CHAPTER 3:

THE CENTER WILL NOT HOLD:

THE 1960S AND THE SHIFTING RACIAL GEOGRAPHY OF AMERICAN POLITICS
It is hardly news that the years 1960 to 1972 marked a sea change in American culture and politics. At the beginning of the period, the distinctive postwar status quo, detailed in the previous chapter, seemed as strong as ever. Politically centrist coalitions remained dominant in both major parties, allowing for considerable bipartisan cooperation on most issues. Facing off in the first presidential contest of the sixties were two pragmatic moderates, John F. Kennedy for the Democrats and the GOP nominee, Richard Nixon. Both men were more attuned to foreign than domestic affairs, but in fact, their views on the three major policy issues of the day—Communism, civil rights, and the role of government—were similar, as were the broader party platforms on which their campaigns were nominally based. Both parties advocated civil rights reform, aggressive action to counter Soviet threats wherever they appeared in the world and a continued active role for the federal government in countering disadvantage and inequities through various programs and policies. As we noted in the previous chapter, public trust in government was at the highest levels observed for that particular survey question.

By the end of the period, things looked very different. The year 1972 marked another presidential contest, but this time around the candidates and their parties offered a stark ideological choice. The Democratic candidate, George McGovern, was running on the most liberal platform in party history. It called for an immediate end to the Vietnam War and generally downplayed the Soviet threat. It also called for more concerted federal action to counter the effects, not only of racial discrimination, but other forms of disadvantage, with specific attention to the plight of Hispanics, Native Americans, the disabled, and women, among others. By contrast, the GOP platform, called for “peace with honor” in Vietnam, while excoriating (Democratic) anti-war demonstrators for dishonoring American troops by giving aid and comfort to the enemy. While touting President Nixon’s diplomatic overtures to both China and the Soviet Union, the platform also warned against complacency when it came to the continuing Communist threat. Finally, the platform embraced a much more conservative stance not only on the issue of race—arguing against forced busing to achieve educational desegregation—but on government action to address social ills more generally. Reflecting the general turbulence and deep divisions of the late 60s and early 70s, public trust and confidence in government was down sharply from the beginning of the period. While more than three-quarters of those polled in both 1958 and 1964 indicated they trusted the federal government to do the right thing, “just about always,” or “most of the time,” by 1972 that percentage was down to just slightly more than half of all respondents.1

How are we to understand these changes? More to the point, why had the two parties moved so sharply away from each other? What had become of the sustained bipartisan consensus that prevailed in the U.S. from roughly 1940 until well into the 60s? The temptation, of course, is simply to blame the collapse of the consensus on the generalized turbulence occasioned by The Sixties. The Sixties is, in fact, invoked in just this way in countless popular narrative histories with the blame for all manner of contemporary ills laid to the general unrest and chaos of those years. In some cases, the attribution may be justified. When it comes to the considerable partisan overlap of the postwar period, however, the account is far too crude to serve as a satisfactory answer to the question. Two points are worth making here. First, in

---

1 American National Election Studies: http://electionstudies.org/nesguide/text/tab5a_1.txt
strictly chronological terms, the Sixties is really a misnomer. While we tend to think of the entire decade as an undifferentiated, rebellious whole, most Americans did not experience it that way. Instead the early years of the decade—up through, say, 1964—were really more aligned with the staid, conformist 50s than the stereotypic Sixties. Conversely, much of the political upheaval and countercultural experimentation we associate with the Sixties, were actually more in evidence in the 70s than the prior decade. It is, for example, commonplace to include feminism, environmentalism and gay liberation in the long, undifferentiated list of “60s movements,” even though these struggles really only emerged or took off in the 1970s. Similarly, if we track the incidence of virtually any alleged Sixties countercultural practice—drug usage or cohabitation outside marriage for example—we typically see that the real escalation in the behavior took place in the 1970s rather than the previous decade.

In this sense, the most intense period of generalized political and cultural ferment is a span of years bridging the 1960s and 70s. We might nominate 1967-1973 for this honor, but the precise time period matters less than the general point. The temporal heart of the “60s phenomenon” comes later in time than most popular narrative histories suggest.

Our second point is related to the first, but assumes a substantive, rather than temporal, focus. Over the years, the first author has taught many a course on the Sixties. He has always opened those classes by asking the students to offer up images of the period in question. These images are always the same; with more stress on the counterculture than politics and with images invariably drawn from the late 60s/early 70s rather than the very early 1960s. To oversimplify, the images tend to focus on the “sex, drugs, and rock and roll” dimension of the Sixties, with a few images of antiwar protests and/or women’s lib “bra burners” thrown in as a reminder that politics played some part in the period to. This is, to put the matter bluntly, a decidedly white, middle-class perspective on the Sixties, probably filtered through their parents backward looking, simplified positive or negative view of the era. Once in a great while, a student—typically of color—may throw in an image of MLK or police dogs and fire hoses from Birmingham, but this is the exception that proves the rule.

So what does this aside have to do with the question posed earlier regarding the collapse of the postwar consensus? Answer: while the generalized rebellion and turbulence of the late 1960s and early 1970s exacerbated partisan divisions within the two parties, the decisive break occurred much earlier, with the seeds sown in the first few years of the decade. Our stereotypic rendering of the substantive issues that catalyzed the Sixties is as badly distorted as our temporal map of the period. To wit: the collapse of the postwar consensus had everything to do with race and much less to do with the issues—Vietnam, sexism, cultural liberation—that defined the later years of the period. To be clear, these later issues—especially Vietnam—clearly magnified partisan divisions, but they were not the root cause of them. That honor, as with the origin of the convulsive Sixties more generally, goes to the issue of race and the enduring changes it brought to the structure of American politics.

This is really the story of the return of social movements to American politics after the unnatural quiescence of the postwar period. More accurately, it is the story of not one, but two parallel movements, the revitalized civil rights movement of the early 1960s and the powerful segregationist countermovement, that quickly developed in response to the black freedom struggle. Our claim is that these two struggles did much more than simply bring the movement

---

2 McAdam 1998
form back to American politics; more importantly, over a fairly short span of time in the early to mid-60s, the two movements decisively altered the partisan geography of the United States, and in the process pushed the national Democratic and Republican parties sharply to the left and right respectively, undermining the centrist policy convergence of the postwar period and setting the parties on the divisive course they remain on today. Our concern in the chapter is not the present, but the seismic shifts that took place roughly a half-century ago. We take up the two movements in turn, being sure to note the dynamic connections between them as we go. We begin appropriately, with the “borning struggle” of the civil rights movement.

The Civil Rights Revolution

As one of the two or three most significant movements in U.S. history, the civil rights struggle is routinely credited with any number of specific effects, ranging from the restoration of voting rights in the South, to the collapse of the constitutional underpinnings of “separate but equal,” and just for fun, the rise of blue jeans as the ultimate fashion fad of the 1960s. Arguably the most important legacy of the movement, however, is one whose significance is only now starting to be recognized. In setting in motion a fundamental transformation of the racial geography of American politics, the movement brought to a close the most sustained period of progressive policymaking in federal history (1932-1968), and ushered in the era of rising inequality and political polarization in which we remain mired.

The pivot point of this transformation comes, as we will show, in the early to mid-1960s, as a result of the relentless pressure that civil rights forces brought to bear on the American state and the Democratic administrations who were serving at the time as its stewards. However, to really grasp the decisive effect the movement had on the Democratic Party, the New Deal coalition, and American politics more generally, it will be necessary to go back even further in time and describe in some detail the distinctive racial geography that structured politics in this country from the close of the Civil War to the onset of the 1960s. Only by putting the events of that pivotal decade, the 60s, in broader historical context, can one appreciate the seismic shift in the political landscape set in motion by the civil rights revolution.

The Solid South, the Party of Lincoln, and the Geography of Race, 1876-1960 - The standard narrative account of the relationship between the civil rights movement and the Democratic Party tends to depict the two as staunch allies in the struggle. To be sure, the celebrated legislative achievements that marked the struggle—the Civil Rights Act of 1965 and the 1964 Voting Rights Act—could not have been achieved without the contributions of both parties. But to see the movement and the party as allies is to ignore the enduring and deep antipathy that marked the relationship between civil rights forces and the Democratic Party until well into the 1930s. More accurately, the relationship evolved through three distinct phases. The first lasts from the close of the Civil War until Roosevelt’s election in 1932. This is the period of intense, sustained enmity between the Democratic Party and civil rights forces who, in truth, are a small and beleaguered group during this, the heyday of Jim Crow. The antagonism is rooted in history. It

---

3 McAdam 1988, p.142
is hard to overstate the lasting hatred that southern whites felt toward a Republican Party (the despised Party of Lincoln), which, from their point of view, had inflicted the “war of northern aggression” on the region. With southern blacks denied the franchise during this period, white voters transform the region into a one-party racial autocracy—the “solid South”—which will serve as the electoral foundation of the national Democratic Party from the end of Reconstruction until well into the 1960s.

Figure 3.1 1928 Presidential Election

![Map of 1928 Presidential Election](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Party</th>
<th>Presidential Nom.</th>
<th>VP Nom.</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>Herbert Hoover</td>
<td>Charles Curtis</td>
<td>444</td>
<td>83.6</td>
<td>21,432,823</td>
<td>58.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>Alfred E. Smith</td>
<td>Joseph Robinson</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>15,004,336</td>
<td>40.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UCSB American Presidency Project

Figure 3.1 shows the electoral map of Herbert Hoover’s victory in the 1928 presidential contest and clearly underscores the dependence of the Democratic Party on the votes of southern segregationists. Of the scant 87 electoral votes captured by the Democratic candidate, Al Smith, in that year’s race, 64 were garnered by southern states. This was altogether typical of the results in the early decades of the 20th century, during which the Party was uniquely beholden to its southern, segregationist wing.

Roosevelt’s election in 1932 marked the onset of a second, much more complicated, contradictory—one might even say, “schizophrenic”—period in the relationship between the Democratic Party and civil rights forces. Besides reclaiming the White House after a twelve-year hiatus, FDR’s victory also served to fundamentally transform the Party. The electoral map of the 1932 contest tells the story.
While the South remained solidly Democratic in 1932, Roosevelt’s resounding victory essentially marked the birth of the modern Democratic Party and the northern, liberal labor wing that would, in time, come to be the dominant force in the party. By the late 1930s, the most progressive elements in this wing had allied themselves with civil rights forces and racial liberals in the GOP to introduce anti-lynching bills in Congress. By the mid-40s, these same labor/civil rights Democrats had supplanted liberal Republicans as the cutting edge of the civil rights struggle in Congress. Finally, in the 1960s, this wing would succeed in allying the broader Party with the civil rights movement, ushering in the third and final period in that evolving relationship. During this second period from 1932 until the early ‘60s, however, the Party remained fundamentally divided on the issue of race, though by default committed to accommodating the regional “sensibilities” of the Dixiecrats. No one was more adept at this accommodation than FDR during his long tenure in office. Given his patrician background, his clear liberal views, and the even more radical sensibilities of some of his key advisers, especially those of his wife, Eleanor, you would have thought that Southern whites would have abandoned the Party in droves during the Roosevelt years. To the contrary, Roosevelt was wildly popular in the South, carrying every single state of the former Confederacy in all four of his presidential races.

