

What Drives a Paler Shade of “Red” in Mississippi State?

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Abstract

Over the years, as a result of depopulation, the population in Mississippi State has fallen by almost half. Moreover, traditionally Mississippi has been considered one of the “deep” southern states (Key, 1949). They are very conservative in terms of political position, and they have largely supported “Red” or the Republican Party, for the last several decades. However, the conservatism of the south is now challenged by the Democratic Party, and trends have been changing gradually in the south, including Mississippi State in recent history. In this paper, I investigate what drives the paler shade of “Red” in the southern states. In particular, I examine some characteristics of political position in Mississippi, one of the most strongly conservative states in the United States, identifying certain relationships between political preferences and demographic, economic and social factors.

Keywords: Southern Politics, Political change, Demographic factors in politics

1. Introduction

Over the years, as a result of rural depopulation, the population in Mississippi State has fallen by almost half. In particular, Greenville lost 17 percent of its population, and in other counties in rural states, residents left small towns to escape a poor economy. People in these regions suffer low rates of education and high rates of unemployment. Moreover, traditionally Mississippi has been considered one of the “deep” southern states (Key, 1949). Key divides the South into two parts – “rim” south and “deep” South – by union, size of the African-American population, and states’ solid Democratic voting patterns in presidential elections. They are very conservative in terms of political position, and they have largely supported “Red” or the Republican Party, for the last several decades. However, the conservatism of the south is now challenged by the Democratic Party, and trends have been changing gradually in the south, including Mississippi State in recent history. Kapeluck, Moreland and Steed (2009) refer to this phenomenon as “a paler shade of Red” in their book documenting voting patterns among the southern states during the 2008 presidential election.

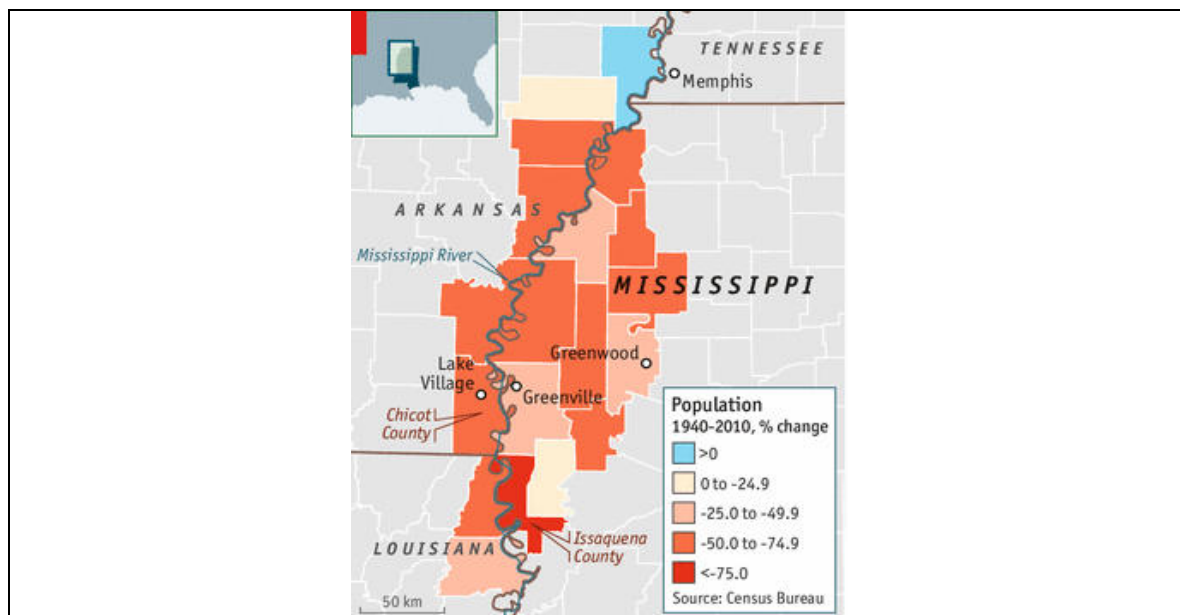


Figure 1. Population Changes in Mississippi State from 1940 to 2010
(Source: Economist (2013, Jun))

