levels for two years.
August 2021	The debt limit suspension expires, and the debt limit is reinstated at \$28.4 trillion, forcing Treasury to immediately deploy extraordinary measures.
October 2021	Biden signs legislation raising the debt limit by \$480 billion to facilitate federal borrowing through December 3, 2021.
December 2021	Biden signs legislation raising the debt limit by \$2.5 trillion after Senate leaders negotiate a one-time carve-out to the filibuster allowing Senate Democrats to increase the debt limit by a simple majority vote.
January 2023	Debt limit is reached at \$31.4 trillion, and Treasury deploys extraordinary measures.
June 2023	Biden signs Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023, which suspends the debt limit through January 1, 2025, and caps discretionary spending for two years.
August 2023	Fitch Ratings downgrades the U.S.'s credit rating from AAA to AA+.
September 2023	Congress passes a stopgap funding measure to fund the federal government for 45 days, with 117 Republicans voting against the legislation.
October 2023	Eight Republicans join 208 Democrats in a 216-210 vote to remove Rep. Kevin McCarthy as Speaker of the House.
November 2023	Congress passes stopgap legislation to avert a government shutdown through a two-tier model championed by Speaker Johnson, whereby funding is extended through January 19 and February 2.
March 2024	Congress passes the FY 2024 Consolidated Appropriations Act, taking a two-tier bill approach proposed by Speaker Johnson to fund the federal government through the end of the fiscal year.
September 2024	Congress passes stop gap to fund the government through December amidst conservative push-back on failure to return to traditional budget process through the 12 parallel appropriations subcommittees.
December 2024	Congress enacts legislation to provide funding by continuing resolution to avert a government shutdown that would otherwise occur; funding is extended through March 2025, as a stopgap to allow Trump's second term team to assume office with a newly minted congressional majority.
January 2025	Debt limit is reinstated at \$36.1 trillion.
<i>Source: Compiled by author.</i>	