Some of this popularity was due to the fact that, unlike today, social programs had considerable appeal in the South, the nation’s poorest region, struggling as it was under the added burden of the Great Depression. But make no mistake about it; had Roosevelt openly

---

4 Feinstein and Schickler 2008; Schickler et al. 2010
espoused pro-civil rights views, his stance on any other issue would have mattered little to the white South. In truth, FDR took great care during his thirteen years in office to give the white South—and especially the region’s powerful Congressional delegations—no reason to doubt his commitment to the longstanding federal-southern “understanding” with respect to race.

With the close of Reconstruction in 1877, federal involvement in racial matters came to an abrupt end. Control over racial issues reverted to the states. Roosevelt was not about to violate this tacit “hands off” policy. Even on as morally a compelling issue as lynching “Roosevelt remained silent on racial matters throughout his four term presidency, refusing to come out in favor of anti-lynching legislation on the numerous occasions such bills were brought before Congress.” In his choice of running mates, FDR also catered to the Dixiecrats. Of the three vice-presidents who served under Roosevelt, two, John Nance Garner of Texas and Harry Truman from Missouri, came from former slaveholding states or territories. Needing the electoral votes of the “solid South” and the legislative cooperation of the region’s senior senators and House members, Roosevelt was only too happy to use his choice of running mates and his cabinet appointments to reassure the South of his sensitivity to their distinctive regional “traditions.” Translation: the “southern way of life” will be safe on my watch. Nor was this all just cynical calculus on Roosevelt’s part. As William Leuchtenburg makes clear in his 2005 book, The White House Looks South, FDR enjoyed a special relationship with the South, nurtured in large part by his twenty-one year residence in Warm Springs, Georgia. Roosevelt first went to the small, spa town when he contracted polio in 1924, but fell in love with the place and the warmth of the local residents and maintained a second home there until his death in 1945.

The important point is that as long as the progressive racial views of northern liberal Democrats were held in check and tacit support for Jim Crow remained the guiding—if unofficial—policy of the Party, the South remained solidly and reliably in the Democratic column. In turn, the need to accommodate the views of the Dixiecrats had a moderating effect on the Party’s policy preferences, most notably with respect to race. So even in the face of the gradual ascendance of the Party’s liberal labor wing after 1932, the Democrats remained, in the aggregate, moderately centrist in their policies. And with moderate to liberal Republicans consistently replacing their more conservative predecessors after 1944, the GOP, as we have seen, also moved steadily to the ideological center during the postwar period. These trends set the stage for the unprecedented period of sustained bipartisanship documented in the previous chapter. But even as the postwar period was getting underway, the seeds of change in the two-party system were being sown.

The Cold War and the Renationalization of Race - In the preceding section, we devoted considerable attention to Roosevelt’s strategic silence on matters of race and his unwavering efforts to accommodate the Dixiecrat wing of his Party. By contrast, within a year of FDR’s death in office in 1945, his successor, Harry Truman, violated the tacit federal “hands off” policy with respect to race when he created a national Committee on Civil Rights and charged it with investigating “the current state of civil rights in the country and recommending appropriate

---

5 McAdam 1999, p.xx  
6 Leuchtenburg 2005, p.46
Two years later, in 1948, Truman went even further, issuing two landmark Executive Orders, the first establishing a fair employment board within the Civil Service Commission, and the second calling for the gradual desegregation of the armed forces. Why did Truman act when Roosevelt had not? Comparing the domestic political environments in which FDR and Truman found themselves only deepens the puzzle. While Roosevelt’s electoral margins left him politically secure, Truman’s status as an unelected incumbent made him uniquely vulnerable to challenge as he headed into the 1948 presidential campaign. Moreover, with black voters now returning solid Democratic majorities, Truman had seemingly little to gain and everything to lose by alienating the Dixiecrat wing of his party. And that, of course, is exactly what his open advocacy of civil rights reform did. Angered by his proactive support for civil rights, the Dixiecrats broke with the party in 1948 and ran their own candidate, Strom Thurmond, for president on the States Rights Party ticket. The electoral votes of the once “solid South” were now in peril. Given Truman’s own roots in the South and early racial attitudes, to say nothing of the general conservatism of the Cold War period, one could hardly think of a less likely candidate and less propitious time to be advocating for politically and socially progressive causes.

The otherwise puzzling contrast between Truman’s aggressive actions and Roosevelt’s resolute inaction on the issue becomes entirely comprehensible, however, when placed in the very different international contexts in which they occurred. The post-war world that confronted Truman exposed the U.S. to two unprecedented sources of pressure regarding its treatment of African-Americans. One, ironically, was the anti-racist ideology the allies had espoused in waging war against the Axis powers, and which, following the termination of hostilities, was explicitly encoded in the founding language of the United Nations. While all of the allies had long been identified with egalitarian principles in the abstract, the war effort and the boost it gave to the post-war stress on global human rights forced France, Great Britain and the U.S., to more scrupulously conform to these principles. For France and Britain this meant decolonization; for the U.S., civil rights reform.

The second, and far more significant, source of pressure came courtesy of the Cold War. The onset of the Cold War effectively ruled out any possibility of a return to the isolationist foreign policy that had, since the First World War, shaped America’s relationship to the rest of the world. With both France and Great Britain decisively weakened by WWII and in no position to counter the emerging Soviet threat, it fell to the U.S. to assume the role of global “policeman for Democracy.” As a consequence of this role, federal policymakers—first and foremost the president—found themselves exposed to international political pressures and considerations their predecessors had been spared. Extensive research has greatly enhanced our understanding of this period by documenting the rising tide of international criticism directed at the U.S.—by allies and non-aligned countries as well as the Soviet bloc—during the Cold War period. Locked in an increasingly intense ideological struggle with the U.S.S.R. for influence around the world—and especially with emerging Third World nations—American racism suddenly took on great international significance as an effective propaganda weapon of the Soviets. Viewed in this light, Truman’s civil rights initiatives should be seen for what they were: not so much domestic

---

7 Quoted in McAdam 1999, p.84
8 McCullough 1992
9 See Dudziak 2000; Layton 2000; Skrentny 1998
reform efforts as a critical component of his Cold War foreign policy. In short, after a seventy-year hiatus, the onset of the Cold War renationalized the issue of race. But if the pressures that had occasioned this renationalization were primarily international, the domestic political consequences that followed from it were to be significant and long lasting. As a harbinger of what was to come in the 1960s, the 1948 Dixiecrat Revolt, merits a bit more attention

The Dixiecrat Revolt - We pick up the story with the 1948 election. The question is what became of that year’s Dixiecrat revolt within the Democratic Party? Leading up to the election, it looked, for all the world, as if the third party candidacy of the Dixiecrat’s standard bearer, Strom Thurmond, was going to cost Truman the election. As most everyone knows, it did not turn out that way. The photo of Truman celebrating his victory while displaying a copy of the Chicago Tribune headline proclaiming “Dewey Defeats Truman,” is one of the iconic shots in the annals of the American presidency. Although the 1948 electoral map (see figure 3.3) shows Thurmond carrying the Deep South (except Georgia), the revolt failed to spread far enough to deprive Truman of his narrow victory over the Republican nominee, Thomas Dewey.
So what became of the South’s anger toward Truman and the national Democratic Party for its “betrayal” of the region? Certainly Truman did nothing in his second term in office to assuage the Dixiecrats. On the contrary, his Cold War motivated advocacy of civil rights reform continued throughout his remaining four years in office. He closed out his term by directing his Attorney General to file an amicus brief in support of a school desegregation case, Brown v. Topeka Board of Education, then before the U.S. Supreme Court. The link between the imperatives of the Cold War and the administration’s open embrace of civil rights reform were clearly spelled out in the brief, which read in part: “It is in the context of the present world struggle between freedom and tyranny that the problem of racial discrimination must be viewed . . . Racial discrimination furnishes grist for the Communist propaganda mills, and it raises doubt even among friendly nations as the intensity of our devotion to the democratic faith.”

Given Truman’s sustained, if mostly symbolic, advocacy of civil rights, one might have expected a repeat in the 1952 election of what happened four years earlier; that is, another third party challenge by the white South under the banner of “state’s rights.” But no such challenge was mounted, nor apparently contemplated. The reasons for this are not so hard to discern. For starters, the target of the Dixiecrat’s wrath four years earlier—Truman—was not on the ballot in 1952. Nor did the 1952 Democratic platform feature civil rights reform anywhere near as prominently as it had in 1948. What’s more, the Republican platform was virtually indistinguishable on the issue from that of the Democrats. More importantly, with the Korean Conflict still raging, and Joe McCarthy at or near the peak of his power, the issue of race received very little attention in the run up to the election. Instead, the Cold War—in various guises—dominated debate within and between the two parties in ’52. In the end, Eisenhower’s popularity rendered the issue moot in any case. As the electoral map for that year shows, only the return of the South to the Democratic fold prevented Ike from a clean sweep of the country. The Dixiecrat revolt appeared to be a thing of the past.

---

11 Quoted in Woodward 1966, p.132
Eisenhower’s two terms in office only reinforced the sense that the traditional sectional loyalties had been restored. The South’s traditional enmity toward the GOP was rekindled in these years now that it was a Republican president responding to the new Cold War realities with the same kind of advocacy of civil rights seen under Truman. Reflecting the prevailing bipartisan consensus on the issue, Eisenhower’s actions in this area essentially mimicked those of his predecessor. “During his first term, Eisenhower continued the trend established by Truman. Through executive action he accelerated the desegregation of the armed services and pressed for the integration of facilities throughout the District of Columbia.” Eisenhower also continued Truman’s practice of directing his Attorney General to file amicus briefs in support of civil rights cases reaching the Supreme Court. It was also on his watch that the Court issued its unanimous, landmark decision in the Brown case. And while Eisenhower famously cautioned that court cases and legislation alone could not change racial attitudes, he was steadfast in calling on all Americans to abide by the Court’s decisions in this area. Eisenhower’s time in office also coincided with the first piece of federal civil rights legislation—the 1957 Civil Rights Act—since Reconstruction. All of this angered the white South, but nothing prompted more regional vitriol than Eisenhower’s decision to send federal troops to Arkansas in the fall of 1957 to enforce the desegregation of Little Rock’s Central High School. Nothing Truman had done provoked anything like the backlash that followed Eisenhower’s decisive stand on the matter.