In this paper, I investigate what drives the paler shade of “Red” in the southern states. In particular, I examine

some characteristics of political position in Mississippi, one of the most strongly conservative states in the United States, identifying certain relationships between political preferences and demographic, economic and social factors.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Demographic Factors – Age, Race, Population and Gender

According to previous research (Erikson & Tedin, 2011), there are some differences between age groups on many issues, such as political parties and economic issues. Among those characteristics, age is one of the generally influential factors in terms of political preference, and this reflects different political position, as many issues stimulate concerns unique to each age group. For example, Social Security and Medicare benefits are more likely to be provided to older Americans, but the younger generation must continue to make payments toward these benefits. In this case, young people are more concerned that the system will be bankrupt before they can enjoy benefits (Connolly & Allen, 2005).

Younger generations in America are, in general, less interested in politics than older generations (Bennett, 1997; Wattenberg, 2008). However, younger generations of people in Southern areas have experienced dramatic changes in politics over the last 40 years (Erikson & Tedin, 2011). Originally, the South had been the territory of the Democratic Party since the Civil War, but the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which disenfranchised African-Americans in the South, turned many white people in the South into Republicans, and this trend has continued until recent times. Thus, people from the younger generation (Republicans) should be different than those from the older generation (Democrats) in their political preferences, and the trend encompasses both age and race issues. Surveys reveal that older White Southerners who grew up during the Democratic years have been more resistant to the Republican Party than young Southerners (Erikson, MacKuen, & Stimson, 2002; Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 1998).

Actually, when we look at the political characteristics by race or ethnicity in the South, this uniqueness of the South demonstrates a conservative stance on racial questions and overwhelming support for the Republican Party. Recent surveys have revealed differences between White Southerners and the rest of the nation on race (Erikson & Tedin, 2011). Even when compared with Republicans of younger generations in the North, those in the South are more “Republican.”

The gender gap is demonstrated in party identification, voting, and various opinions on social and political issues (Schlesinger & Heldman, 2001; Kanthak & Norrander, 2004). Generally, women have become more Democratic since they began to enter college and the workforce. Meanwhile, men have moved decidedly in the Republican direction in the backlash of women’s movement to the Democratic Party (Kaufmann & Petrocik, 1999; Kaufman, 2006).

2.2 Economic Factors – Income, Unemployment

Tufte (1978) defines the relationship between politics and the economy as follows: “When you think economics, think elections; when you think elections, think economics.” There are many economic indicators, such as unemployment, inflation, GDP, retail sales, the S&P 500, or the Consumer Index, but unemployment is a leading economic indicator (Gerber & Huber, 2010; Lewis-Beck & Stemaier, 2000). The unemployment rate demonstrates similar cycles with politics (Nordhaus, 1975), because unemployment decimates the real income of a family, and this may lead to political changes (Arculus & Meltzer, 1975). Moreover, current trends in politics prove that the partisan polarization of the rich and the poor has been gradually increasing (Stonecash, 2000; Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Bartels, 2008).

2.3 Social Factors – Education

Educational level affects some social issues and measures of the degree of conservatism (Rowatt, LaBouff, Johnson, Froses, & Tsang, 2009; Kite & Whitley, 1996). For example, surveys show that people in a lower educational group more readily take the isolationist position than those in a better educated group (Erikson & Tedin, 2011). The different political stances based on educational gaps affect the political preferences of the people of Mississippi.