---

12 Cook 1981, p.173-77; Dudziak 2000, chapter 4
13 McAdam 1999, p.86
Editorials throughout the region inveighed against Eisenhower’s action, invariably describing it as akin to another “War of Northern Aggression” or the onset of a second “Reconstruction.”

Eisenhower’s personal ambivalence regarding the appropriate role for the federal government in matters of race was clearly lost on the white South. By the time he left office, Southern anger over the federal government’s “assault” on state’s rights (read: segregation) was once again primarily directed at the Party of Lincoln. There is a more general, and critically important, point to be made here. As the 1960s dawned, the Democratic Party remained deeply divided on the issue of race and, in the aggregate, much more opposed to civil rights reform than the Republicans. We offer two significant “data points” from the late 1950s in support of this characterization. We briefly alluded above to the 1957 Civil Rights Act. Notwithstanding its substantive weakness, the bill’s status as the first piece of federal civil rights legislation since Reconstruction, made it symbolically very significant. How did the two parties vote on the bill? Table 3.1 provides the answer to that question.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3.1 Congressional Voting on 1957 Civil Rights Act</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>House Democrats: 118 Yes; 107 No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House Republicans: 167 Yes; 19 No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senate Democrats: 29 Yes; 18 No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senate Republicans: 43 Yes; 0 No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For those conditioned by today’s stark partisan divisions to think of Republicans as extreme racial conservatives relative to Democrats, the results of the 1957 vote will come as a revelation. While all 43 Senate Republicans backed the bill, 18 of their 47 Democratic colleagues opposed it. In the House, a stunning 90 percent of GOP representatives cast their votes in favor of the Act (167-19), while Democrats essentially split on the measure (118 to 107 in favor of). Quite simply, this important piece of breakthrough legislation was primarily the work of Republican, not Democratic, lawmakers.

The second piece of evidence mirrors the first. In their 1989 book, *Issue Evolution*, Carmines and Stimson report the partisan distribution of racial “liberals” and “conservatives” in the Senate during the 85th Congress, which served from 1957 to 1959. The party difference in this regard is striking. Based on their voting records, forty-two of the 46 Republican Senators scored as racial “liberals.” By contrast, notwithstanding the cutting-edge, civil rights views of many in the northern wing of the Party, 27 of 48 Democratic senators were racial “conservatives.” Taken together, these data points support two conclusions. First, as the Sixties dawned, the Democrats remained decidedly schizophrenic on the issue of race, with most northern Democrats deeply committed to reform and virtually all Dixicrats just as intransigent as ever on the matter. Second, even if the most committed racial liberals were Democrats, the GOP was, in the aggregate, far and away more progressive on civil rights issues. All of this would change—irrevocably—as both parties scrambled to respond to the dramatic rebirth and escalating turmoil of the civil rights revolution.

**Kennedy, the Revitalized Movement and the Dixiecrat Revolt Revived** - The Kennedy-Nixon presidential contest in 1960 remains one of the tightest in U.S. history. Out of better than 68
million ballots cast, Kennedy won by just over 112,000 votes. Kennedy’s share of the popular vote was 49.7% to Nixon’s 49.6%. The demography of Kennedy’s win, however, had disquieting implications for the future of his party. Reflecting the strategic dilemma that would roil the Democrats in the decade to come, the votes of both African-Americans and southern whites had proven to be crucial to JFK’s razor-thin victory. In his 1976 book, Black Ballots, Stephen Lawson underscores the critical importance of the “black vote” to Kennedy’s election. “An analysis of the returns demonstrated that Negro ballots were enough to give the Democratic contender a winning margin in New Jersey, Michigan, Illinois, Texas and South Carolina, all states that had supported Eisenhower in 1956. Had the Republican-Democratic division in the black districts of these states broken down in the same way as four years earlier, Richard Nixon would have become the thirty-fifth President.”14 At the same time, there is no gainsaying the decisive importance of the “solid South” to Kennedy’s victory. As the 1960 electoral map shows, no region of the country went as decisively for JFK as did the South. Had the Deep South abandoned the Democratic candidate as it did in 1948, Nixon would have won handily.

**Figure 3.5 1960 Presidential Election**

These electoral cross pressures meant that the new president began his term in a serious strategic straightjacket. If he eschewed his predecessors’ civil rights agenda, he risked alienating the large and strategically positioned black vote so key to his victory over Nixon. If on the other hand, he sought to solidify black support by aggressively promoting additional civil rights measures, he faced the specter of another Dixiecrat revolt. As bad as this strategic dilemma was,

---

14 Lawson 1976, p.256
two developments in the early 1960s were to make it even worse. The first was the onset of the heyday of the modern civil rights movement. As we noted in chapter 2, the canonical account of the civil rights struggle turns on a significant temporal distortion. The account has the movement marching inexorably forward from its “birth” in Montgomery in 1955-56 until its “death” in the late 1960s or early 1970s. This stylized account obscures, in at least two ways, a far more complicated story. First, a recent scholarship on the “long civil rights movement” reminds us, the struggle began much earlier than 1955 and extended well beyond the alleged “death” of the movement circa 1970. But even were we to accept the standard 1955-1970 time frame, there is another lie encoded in the popular narrative. The movement hardly resembled an inexorable upward march between 1955 and 1970. Reproduced below is the same time series of annual “civil rights movement actions” reported in the previous chapter.

![Figure 3.6 Civil Rights Movement Actions, 1948-1976](image)

In truth, after the triumph of Montgomery, the movement struggled to find its footing and, confronted with the white South’s campaign of “massive resistance” in the late 1950s, found itself largely moribund as the new decade dawned. It was, as the figure shows, the 1960 sit-in campaign that revived the struggle and ushered in the true heyday of the movement between 1960 and 1965. The important implication of this is that neither Eisenhower nor Truman had had to contend with the intense bottom-up pressure of the fully mobilized civil rights movement. Kennedy, on the other hand, did. His were the years of the Freedom Rides, of fire hoses and police dogs in Birmingham, and King’s “I Have a Dream Speech” at the epochal 1963 March on Washington. Not since the Civil War had America been challenged so intensely to put its racial house in order. And this time, courtesy of the Cold War, it had to do so with the whole world watching and the global battle for geo-political supremacy hanging in the balance.

Which brings us to the second dilemma: Kennedy had to contend with the intense bottom-up pressure of the civil rights movement during an especially “hot” phase of the Cold

---

15 Hall 2005
War. In his celebrated 1,000 days in office, Kennedy confronted no less than four major Cold War crises: the erection of the Berlin Wall by East German authorities; the collapse of the Diem regime in South Vietnam; the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion in Cuba and the single most dangerous confrontation with the Soviet Union in the history of the superpower competition: the Cuban missile crisis in October of 1962.

Nor, as we have tried to make clear, should these two dilemmas be regarded as separate sources of pressure on the administration. Instead, there was a close connection between the two. For their part, the Soviets monitored racial tensions and conflict in the U.S. very closely, launching major propaganda attacks in the wake of every celebrated attack or atrocity. And central to movement strategy during this period was a savvy understanding of just how vulnerable the U.S. state was to criticism on racial grounds, as a result of the Cold War. Publicized instances of American-style racism constituted an enormous liability when it came to countering Soviet influence in the world, especially among “peoples of color” in the emerging nations of Asia and Africa. The central tactical dynamic at the heart of the movement during these years reflects this understanding. “Lacking sufficient power to defeat the segregationists at the state or local level [in the South], movement forces sought to broaden the conflict by inducing opponents to disrupt public order to the point where sympathetic media coverage and broad public support—international no less than domestic—for the movement could be mobilized. In turn, the media coverage and public [outrage] virtually compelled federal officials to intervene in ways supportive of the movement.”

The picture is of the Kennedy administration and, by extension, the Democratic Party, being inexorably pushed off center by the centrifugal force of a national movement operating at the peak of its extraordinary mobilizing powers. No single episode during Kennedy’s abbreviated tenure in office speaks to the force of these pressures better than the evolution of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the final partisan breakdown of votes on the measure. To underscore the intensity of the pressure brought to bear on the President by civil rights forces during this period, we show in figure 3.7 the number of “movement actions” reported in the *New York Times* for each month between January 1961 and Kennedy’s death in November 1963.

16 McAdam 2009, p.67-68
The peak of movement activity during this period corresponds to the high drama of Martin Luther King’s Birmingham campaign in April and May of 1963. To understand the intensity of the events in Birmingham and how well they fit the general strategic dynamic described above, it will help to contrast the episode with the major campaign that preceded it. That episode took place in Albany, Georgia beginning in November of 1961 and extending through the summer of the following year. In intent and scale, Albany closely resembled the later Birmingham campaign. In both cases, King and his supporters sought to bring the city to a standstill by launching a community wide campaign of non-violent civil disobedience to call attention to the continued denial of black civil and political rights in Albany and, by extension, throughout the Deep South. Reflecting the campaign, figure 3.7 shows a modest increase in movement activity in late 1961 and early to mid-1962, but nothing on the scale of what would come later in Birmingham. This is entirely consistent with narrative accounts of the campaign. Those accounts stress the firm control exercised by police chief, Laurie Pritchett over events in Albany. While systematically denying demonstrators their rights, Pritchett nonetheless did so in such a way as to prevent the major breakdown of public order that would have compelled federal intervention. Or, as another chronicler of the events in Albany put it, “the reason . . . . [the movement] failed in Albany was that Chief Pritchett used force rather than violence in controlling the situation.”