2.4 Political Factors – Political Conflicts

The two party system in the United States means that the major parties (Republican and Democrat) differ on social and cultural matters, and this is, in part, a method of distinguishing themselves from one another (Shafer, 1985; Baker & Steed, 1992; Shafer & Clagget, 1995; Layman & Carmines, 1997). The Democratic Party, for example, has become increasingly associated with cultural liberalism, while the Republican Party has become

more politically and socially conservative. Thus, from the end of the 1980s, partisanship in Congress has risen dramatically and has remained at a high level ever since (Patterson & Caldeira, 1988; Rohde, 1991; Sinclair, 2002). Political conflicts may arise between governors and the president as well if the president has a different political ideology than a governor. The political discrepancy can lead to failures of cooperation in major undertakings of a state. In Mississippi, both the governor and the president came from the same political party in some of the terms between 1990 and 2012, but in other terms, the president came from a different political party than the party of Mississippi's governor. Political conflicts between the governor and the president may result in some changes of political preferences.

3. Hypotheses

The political preferences of Mississippians are assumed to be formed by four groups of factors. This paper is interested in political preferences based on the four categories of variable groups: demographic changes (age, gender, race and population), economic conditions (unemployment rate, income level), social factors (educational level), and political conflict.

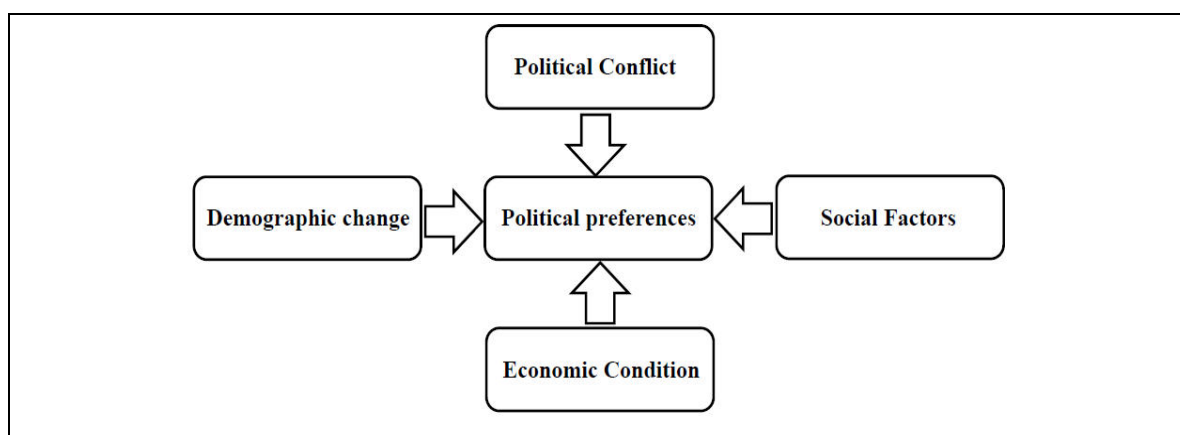


Figure 2. Influential Factors on Political Preferences

The nine hypotheses to be tested in the paper are as follows:

- H1: Older people in Mississippi are more likely to support the Republican Party than younger people.
- H2: People with a higher level of education are more likely to support the Republican Party than those with a lower level of education.
- H3: White people are more likely to support the Republican Party than African-American people.
- H4: Males are more likely to support the Republican Party than females.
- H5: Rich people are more likely to support the Republican Party than poor people.
- H6: Counties with larger populations of White people are more likely to support the Republican Party than those with smaller populations of White people in Mississippi.
- H7: Counties with larger populations of African-American people are more likely to support the Republican Party than those with smaller populations of African-American people in Mississippi.
- H8: Counties with lower unemployment rates are more likely to support the Republican Party than those with higher unemployment rates in Mississippi.
- H9: People are more likely to support the Republican Party when the President of the United States and the Governor of Mississippi come from different political parties than they are when the president and the governor come from the same political party.