Even in defeat, then, the strategic dynamic described earlier was evident in Albany. Failing to provoke the public violence necessary to prompt federal intervention, insurgents lacked sufficient leverage to achieve anything more than a standoff with the local supremacist forces in Albany. The setback in Albany was not without value, however, as the following revealing quote from King suggests:

17 Hubbard 1968, p.5
There were weaknesses in Albany, and a share of the responsibility belongs to each of us who participated. However, none of us was so immodest as to feel himself master of the new theory. Each of us expected that setbacks would be a part of the ongoing effort. There is no tactical theory so neat that a revolutionary struggle for a share of power can be won merely by pressing a row of buttons. Human beings with all their faults and strengths constitute the mechanism of a social movement. They must make mistakes and learn from them, make more mistakes and learn anew. . . . Time and action are the teachers. When we planned our strategy for Birmingham months later we spent hours assessing Albany and trying to learn from our errors.18

The important implication of King’s statement is that a fuller understanding of the dynamic on offer here was born of events in Albany. No doubt a part of that “fuller understanding” was a growing awareness of the importance of white violence as a catalyst of the kind of media attention that compelled federal intervention. As Hubbard argues, this awareness appears to have figured in King’s choice of Birmingham as the site of his next major protest campaign. “King’s Birmingham innovation was pre-eminently strategic. Its essence was not merely more refined tactics, but the selection of a target city which had as its Commissioner of Public Safety ‘Bull’ Connor, a notoriously racist and hothead who could be depended on not to respond nonviolently.”19

The timing of the events in Birmingham strongly supports Hubbard’s contention that there was strategic calculus involved in the selection of the city as the site for King’s next major protest campaign. The significant fact here is that Connor was a lame-duck official at the time of the campaign, having been defeated in his bid for re-election in early April of 1963. Given this, and his reputation for racist violence, why, it seems reasonable to ask, didn’t King and SCLC wait until Connor was out of office to launch the campaign? Pat Watters, one of the most astute observers of the civil rights struggle, provides the logical answer to the question when he writes that “the supposition has to be that. . . .SCLC, in a shrewd. . . . stratagem, knew a good enemy when they saw him. . . .one that could be counted on in stupidity and natural viciousness to play into their hands for full exploitation in the press as archfiend and villain.”20

The sharp spike in “movement actions” in figure 3.7 corresponding to the Birmingham campaign attests to the strategic savvy underlying the choice of protest site. After a few days of uncharacteristic restraint, Connor unleashed the police dogs and fire hoses featured in the iconic images that made headlines around the world, and brought the weight of international and national pressure to bear on the White House. Predictably, the administration was forced to intervene and not simply to restore some measure of public order in Birmingham. More significant was Kennedy’s reversal of an earlier decision to not bring civil rights legislation to Congress in ’63. “The ultimate result [of Birmingham] . . . .was administration sponsorship of a civil rights bill that, even in a much weaker form, had earlier been described as politically inopportune by administration spokesmen. Under [sustained] pressure by insurgents, the bill was ultimately signed into law a year later as the Civil Rights Act of 1964.”21, 22

18 King 1963, p.34-35
19 Hubbard 1968, p.5
20 Watters 1971, p.266; emphasis added
21 McAdam 1999, p.178
Like Truman and Roosevelt before him, Kennedy had taken office determined to accommodate the southern wing of his party, without whom he knew he would never be returned to office in 1964. Ultimately, however, the pressure brought to bear on him by the movement—compounded by the Cold War dynamic described above—forced him and his party to move sharply left in policy terms. In table 3.1 we reported the distribution of Republican and Democratic votes on the 1957 Civil Rights Act in both the House and Senate. Table 3.2 compares the ‘57 votes to those cast for and against the 1964 bill. The comparison makes it clear that, in shifting sharply left on civil rights, Kennedy was simply mirroring the broader trend within his party. Whereas Democratic House members had virtually split on the 1957 bill, nearly two-thirds favored the much stronger 1964 measure. A similar increase in support was also evident among Democratic Senators between 1957 and 1964.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3.2 Congressional Voting on 1957 and 1964 Civil Rights Acts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1957 Civil Rights Act</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House Democrats: 118 Yes; 107 No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House Republicans: 167 Yes; 19 No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senate Democrats: 29 Yes; 18 No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senate Republicans: 43 Yes; 0 No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1964 Civil Rights Act</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House Democrats: 153 Yes; 91 No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House Republicans: 136 Yes; 35 No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senate Democrats: 46 Yes; 21 No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senate Republicans: 27 Yes; 6 No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: govtrack.us*

There was, of course, a price to be paid for so direct a challenge to the southern wing of Kennedy’s own party. As much as he had hoped, at the time of his election, to be able to balance the demands of Dixiecrats and civil rights forces, by the time of his death, Kennedy was clearly perceived as siding with the movement. While doing fieldwork in Mississippi more than twenty years after JFK’s assassination, it was not uncommon for the first author to find framed pictures of Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. on the walls of the homes of black interview subjects. JFK remained a revered figure to many in the black community, especially those old enough to have memories of his presidency. On the other side of the political ledger, it seems clear that most Dixiecrats, outraged by what they saw as federal complicity in the attack on “the southern way of life,” were poised to abandon Kennedy and the Democrats in 1964. In the end, though, his death meant that the revolt, if it were to come, would be on someone else’s watch. That someone would be native southerner, Lyndon Baines Johnson.

---

22 Famously, Kennedy paid ironic tribute to Connor—and indirectly to the strategic dynamic under discussion—when he hosted King and other civil rights leaders at the White House during the August 1963 March on Washington. In an off-hand remark to King, during a discussion of the civil rights bill then before Congress, Kennedy allowed as how “our judgment of Bull Connor should not be too harsh. After all, in his own way, he has done a good deal for civil rights legislation this year” (quoted in King 1963, p.144).

23 The high regard for Kennedy among African-Americans is out of proportion to the late president’s objective civil rights record. On taking office, Kennedy had little or no commitment to the issue. His main policy aims had much more to do with foreign policy than domestic matters. Like his Democratic predecessors Truman and Roosevelt, Kennedy’s main goal when it came to race was finessing the issue so as not to antagonize the strategically critical southern wing of his party. In time, the relentless force of the movement made this impossible, compelling Kennedy to more fully embrace the need for civil rights reform. At best, then, his record in this area was mixed and much less consistently pro civil rights than that of his successor, Lyndon Johnson, who nonetheless does not seem to be held in near the same regard by blacks as JFK.
**Freedom Summer and the Convention Challenge** - In the immediate aftermath of Kennedy’s death, the prospects for anything other than a resounding Democratic victory in 1964 seemed remote. The outpouring of grief and sympathy for the martyred President was like nothing the country had ever seen before.\(^{24}\) Other sitting presidents had been assassinated, of course, but none of the earlier tragedies had touched the national psyche in quite the same way as that day in Dallas. Whatever the reasons for this unprecedented response—Kennedy’s youthful charisma, the idealism and innocence of the era, the youthful innocence of his orphaned children, the popularity of his widowed First Lady, the fact that the country had watched the events unfold on live television—the immediate political fallout from the tragedy seemed clear on its face. Whatever differences of opinion people had had of him in life seemed to vanish amidst the outpouring of grief aroused by his death.

Correctly divining the mood of the country, LBJ hitched his own electoral prospects to the fallen President, in essence dedicating the balance of his term to the realization of Kennedy’s legislative program. The most immediate, high profile manifestation of this stance was Johnson’s sustained and effective advocacy of what would become the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In his own words, "No memorial oration or eulogy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy's memory than the earliest possible passage of the civil rights bill for which he fought so long." Johnson’s embrace of his predecessor’s civil rights agenda did not, however, mean that he was blind to the serious political risks posed by this stance. Indeed, as both a white southerner and one of the consummate majority leaders in the history of the Senate, LBJ understood the contradictions inherent in his party better than almost anyone. As he headed into the election year of 1964, he was determined to manage those contradictions and do what he could to retain the loyalties of both civil rights forces and his fellow Dixiecrats. Johnson assumed—rightly in the end—that his support for the aforementioned bill would mollify those civil rights leaders who were initially deeply skeptical of his commitment to the cause. The bigger trick, he knew, would be avoiding another rebellion by the southern wing of his party. The bill was bad enough. The threat of more Birminghams, with armies of civil rights protestors descending on southern cities, was worse still. Johnson did what he could to avert this threat, indirectly calling on civil rights leaders to effectively suspend disruptive demonstrations in the run up to the fall election.\(^{25}\)

With the Republican presidential candidate, Barry Goldwater, voicing strong opposition to the civil rights bill, Johnson argued that additional demonstrations would only further alienate the white South and drive Dixiecrats into the GOP fold in November. In the end, virtually all of the major civil rights groups acceded to Johnson’s call for a suspension of direct action during this period. SNCC, however, did not, setting in motion one of the most dramatic chapters in the civil rights struggle and a pivotal moment in the long and consequential history of racial politics in the U.S. It marks the point in time at which, after more than a century of intense enmity, the electoral loyalties of the white South aligned for the first time with the GOP, the despised “party of Lincoln.” The politics of contemporary America, we will argue, continues to bear the clear imprint of this moment. Accordingly, the story of SNCC’s summer project—or Freedom Summer as it has come to be known—bears repeating.

---

\(^{24}\) One might object to this characterization, pointing to the prolonged and agonized response to Lincoln’s assassination in 1865. The difference in the two cases, however, owes to the barely suppressed righteous satisfaction—if not outright joy—which greeted Lincoln’s death in the South. There was no such regional “dissent” from the genuine outpouring of grief evoked by Kennedy’s murder.

\(^{25}\) McAdam 1999, p.168
It is important at the outset to call attention to the fundamental contradiction between SNCC’s plans for the summer and Johnson’s call for a “cooling off” period in the movement. While Johnson had hoped to insulate the 1964 election from the divisive influence of the movement, SNCC planned to do the exact opposite; that is, infect the election with its unique brand of confrontational politics. The inspiration for the project had come from the Freedom Vote campaign that SNCC had carried out in Mississippi the previous fall. Denied the right to participate in the state’s fall gubernatorial election, SNCC had organized 80,000 black state residents to cast “freedom votes” to protest their exclusion from the political process. To augment its relatively meager staff resources, SNCC had recruited 100 white northern college students—almost all from Yale and Stanford—to help with the effort.

Buoyed by the success of the campaign, SNCC was now proposing to do for the general election what it had done the previous fall in the governor’s race. The difference would be in the scale of the two projects. While the Freedom Vote campaign had been a two-week affair, the new project, as the name indicated, was to last all summer. And while the fall effort had involved 100 white volunteers, the summer project would bring ten times that number to the state. Finally, while the Freedom Vote campaign had been centered in Jackson, the new project was to consist of some 44 projects scattered throughout the state (and a corner of Louisiana). The sheer size of the effort, to say nothing of the presence of so many white volunteers, guaranteed significant media attention from the outset. Indeed, that was one of the rationales for recruiting white students from elite institutions in the first place. In the three years SNCC had been working in the state, its field secretaries had endured countless beatings, arson attacks, and arrests. In that same span of time, at least five black Mississippians had given their lives in service to the movement.26 And yet through it all white Mississippi remained defiant and unrepentant in its embrace of Jim Crow. Conceding stalemate, SNCC had come to see outside intervention as the key to breaking the impasse in the state. From this perspective, the fundamental goal of the project was to focus national and international attention on Mississippi—something the organization had not yet been able to do—as a means of compelling federal intervention in the state. For the Freedom Summer campaign to be successful, then, it had to attract outside media attention. What better way to do so than by recruiting the sons and daughters of upper middle class white America to join the effort? Their experiences during the Freedom Vote campaign had convinced the SNCC high command that nothing attracted the media quite like the scenes of idealistic white college kids helping the “downtrodden Negroes of Mississippi.” The SNCC veterans had also learned that the presence of well-heeled white students insured the conspicuous presence of federal law enforcement officials. Describing the Freedom Vote effort, veteran field-secretary, Lawrence Guyot, said: “Wherever those white volunteers went FBI agents followed. It was really a problem to count the number of FBI agents who were there to protect the [Yale and Stanford] students. It was just that gross. So then we said, ‘Well, now, why don’t we invite lots of whites . . . . to come and serve as volunteers in the state of Mississippi?’”27

In a 1964 interview with the Saturday Evening Post, Bob Moses, the principal architect of the summer project, put the matter a bit more diplomatically when he remarked that “these students bring the rest of the country with them. They’re from good schools and their parents are

26 Dittmer 1995; Payne 1995
27 Guyot quoted in Raines 1983, p. 287
influential. The interest of the country is awakened and when that happens, the government responds to that issue."\textsuperscript{28} Or as James Forman, SNCC’s Executive Director at the time of the summer project explained some years later, “we made a conscious attempt. . . .to recruit from some of the Ivy League schools. . . .you know, a lot of us knew. . . .what we were up against. So that we were, in fact, trying to consciously recruit a counter power-elite.”\textsuperscript{29} It bears repeating that the strategic logic so evident in these statements represented Lyndon Johnson’s worst nightmare: a direct and highly public challenge to the entrenched political power of the very wing of his Party whose support he hoped to retain in the upcoming election. Worse still, project organizers hoped to orchestrate a confrontation with Mississippi’s white power structure that would compel supportive intervention by the movement’s liberal northern allies, which of course included LBJ himself.

While the summer project was to have a number of components, including efforts to identify and dialogue with moderate elements in the white community and an ambitious “freedom schools” program, the centerpiece was to be an aggressive effort to register black voters in advance of the November election. Early on, however, it became clear that the state’s white registrars were prepared to use every means at their disposal to block this effort. Thus stymied, project organizers engaged in a bit of strategic jujitsu, turning the registrars’ intransigence against them. If white Mississippi was not going to allow its black residents to participate in the official electoral process, SNCC would organize a parallel process complete with “freedom registration forms,” a new party—the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP)—open to all residents of the state, and the selection of an alternative delegation to challenge the seating of the regular, lily white, party regulars at the Democratic National Convention scheduled for August in Atlantic City.

Initially, the intent behind this parallel political process was almost entirely symbolic. Much like the Freedom Vote campaign the previous fall, Mississippi’s delegate selection process afforded the SNCC brain trust another opportunity to demonstrate the willingness and desire of Mississippi’s black population to participate in the state’s political process. A week into the summer, however, three project participants—James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Mickey Schwerner—went to investigate the suspicious burning of a black church near Philadelphia, Mississippi. They never made it back. Instead, after visiting the arson site, they were arrested on a trumped up traffic charge, held until after midnight and released into the Mississippi night. It was the last time they were seen alive, except of course, by their abductors. Their burned out station wagon was found near Bogue Chitto swamp the next day, but it would be August before their bodies, bearing unmistakable signs of torture —were uncovered beneath a make-shift earthen dam near Philadelphia, Mississippi.

With the media already focused on events in Mississippi, the disappearance of the three workers and the subsequent search for their bodies, guaranteed that the project would be front page news all summer long. Predictably, the kidnapping and presumed murder of Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner, also generated outrage and support for the project throughout the country. As the summer wore on and the MFDP effort gained momentum, the possibility of unseating the regular Mississippi delegation began to be taken more seriously. Expressions of support from as many as twenty-five Democratic members of Congress and nine state party

\textsuperscript{28} Atwater 1964, p.16  
\textsuperscript{29} Froman quoted in McAdam 1988, p. 40
delegations served to raise expectations as the date of the convention drew near.\textsuperscript{30} Still on the eve of the convention, the SNCC leadership knew its best chance of unseating the regular Mississippi delegation was likely to come from bringing the issue to the full convention rather than through any action of the Credentials Committee. As the official body charged with reviewing the credentials of all state and territorial delegations, the Committee was home to a good many party regulars whose interest lay in seeing that the proceedings went smoothly. Therefore, they were not likely to countenance the divisive challenge of some ragtag band of movement activists from Mississippi. For the MFDP the problem was that even a floor fight over the issue required a minority report from members of the Credentials Committee. This prompted the MFDP forces to adopt a dual strategy in Atlantic City. First, they sought the support of state delegations through an intensive lobbying campaign. Second, they made a strong and emotionally powerful appearance before the Credentials Committee. The highlight of the appearance was Fannie Lou Hamer’s riveting account of being savagely beaten in jail following her attempt to register to vote in Ruleville, Mississippi. At one point, she recounted how her jailers had forced several black “trustees”—longtime black prisoners—to beat her:

\begin{quote}
The first Negro began to beat, and I was beat until he was exhausted…..After the first Negro….was exhausted, the State Highway Patrolman began to beat….I began to scream, and one white man got up and began to beat me on the head and tell me to “hush.” One white man—my dress had worked up high—he walked over and pulled my dress down and he [then] pulled my dress back up, way up…. All of this is on account we want to register, to become first-class citizens, and if the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

Hamer’s electrifying testimony moved even the hardened party regulars on the Committee, as well as a national television audience, which responded with a flood of telegrams in support of the challenge. It began to look as if the moral force of the challenge might actually prevail. Almost unbelievably, the MFDP was poised to play David to the Goliath of the state’s longstanding white political establishment.

What the MFDP leadership had underestimated was the lengths to which that ultimate backroom politician, Lyndon Johnson, and his supporters would go to block the challenge. Hoping to prevent a full-scale Dixiecrat revolt, the Johnson forces were prepared to do whatever was necessary to insure that the regular Mississippi delegation was seated. Toward that end, Johnson ordered the FBI to place the SNCC/MFDP convention forces under surveillance. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover responded by tapping the phones in SNCC’s Atlantic City office. The White House let it be known that the seating of the MFDP delegation would damage the vice-presidential prospects of veteran civil rights stalwart, Hubert Humphrey. The move was probably directed at Joseph Rauh, the MFDP’s chief counsel and long-time Humphrey supporter. In turn, Humphrey’s staff pressured Rauh to urge moderation and compromise on the MFDP delegation. Walter Reuther, Rauh’s immediate superior and the President of the United Auto Workers (UAW) union, flew in for a bit of backstage arm twisting of his own. He threatened to pull all the UAW’s money out of the Mississippi movement should the MFDP persist in its

\textsuperscript{30} Holt 1965, p.167

\textsuperscript{31} Quoted in White, 1965, p.279
challenge.\textsuperscript{32} According to Rauh, Johnson’s supporters even threatened individual members of the Credentials Committee. Later he told an interviewer that one black supporter was informed “that her husband wouldn’t get a judgeship if she didn’t leave us, and the Secretary of the Army told the guy from the Canal Zone that he would lose his job if he didn’t leave us.”\textsuperscript{33}

In the end, the pressure proved to be too much. Support for the challenge evaporated on the Credentials Committee and the MFDP forces were left to consider a rather weak compromise proposal: two at-large convention seats and a promise that the matter of racial exclusion would be reviewed prior to the 1968 convention. When moderate civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bayard Rustin joined the chorus of those calling for acceptance of the compromise, the MFDP delegates’ sense of betrayal and isolation was complete. The challenge delegation rejected the compromise. Speaking for the group, Fannie Lou Hamer summed up the feelings of most when she said, “we didn’t come all this way for no two seats!”\textsuperscript{34} That was not quite the end of it, though. Using credentials borrowed from sympathetic delegates from other states, a contingent of MFDP members gained access to the convention floor and staged a sit-in in the Mississippi section. The sight of black Mississippians being carried from the hall by uniformed, white security officers was but the ultimate dramatic denouement to Freedom Summer.

For all the public spectacle of Atlantic City, however, the significant fallout from the convention challenge played out elsewhere and largely in private. Any chance of an actual physical showdown between the two delegations evaporated early on when the lily-white party regulars packed up and headed home, incensed at the support enjoyed by the MFDP within the Party. Notwithstanding his mastery of back-room politics, Johnson’s efforts to hold his fractious party together came to naught. After returning to the fold following the abortive States Rights challenge of 1948, the South was in open revolt once again. But this time, instead of supporting a third party candidate, disaffected white southerners did the unthinkable and cast their votes for the once despised Republican Party. The 1964 electoral map shows that Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina joined Goldwater’s home state of Arizona as the only states to buck Johnson’s landslide triumph in November.

\textsuperscript{32} Harris 1982, p.74
\textsuperscript{33} Quoted in Romaine 1970, p.335-336
\textsuperscript{34} Quoted in Carson 1981, p.126
Figure 3.8 1964 Presidential Election

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Party</th>
<th>Presidential Nom.</th>
<th>VP Nom.</th>
<th>Electoral #</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Popular #</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>Lyndon B. Johnson</td>
<td>Hubert H. Humphrey</td>
<td>486</td>
<td>90.3</td>
<td>43,129,968</td>
<td>61.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>Barry Goldwater</td>
<td>William E. Miller</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>27,178,188</td>
<td>38.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UCSB American Presidency Project

Figure 3.9 1956 Presidential Election

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Party</th>
<th>Presidential Nom.</th>
<th>VP Nom.</th>
<th>Electoral #</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Popular #</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>Dwight D. Eisenhower</td>
<td>Richard M. Nixon</td>
<td>457</td>
<td>86.1</td>
<td>35,690,472</td>
<td>57.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>Adlai Stevenson</td>
<td>Estes Kefauver</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>26,022,752</td>
<td>42.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UCSB American Presidency Project
The more telling visual, however, comes from comparing the 1964 map to its 1956 counterpart, the latter showing Eisenhower’s equally lopsided win in that year. In 1956 the “solid South” holds true to its historic allegiance to the Democratic Party, even in the face of Eisenhower’s sweep of the rest of the country. Eight years later, the South remains out of step with the nation, but in a way that no one could have imagined in 1956. The votes of the Deep South now belong to the Republican Party and more tellingly to its conservative, anti-civil rights candidate, Barry Goldwater. The magnitude of LBJ’s stunning triumph in 1964 may have obscured the revolution for most Americans, but the full implications of the electoral realignment hinted at in the 1964 returns were not lost on everyone. This brings us to the second story we promised earlier. It turns out the Democrats weren’t the only party moving decisively away from the ideological middle in the mid-60s.