4. Data and Methodology

4.1 Data

In this paper, I investigate the relationships between party preferences of people in Mississippi and other demographic, economic, social, and political factors. To test my hypotheses, I use data from the Mississippi Poll Project, which has carried out public opinion surveys through the Survey Research Unit of the Social Science Research Center (SSRC) at Mississippi State University, led by Dr. Shaffer, Professor of Political Science & Public Administration. I combined or pooled the survey data in every other year from 1990 to 2012. Moreover, I collected data from outside sources, such as the Bureau of Labor Statistics (www.bls.gov) and the U.S. Census Bureau (www.census.gov).

From the data sources above, I relied on 10 variables in four categories: demographic, economic, social, and political factors. For demographic factors, I included age, race, sex and the population of White and African-

American people in each county. Those variables describe the characteristics of survey respondents, and the total number of the population divided by each race is used in the regression model as well. I investigate those characteristics in Hypothesis 1, Hypothesis 3, Hypothesis 4, Hypothesis 6, and Hypothesis 7. For economic factors, unemployment rates of each county from 1990 to 2012 and respondents' income levels from the survey are used. Based on general conditions in each county and specific income conditions, people may have different political preferences, and this is why I proposed Hypothesis 5 and Hypothesis 8. For social factors, I used educational level of survey respondents and tested it in Hypothesis 2. Lastly, political factors, such as party preference (a dependent variable) and political conflicts, are tested in Hypothesis 9.

4.2 Model Specification

In this research, I used an ordered logit model, because the original motivation of the research was to find any clues related to a "paler" shade of Red in Mississippi. As a result, I assume that political preferences range from 1 (Democrat; much less "Red") to 2 (independent; less "Red") to 3 (Republican; "Red"), representing a series of degrees regarding political preferences. For example, people in category 3 (Republican) are more "Red" than people in category 2 (independent). Thus, the system demonstrates the degree to which people are "Red" in Mississippi. The equation below is the ordered logit model.

$$y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 x_{1,i} + \beta_2 x_{2,i} + \beta_3 x_{3,i} + \beta_4 x_{4,i} + \beta_5 x_{5,i} + \beta_6 x_{6,i} + \beta_7 x_{7,i} + \beta_8 x_{8,i} + \beta_9 x_{9,i} + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where

Y_i : Political preference (1=Democrat, 2=Independent, 3=Republican)

$X_{1,i}$: Age

$X_{2,i}$: Education (1=Under High School, 2=High School, 3=College, 4=College Grad and Graduate Schools)

$X_{3,i}$: Gender (1=Male, 0=Female)

$X_{4,i}$: Income (1=Under \$20,000, 2=From \$20,000 to \$40,000, 3=From \$40,000 to \$60,000, 4=Over \$60,000)

$X_{5,i}$: Race (1=White, 0=African-American)

$X_{6,i}$: The total number of White people in each county of Mississippi

$X_{7,i}$: The total number of African-American people in each county of Mississippi

$X_{8,i}$: Unemployment rate of each county in Mississippi

$X_{9,i}$: Political conflicts in Mississippi (1=There is a conflict, 0=There is no conflict)

ε_i : Error terms

5. Results

The total number of observations is 4,817. Chi-square and its p-value are 1,504.6 and 0.000, respectively. The table below is the result of the ordered logit model. Age has a negative relationship with political preference, and this is different from Erikson's and Tedin's (2011) findings. Generally, older people are more likely to be conservative and this leads to more Republican preferences. But the result in the model shows that age has a negative impact on political "Redness", and it is statistically significant at the level of 1 percent. I can conclude that old population keeps still holds its Democratic position, which was dominant before the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and this result proves that Mississippians retain their Democratic stances even as they grow old. Educational level states that better educated people in Mississippi are more "Red" than less educated people, and it is significant at the level of 5 percent.

In terms of the gender variable, males demonstrate their political preference as Republican when compared with females, and it is statistically significant at the level of 5 percent. Income level also has a strong positive relationship with political preferences, which means that people with a higher income level support the Republican Party ("political Redness") more than people with a lower income level. It is statistically significant at the level of 1 percent. Whites are likely to be more "Red" than African-Americans, and it is statistically significant at the level of 1 percent.