The GOP Looks South and Moves Right

Even as the Democratic Party was being pushed sharply left by the civil rights movement, the GOP was moving in the opposite direction. Numerous commentators have, in fact, noted the significance of the Republican shift, attributing it largely to Nixon’s aggressive courtship of the white South in his successful 1968 bid for the White House.35 We too assign great importance to the 1968 race and to the politics of racial reaction that marked Nixon’s first term in office and accordingly, devote significant attention to both episodes below. Our analysis of the Republican shift to the right, however, differs from the previous accounts in two crucial respects. First, we argue that the shift was underway much earlier than the standard account suggests. Second, we see the same movement-party dynamic at work in the Republican shift that we emphasized in our analysis of the leftward movement of the Democrats. That is, the GOP also shifts its ideological center of gravity in response to the force of social movement activity, this time on the right. The principal movement occasioning the shift is the “white resistance” countermovement that develops in response to the civil rights struggle, first in the South, but evolving into a nationwide “white backlash” as the decade progresses. Of great importance in helping to link and diffuse white resistance from south to north are the presidential challenges mounted by Alabama Governor, George Wallace in 1964 and 1968. These challenges will come in for special attention in our account of the Republican shift to the right during the decade.

Even if it is more amorphous and less self-consciously a movement than civil rights, we see the national “white resistance” counter-movement having much the same impact on the GOP as the freedom struggle does on the Democrats. Locked in a contentious embrace throughout the decade (and beyond), these two linked struggles push the major parties steadily off center. In short, nothing serves to undermine the longstanding dominance of moderate centrists in both parties more than the centrifugal force of racial contention over the course of the 1960s. There was, however, a second grass roots movement that aided and abetted the rightward shift of the GOP. Indeed, this second movement preceded the onset of “white backlash” nationwide and probably helped to condition its rise. We would be remiss if, before devoting the balance of the chapter to a detailed account of “white backlash,” we failed to acknowledge the significance of this earlier grass roots effort.

35 Edsall and Edsall 1992; Carmines and Stimson 1989
Thunder on the Right: The Draft Goldwater Movement – At the time, Goldwater’s sound thrashing at the hands of Johnson in 1964 seemed to affirm the resolve of the medium voter to punish any presidential candidate that dared to stray too far from the middle of the ideological continuum of U.S. politics. A half-century of historical perspective, however, would seem to support a very different interpretation of that year’s race and the movement, which preceded it. It now seems clear that Goldwater’s candidacy represents an important early source of centrifugal pressure that helps to set in motion the ideological makeover so evident in today’s Republican Party. Moreover, consistent with the overall argument advanced here, it is pressure that reflects not so much conventional party politics, as the return of social movements to American political and social life.

As recounted by Theodore White (1965), the foremost historian of the 1964 presidential contest, Goldwater’s 1964 bid for the White House was born in the run up to the 1960 general election and with virtually no input from the candidate himself. Instead a specific incident in the race for the 1960 GOP nominee so angered conservatives as to trigger the beginnings of what would become the draft Goldwater movement. Dubbed the Compact of 5th Avenue, the triggering incident involved a meeting in New York between the presumptive Republican nominee, Richard Nixon, and his chief challenger, liberal GOP stalwart, Nelson Rockefeller. The meeting was born of Rockefeller’s threat to mount a floor fight at the convention in opposition to what he saw as the overly conservative substance of the preliminary draft of that year’s party platform. Fearing what that would do to party unity, Nixon flew to New York and worked with Rockefeller to substantially modify and mute the conservative tenor of the platform, especially on the critical issue of race.

Furious at the back room nature of the Nixon/Rockefeller “deal,” at the convention just days later conservatives importuned Goldwater to challenge the Nixon nomination. In the end, the lateness of the hour doomed the effort, but not before the seeds of the later draft Goldwater movement had been sown. Cohen et al. pick up the story from there: “[t]he principal agent of this movement was a former [Republican presidential candidate Thomas] Dewey operative named F. Clinton White. White worked loyally for Eisenhower in 1952 and Nixon in 1960, but became disgusted by the ‘me-too Republicanism’ of those leaders.”36 It was White who resolved to build a grass-roots movement to remake the ideological character of the GOP; or as he announced at the first national gathering of his group, “[w]e’re going to take over the Republican Party. . . . and make it the conservative instrument of American politics.”37 If this sounds eerily similar to the goal of today’s Tea Party adherents, the comparison is strictly intentional. The point is, while retrospective accounts of Goldwater’s ’64 presidential bid tend to focus almost exclusively on the candidate, it was the movement that largely made the candidate, rather than the other way around. Working tirelessly from 1961 to 1964, White built a grass roots movement of conservative activists who shared his vision of a transformed Republican Party and the hope of drafting Goldwater to serve as the movement’s standard bearer in ’64. In the end, they were able to overcome Goldwater’s initial coolness to the idea, with him signing on to the campaign in late 1963. Quoting approvingly from White’s obituary in the New York Times, Cohen et al. reject the conventional wisdom that Goldwater’s was a “candidate-centered”

36 Cohen et al. 2008, p.140
37 Quoted in Middendorf 2006, p.15
campaign, seeing it instead as very much a grass roots movement-based effort. As the New York Times reported: “The Goldwater movement germinated in 1961, when Mr. White gathered a cadre of conservatives for a private meeting in a Chicago motel. They decided to seek ideological control of the party and chose Senator Goldwater of Arizona as their nominee, although he initially spurned the idea.”

Notwithstanding Johnson’s landslide win that November, the Goldwater movement had the effect of moving the party significantly to the right. It did so in at least four important ways. For starters, the movement brought countless new conservative recruits into theGOP. Second, it left behind a loose network of conservative groups and individual activists that simply hadn’t been there before, making later mobilizing efforts by the right easier to mount. Third, the movement gave powerful voice to those frustrated by what they saw as the failure of the party to articulate an ideology distinctive from the dominant Democratic liberalism of the era. Finally, in his stark opposition to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and general critique of federal “meddling” in this area, Goldwater sent a powerful message to racial conservatives, not only in the south, but the nation as a whole, encouraging the shift from regional “resistance” to national “backlash.”

Before we take up this critically important second movement, we first document the magnitude and early onset of the GOP shift to the right on racial matters.

The Shift Begins - It is now commonplace to lament the lack of a moderate, centrist wing of the Republican Party. Forget moderates, we wager that most readers would be shocked to learn that not so long ago the great majority of card carrying racial liberals in Congress were Republicans. To revisit the striking finding reported above: only four of the forty-six Republican senators in the 85th Congress (1957-59) had conservative voting records on civil rights matters. Put another way, exactly two-thirds of the sixty-three senators coded as racial liberals by Carmine and Stimson were Republicans. The popular understanding that decisive federal enactment of civil rights reform in this era was a Democratic accomplishment is simply wrong. Yes, a host of liberal Democrats contributed mightily to the key legislative victories of the period. At the same time, it was the determined opposition of conservative, segregationist Democrats that delayed meaningful reform for decades. Republicans, by contrast, were consistently more pro-civil rights in the immediate postwar period. The question remains: how, when, and why did this begin to change?

In this over brief accounting of the contributions of the two parties to the civil rights revolution, there is a hint of one of the early precipitants of the conservative turn in the Republican Party. We note that Democrats were every bit as central to resistance to early efforts at racial reform as they were later to civil rights gains. The point is, before any breakthrough on the issue could occur, the power and influence the Dixiecrats exercised over the Party had to be broken. And this required a strengthening of the northern, liberal labor wing of the Party. This came via the election of strong cohorts of liberal Democrats in the late 1950s and early 60s. Ironically, the losers in the great majority of these cases were Republicans, racially liberal Republicans. Consider the highly consequential example of the 1958 Senate races, which were

38 Cohen et al. 2008
39 Lambert 1993, p.A34
40 Carmine and Stimson 1989, p.69
to dramatically alter the previously discussed partisan distribution of “racial liberals” in that chamber. Carmines and Stimson explain the aggregate significance of that year’s races:

. . . eleven Republicans were replaced by Democrats; ten were racial liberals, each in turn replaced by a liberal Democrat. The forty-two Republicans to twenty-one Democrats found in the liberal ranks of the Eighty-fifth Senate became thirty-two to thirty-one in the Eighty-sixth Senate purely by virtue of interparty electoral change. . . . That single election ended the pattern of greater Republican liberalism on race. . . . Liberal Republicans were never again the dominant force in the civil rights coalition.41

Nor was this election a one-time aberration. Instead the replacement of moderate-liberal Republican senators by more liberal Democratic challengers continued until at least 1966. This prompts us to underscore a very important point. The dramatic transformation of the partisan landscape of racial politics at issue here was the product of significant compositional changes in both parties. We begin with the Democrats. Reflecting the high water mark of postwar liberalism and the party’s sharp shift leftward after 1960, waves of newly minted liberal Democrats entered the House and Senate from 1958 through the end of the sixties. As we saw in 1958, in a good many cases, these liberal Democrats replaced liberal to moderate Republicans; in others they claimed spots held previously by more moderate Democrats. Either way, the net effect was to strengthen the northern liberal wing of the party and further marginalize the Dixiecrats.

The transformative dynamics within the GOP were a bit more complicated. Obviously, the loss of liberal Republican House and Senate seats to the Democrats had significant compositional implications for the GOP as well, thinning the Congressional ranks of racially liberal Republicans, even as it increased their numbers among Democrats. But that is not the whole story. The number of liberal Republican senators dropped from 42 to just 10 between the 85th and 89th Congresses. There is probably no single factor responsible for the party’s early shift to the right, though as we argued above, the Goldwater campaign has to be accounted a major influence on the process. And while it is true that Goldwater’s brand of conservatism was roundly rejected by the nation’s voters in 1964, it still says something about the centrifugal movement pressures developing within the GOP that he secured the nomination in the first place.

As improbable as it sounds, Goldwater’s defeat in ‘64 may even have reinforced the strategic wisdom of a general shift to the right, even in the face of Johnson’s landslide victory. How could that be? Two points are worth making; one familiar, one not. The familiar point has to do with the powerful symbolism and strategic implications that attached to the Democrat’s loss of the “solid South” in 1964. Even if the significance of the defection wasn’t apparent to the electorate, it certainly wasn’t lost on strategists in both parties. The second, less familiar, point is perhaps even more important. With liberal Democrats routinely capturing liberal to moderate Republican seats and Johnson claiming a still-record 94 percent of the black vote in 1964, it must have occurred to some that tacking leftward was suicidal. Quite simply, by the early 1960s the Republicans had no comparative advantage when it came to courting liberal or black voters.

41 Carmines and Stimson 1989, p.70
Better to move to the right, especially in light of the white South’s growing disaffection with the Democratic Party. Nor was this impulse to move right just a matter of strategic calculus. Ideological opposition to what had become known as “me-too Republicanism”—that is the tendency of postwar Republicans to mirror the central policy preferences of centrist Democrats—was very much on the rise among at least some grass roots Republicans in the early 1960s. Indeed, as noted above, nothing fueled the rise of the draft Goldwater movement more than this anger at the failure of the GOP to differentiate its policies from those of its Democratic opponents.