Table 1. The Result of the Ordered Logit Analysis ($n=4,817$)

Variables	Coefficients	Standard Errors	Z	p-value
Age	-0.011	0.002	-6.43	0.000 ***
Educate	0.075	0.032	2.36	0.018 **
Gender	0.012	0.026	2.05	0.040 **
Income	0.317	0.030	10.62	0.000 ***
Race	2.132	0.073	28.94	0.000 ***
White	2.24e-06	9.42e-07	2.38	0.017 **
African-American	3.95e-07	9.27e-07	0.43	0.670
Unemployment	0.011	0.012	0.95	0.343
Conflict	0.103	0.058	1.79	0.074 *

***, **, and * indicates significance at the level of 1%, 5%, and 10%

Interestingly, the population of Whites has a positive impact on political preferences. I conclude that in larger White communities, people have stronger “Redness” in Mississippi. But the size of the African-American community also has a positive influence on political preferences, even though it is not statistically significant. To explain it in another way, the recent decrease in population, especially the decrease of the White community compared with the decrease of the African-American community, influenced changes in political “Redness.” Even though Mississippi has the largest African-American community and African-Americans in Mississippi give lopsided support to the Democratic Party, White people and their community are the most powerful influential factor on political preferences. This leads to the explanation that White people in Mississippi may cause the recent paler shade of “Red,” and it is proved both by the ordered logit regression model. Political conflicts between the governor and the president increase motivation to change people’s political preferences to the Republican Party, and it is statistically significant at the level of 10 percent. The different political positions of governmental officers may stimulate conservativeness in the people of Mississippi.

I will predict how these variables contribute to “Redness” in Mississippi. To be “Red,” which means to ranked “Political Preferences=3,” I calculate how each variable contributes to becoming “Red” based on the assumption that the other variables are at the mean. The marginal effect of each variable is as follows:

Table 2. Delta-method of Ordered Logit Model ($n=4,817$)

Variables	Coefficients	Standard Errors	Z	p-value
Age	-0.002	0.000	-6.43	0.000 ***
Educate	0.016	0.007	2.36	0.018 **
Gender	0.025	0.012	2.05	0.040 **
Income	0.067	0.006	10.58	0.000 ***
Race	0.451	0.015	29.5	0.000 ***
White	4.74e-07	1.99e-07	2.38	0.017 **
African-American	8.36e-08	1.96e-07	0.43	0.670
Unemployment	0.002	0.003	0.95	0.343
Conflict	0.022	0.012	1.79	0.074 *

***, **, and * indicates significance at the level of 1%, 5%, and 10%

The p-value and the significance level of each variable are the same as the ordered logit model. The most powerful variable for “Redness” in Mississippi is race, indicating that the fact that White people support the Republican Party contributes the most to keeping “Redness” in Mississippi. On the other hand, age negatively contributes to “Redness.” Education and gender have positive impacts on political preferences, and the degree of influence is less than 5 percent of total impact. The White population in each county also makes a significantly positive impact at the level of 5 percent.

6. Conclusion

In this research, I investigate which factors drive changes in political preferences in Mississippi by establishing 9 hypotheses of my models. My models prove that higher level of education, male gender, higher income level, White in race, White population levels, and political conflicts are the most influential factors that affect political preferences in Mississippi.

These trends relating to decreasing population may be the primary cause of changes to a paler shade of “Red” in Mississippi in recent history. However, from 1990 to 2012, the total population and the population of White people have been increasing gradually, so it is hard to prove that all of the changes in trends are related to population alone. Rather, current economic downturns in Mississippi have made people (especially White people with a higher level of income or a higher education level) leave the State, and this has resulted in political changes. The remaining people in Mississippi have less impact on the support of Political Parties, even though the unemployment rate has been consistently more than the average in the United States.

To better understand the current political changes, additional research is required in order to identify more specific factors that change “Redness” in Mississippi. However, this research will contribute to future research in gaining a better understanding of the basic characteristics of political preferences in Mississippi.

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