The speed with which these complex dynamics transformed the two parties is captured in table 3.3, which compares the balance of racial liberals and conservatives in the two parties in the Eighty-fifth (1957-59) and Eighty-ninth (1965-67) Senates.

### Table 3.3 Racial Liberalism of the 85th (1957-59) and 89th (1965-67) Congresses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>85th Congress</th>
<th></th>
<th>89th Congress</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Liberal Democrats: 21</td>
<td>Liberal Republicans: 42</td>
<td>Liberal Democrats: 45</td>
<td>Liberal Republicans: 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conservative Democrats: 27</td>
<td>Conservative Republicans: 4</td>
<td>Conservative Democrats: 21</td>
<td>Conservative Republicans: 22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Carmines and Stimson, 1989, Table 3.3 (p.69) and Table 3.4 (p.72)

### Table 3.4 Congressional Voting in the House on 1964 and 1966 Civil Rights Bills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1964 Civil Rights Act</th>
<th></th>
<th>1966 Fair Housing Bill</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>House Democrats: 153 Yes; 91 No</td>
<td>House Republicans: 136 Yes; 35 No</td>
<td>House Democrats: 183 Yes; 95 No</td>
<td>House Republicans: 76 Yes; 62 No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: govtrack.us

The number of racial liberals among the Democratic senators more than doubled between the Eighty-five and Eighty-ninth sessions of Congress. Over the same period of time, the number of Republicans senators with conservative voting records on civil rights measures increased more than five fold from four to twenty-two. While racial liberals made up nearly 90 percent of all Republicans in the Senate in 1957-59, their proportion had dwindled to just 30 percent a scant eight years later. Bottom line: for all the significance attributed to Nixon’s “breakthrough” election in 1968, a discernible rightward shift was evident in the party’s Congressional delegation earlier in the decade.

The impact of the ascendant conservatism within the GOP was clearly evident in 1966 when Lyndon Johnson sought Congressional support for a third major civil rights bill, this one focused on the issue of fair housing. In Table 3.4 we compare partisan voting in the House on the 1964 Civil Rights Act with the outcome two years later on the failed fair housing bill.

While House Democrats remain overwhelmingly committed to civil rights reform in both years, the change in the disposition of the Republican delegation is striking. While the share of House Democrats voting for the legislation is actually greater in 1966 than in 1964, only slightly more than half of their Republican counterparts vote for the bill in 1966, compared to better than 80 percent two years earlier. The bigger—and more consequential—change, however, takes place in the Senate. Table 3.5 compares partisan voting in the Senate on the 1964 Civil Rights Act with the vote taken in 1966 on a cloture motion that would have ended debate
on the aforementioned fair housing bill and allowed the legislation to come to the floor for a vote.

Table 3.5 Congressional Voting in the Senate on 1964 and 1966 Civil Rights Bills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Act/Amendment</th>
<th>Senate Democrats</th>
<th>Senate Republicans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Civil Rights Act</td>
<td>46 Yes; 21 No</td>
<td>27 Yes; 6 No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Cloture Motion on Fair Housing Bill</td>
<td>42 Yes; 21 No</td>
<td>12 Yes; 21 No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: govtrack.us

In 1964, 27 of 33 Republican Senators voted for the Civil Rights Act, paving the way for passage of the landmark bill by a decisive 73-27 margin. Two years later, 21 of 33 GOP Senators voted against the cloture motion, effectively killing the measure, which the House had already approved by a whopping 102 vote margin (259-157). This outcome marked a distinctive new dynamic in Congressional voting on racial matters. Prior to 1957, the power of southern Democrats—in both the Party and Congress—had ruled out any hope of meaningful legislation on racial matters. But in 1957 enough Democrats had joined with Republicans to finally break the stranglehold of the Dixiecrats and pass that year’s symbolically important Civil Rights Act. This ushered in a period of sustained Congressional action in the area, with four major bills signed into law in a scant eight years. Just to be clear on the partisan dynamics in all of this, Republican support for civil rights reform had been something of a constant from the late 1930s to the mid-60s. It was Southern Democratic intransigence on the “Negro question” that had blocked reform until the 1957 breakthrough. With the death of the 1966 bill, however, the role of the two parties had been reversed. Going forward, the two parties would once again be at loggerheads on the issue; now, however, it would be Congressional Republicans who typically opposed progressive action in the area.

“White Backlash” – If some of the shift to the right by the GOP in this period was an inadvertent result of the capture of moderate-liberal Republican seats by more liberal Democratic candidates, there was a far more important, strategic dynamic emerging as well. And it too precedes Nixon’s breakthrough victory in 1968. Indeed, Nixon’s much ballyhooed “southern strategy” in that year’s race is more accurately seen as a reflection of the emerging dynamic than a bold new direction on his part. What factors, events, or persons shaped this developing strategic orientation? To us, no influence is as important in this regard as the racially conservative white countermovement, or “white resistance movement” that develops—first in the South in the early 1960s, but spreading to the rest of the country in the mid to late 60s—in opposition to the African-American freedom struggle in both its traditional civil rights and increasingly threatening “black power” incarnations.

Given its intensity at the time and, more importantly, its significant long-term political and electoral consequences, it is remarkable to us that this movement is largely forgotten today and certainly not invoked as an important factor by those seeking to understand the political economy of the contemporary U.S. We hope to remedy that neglect here. In our view, if it was the civil rights struggle that largely pushed the Democrats left in the early to mid-60s, then it was the mobilized force of this amorphous “white backlash” that, more than anything, encouraged the sharp shift to the right by the Republicans in the mid to late 60s and beyond. Indeed, one of the central sources of continuity linking the Republican Party that emerged under Nixon in the late
60s and early 70s with the GOP of today is a sustained politics of racial reaction. We will have much more to say about this below and in subsequent chapters. But it is important to understand the origins of the distinctive racial conservatism that has defined the GOP for nearly a half a century. Its origins, we contend, are bound up with the aforementioned white resistance movement and especially with its spread to the North in the mid to late 1960s.

The white countermovement began, however, as a strictly southern segregationist response to the resurgent civil rights movement. The close connection between these two movements can be seen in figure 3.10, which shows the monthly ebb and flow of both civil rights and segregationist actions during the heyday of the struggle in the South.42

![Figure 3.10 Civil Rights Movement and Counter Movement Actions, 1961-1965](image)

*Source: New York Times*

The actions reflected in the figure include both the iconic campaigns orchestrated by civil rights forces (e.g. the sit-ins, Selma, Birmingham, the Freedom Rides) and the infamous acts of resistance offered up by segregationists in response to the threat posed by the movement (e.g. fire hoses and police dogs in Birmingham, the burning of black churches, the murders of Evers, Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner). What analysts have almost entirely missed, however, is the extent to which the southern segregationist countermovement morphed into and inspired the more generalized nation-wide “white backlash” of the mid to late-1960s. Make no mistake about it; these two forms of resistance were definitely linked, if not organizationally than in intent—resistance to integration—and underlying racial antipathy. And no figure was more crucial to this linkage than the South’s most celebrated (and reviled) defender of “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever,” Alabama Governor, George Wallace.

42 Indeed 94 percent of the actions represented in the figure took place in the states of the former Confederacy (McAdam 1999).
Wallace burst on to the national scene in 1963, first by issuing the aforementioned rallying cry during his inaugural address as governor in January of that year. That was nothing, however, compared to his follow up of June 11 when he “stood in the school house door”—actually the entrance to Foster Auditorium on the campus of the University of Alabama—to bar the admission of the first two African-American students in school history. The act was, of course, futile, with the students admitted to campus with little fanfare the following day. Wallace, however, had achieved his political aim; not only enhancing his popularity as governor, but emerging overnight as the most potent symbol of racial resistance in the country. He showed just how “potent” when he shocked both parties and mainstream political analysts by successfully challenging the popular sitting president of his own party—LBJ—in three northern primaries in the run up to the 1964 general election. When Wallace announced he was entering the April Wisconsin primary, most mainstream observers saw it as something of a joke, but the laughing stopped when he captured a third of the vote there. Properly chastened by Wallace’s success in Wisconsin, the Democratic establishment mobilized to stop him in Indiana, but he still polled thirty percent in the state. For his final act, he nearly upset Johnson in Maryland, publicly attributing has narrow defeat to “the nigger voting bloc.” Johnson’s nomination, of course, was never in danger. Still, the fact that at the height of LBJ’s popularity, an unrepentant segregationist could attract the support of between thirty and fifty percent of registered Democratic voters in three northern states, was nothing short of a revelation to political strategists in both parties. At least a few Democrats began to understand the electoral costs of the party’s full on embrace of civil rights reform, while for their part many Republicans—including Barry Goldwater—began to openly call for a shift to the right to capture the Wallace vote and make in-roads in the no longer “solid South.” In the wake of Wallace’s surprising showing in the North and Goldwater’s capture of the Deep South in the general election, GOP calls to look south and move right were destined to grow louder and more frequent, especially as the “white backlash” took hold in the rest of the country.

White Resistance Spreads Northward – Before we continue with our chronological narrative, we would do well to pause and consider the nature of the white countermovement to the civil rights revolution as it developed in the early to mid-1960s. Some may even object to calling this diffuse resistance a “movement” at all, arguing that it lacked the organization and litany of segregationist actions evident in the South. We disagree. Most scholarly definitions of social movements read something like the following: social movements represent loosely organized, sustained efforts to promote or resist change in society and which depend, at least in part, on recourse to non-institutionalized forms of collective action. By this definition, we can certainly characterize the nationwide “white backlash” to the civil rights struggle as a movement. While it is true that the movement never spawned overarching national organizations, few movements ever do. Most are aggregations of local groups involved in local struggles over broadly similar issues. In point of fact, there were a handful of national organizations involved in the movement, groups like the Ku Klux Klan, the John Birch Society and, for a brief period of time, the National

43 The lie in all the drama of that long ago day in Tuscaloosa was that the “confrontation” had been scripted in advance by Wallace in private conversation with John and Bobby Kennedy. The latter agreed to allow Wallace to “stand in the school house door”—as he had promised he would do during his January inaugural address—if he agreed to step quietly aside the following day. He did, but not before the subterfuge allowed him to emerge as the hero of the embryonic white resistance movement.
Association for the Advancement of White People. More often the movement spawned local
groups in response to what were perceived to be threats to jobs, schools, and neighborhoods
posed by civil rights “agitators,” or simply appropriated existing organizations—associations of
realtors, school boards, city councils, churches—in the service of the struggle.

There was also no shortage of grass roots actions taken to advance movement aims. And
let’s be clear, while the overall level of white violence that characterized resistance in the north
was considerably lower than that seen in the Jim Crow south, it was hardly non-existent. Just
ask the open housing marchers in Cicero, Illinois in 1966 who were met by bricks and bottles,
when Martin Luther King sought, unsuccessfully, to apply the tactics of the southern civil rights
struggle to the problem of residential segregation in the north. Or ask school and law
enforcement personnel about the years of riots and mass protests triggered by a 1974 court
ordered school bussing plan in South Boston. In fact, there was no shortage of reactive white
violence or disruptive protest in the north. More often, however, the tactics of choice involved
more subtle and/or institutionalized strategies, ranging from “white flight,” to legal challenges, to
collusion between elected officials and union leaders. If the resulting patchwork of local groups
and myriad strategies lacked the drama and narrative coherence of the pitched battles we saw in
the South, it’s only because the national struggle was more geographically dispersed and
temporally prolonged than the far narrower segregationist resistance movement of the early
1960s. In fact, as we will argue in chapter 7, the movement is alive and well in the U.S. today.

Our question here though, is when do we account the rise of the movement in the 1960s?
It is hard to say exactly when the American public’s broad sympathy for the civil rights struggle
moved from confusion and dismay to out and out resistance, but Goldwater’s presidential bid
and Wallace’s showing also in 1964 made it clear that significant opposition was already in
place. But just as clearly—and with Wallace as a compelling legitimating symbol—the
“backlash” accelerated in the two-year period between Johnson’s triumphant victory and the
mid-term elections of 1966. No doubt some of the increased resistance owed to the events of the
day. It seemed as if every few weeks during that span saw some new event, some alarming new
headline that tapped into white America’s deep seated and escalating fear of African-Americans.
A short, suggestive list of events from those years will help to make the point:

• Barely two weeks into Johnson’s first full term came the violence in Selma and the
  largest civil rights campaign to date;

• Almost before the ink was dry on the Voting Rights Act of 1965, federal registrars began
  fanning out around the South, wresting control of voter registration from defiant southern
  officials, as the white South braced for the loss of political control they feared would
  follow;

• Just five days after LBJ signed the Voting Rights Act into law, the nation watched in
  horror as the Watts Riot exploded in Los Angeles. When it finally ran out of steam six
  days later, the riot had claimed 34 lives and left another 1,032 injured;

• At a rally in Greenwood, Mississippi on June 16, 1966, Stokely Carmichael electrified
  many in the black community, while sowing fear in white America, by calling for the
  mobilization of “black power;”
• At the same time Carmichael was raising the specter of “black power” in the South, Martin Luther King was heightening white fears in the North by staging open housing marches in the white suburbs of Chicago;

• On October 16, 1966, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California.

To say that the relationship between white America and the civil rights struggle had changed between 1964 and 1966 would be a serious understatement. Whereas Johnson’s public commitment to JFKs civil rights agenda had clearly aided his landslide win in 1964, Democratic candidates in 1966 now found themselves the victims of the much-heralded “white backlash.” By that year’s mid-term elections, the degree of racial polarization in the country had grown to such an extent that for a candidate to openly court the black vote was to invite significant defections among his or her white constituents. The imprint of the backlash on the 1966 elections was unmistakable. As pollsters Brink and Harris write: “the backlash vote of 1966 helped install sizeable numbers of conservative congressmen who threaten even the modest goals of the Great Society.”

Much the same view was expressed by Killian: “[t]he congressional elections of 1966 did not reveal a growing alliance between the ‘have nots’. . . . of the United States. Instead, they reflected the existence of a backlash against the welfare programs of the Great Society.”

Many contests for statewide office were shaped by these same sentiments. A prime example was California’s gubernatorial race, in which a liberal Democrat, Pat Brown, was defeated by conservative Republican, Ronald Reagan. And as survey results revealed, the success of the Reagan candidacy owed much to the politics of racial reaction. Specifically, on the question of whether incumbent Governor Brown had been too “soft” in his handling of the riots and racial unrest in general, California voters split roughly 50-50 on the survey. Of those who were critical of him on the issue, however, nine of ten voted for Reagan. In the view of the pollsters, “the California outcome could have been foretold on the single issue of race alone….the facts. . . .prove that three out of four people who voted for Reagan found it easier to do so because they felt they could register a protest in varying forms to the riots and racial unrest that had taken place.”

Moreover, as the authors go on to note, the analysis of election returns from other key industrial states—notably Michigan and Illinois—showed the same general pattern evident in California.

The specific electoral gains enjoyed by conservative Republicans in 1966, however, were less damaging to long-term Democratic prospects than the demographics reflected in these wins. More significant were the mass defections from the traditional New Deal coalition that had allowed Democrats to dominate presidential politics since 1932. Chief among these defectors were the white urban ethnic groups of the industrial North. By 1966 the loyalty of these groups to the Democratic Party had been rendered tenuous by the shift of racial unrest from the South to the very cities in which they lived. Worried by northern “urban disorders” and the threat of open-housing marches in their neighborhoods, these groups were no longer willing, en masse, to

---

44 Brink and Harris 1967, p.182
45 Killian 1975, p.132
46 Brink and Harris 1967, p.111
47 Ibid, p.111-114
support a party that had come to be identified with an urban black underclass that they saw as pushing too fast for racial change. Writing in 1964, Samuel Lubell accurately forecast this trend:

In the past, Democratic strategists have assumed that the civil rights issue helped hold together the ‘big city’ vote. This may have been a valid political strategy as long as the civil rights cause appeared mainly a matter of improving the treatment of Negroes in the South.

But the new demands of Northern Negro militants have posed sharp conflicts with what many white voters see as their own rights. Agitation over civil rights. . . .could alienate enough white voters to disrupt the Democratic majorities in the urban areas.\(^{48}\)

In 1966 Lubell’s prediction came true. Far from solidifying the Democratic hold on the urban vote, the racial issue tended to polarize the various components of their traditional urban coalition. While the black vote held firm, the white ethnics abandoned the party in droves. Brink and Harris recount some of the major defections: “in Illinois, the Polish and Eastern European precincts showed a precipitous drop of 17 points in the Democratic vote from two years before, and a full 22 points off the high-water mark of 75 percent registered for Kennedy six years earlier. In Ohio, Polish precincts plummeted to 44 percent Democratic in the contest for governor there, off 39 points from 1964 and 45 below JFK’s showing in 1960.”\(^{49}\) These were significant electoral losses. As a result of these defections, there occurred a general devaluation of the black vote, as political strategists of both parties came to weigh the advantages of courting the black electorate against the costs of antagonizing a large and ever growing segment of the white population.

Events between 1966 and 1968 did nothing to reverse the general trend discussed above. If anything, the increased frequency and destructiveness of the riots in 1967 and 1968, the full flowering of the black power movement in these years, combined on the other side with the growing use of an inflammatory “law and order” rhetoric by white politicians, accelerated the racial polarization already evident in the 1966 elections. As the 1968 presidential contest drew near, two candidates moved aggressively to exploit this dramatic shift in the political landscape. Both would have been seen as wildly improbable candidates just a few years earlier, but their shrewd understanding of the changing nature of American racial politics gave them a significant strategic edge heading into the 1968 contest.

The Republican nominee, Richard Nixon, was thought to have been washed up as a serious contender when he was soundly beaten by Pat Brown in the 1962 California gubernatorial race. And yet, here he was six years later, running for president on what he termed his “southern strategy.” While the Democrats had lost the Deep South in 1964, Nixon now believed that increasing racial polarization in the country rendered the entire region up for grabs. By distancing himself from the civil rights struggle and reminding voters of the close connection between blacks and the Democratic Party, Nixon hoped to make big inroads in the region while capitalizing on traditional Republican strength in the West and Midwest.

If Nixon’s candidacy was surprising, George Wallace’s third party challenge was anything but. First and foremost, there was his strong showing in the 1964 Democratic primaries. Beyond that, however, the deepening divisions within the country, and increasing

---

\(^{48}\) Samuel Lubell 1964, p.127-128

\(^{49}\) Brink and Harris 1967, p.108
anger at urban riots, court ordered bussing, and general lawlessness made Wallace a more formidable candidate in ’68 than he had been four years earlier. Though still a hero to the white South, Wallace now enjoyed considerable support throughout the country and especially among the embattled white working class of the industrial North. Like Nixon, Wallace too had taken notice of the deepening racial divisions nationwide, but especially the loss of the once “solid South” by the Democrats four years earlier. As a Dixiecrat himself, Wallace aimed to appeal to his regional base, while reaching out to disaffected whites elsewhere in the country.

Standing in the way of these two men was the Democratic nominee, Hubert Humphrey. It would be difficult, however, to think of any presidential candidate from the incumbent party in American history who went into the election burdened by more “negatives” than Humphrey in ‘68. For starters, it took the assassination of Robert Kennedy to open the door for Humphrey’s nomination in the first place. As a result, many in Humphrey’s own party saw him as an illegitimate candidate, as effectively usurping a nomination that, by rights, should have gone to Kennedy, or even the early antiwar candidate, Eugene McCarthy. More importantly, as Johnson’s VP, Humphrey was tainted both by the administration’s prosecution of the War in Vietnam and its increasingly unpopular social programs, including its association with the civil rights movement. Finally, as if Humphrey needed anything else to overcome, there was the almost surreal spectacle of violence and mass unrest that accompanied that year’s Democratic Convention in Chicago. On the eve of the election, it seemed as if Humphrey’s best chance might come from Nixon and Wallace splitting the white southern vote, allowing the Democrat to squeak by with the slimmest electoral plurality. It didn’t quite work out that way. As the electoral map for that year shows, Nixon and Wallace did indeed wind up splitting the South, with Wallace prevailing in the Deep South and Nixon capturing most of the border states.
In the end, though, the division was not enough to give Wallace the electoral votes needed to deny the outright victory to the two major parties and to force, as he had hoped, the House of Representatives to resolve the matter. Nixon edged Humphrey by the narrowest of margins, 43.4 to 42.7 percent. As both parties looked to the future, however, it wasn’t the slim gap between Nixon and Humphrey on which they were focused, but rather the overwhelming majority represented by the combined votes cast for Nixon and Wallace. The significance of the Wallace candidacy, and the broader white resistance movement he represented, for the future electoral prospects of both parties was clear on the face of the 1968 election returns. With the two major parties evenly dividing 86 percent of the popular vote, the remaining fourteen percent, which had gone for Wallace, clearly loomed as the balance of power in future elections. As one noted analyst wrote in the wake of the election, “it is obvious to any ‘rational’ politician hoping to maximize votes in 1970 or 1972 that there are several times more votes to be gained by leaning toward Wallace than by leaning toward [Eugene] McCarthy.”

For the Republicans, their narrow victory suggested that the party’s future lay not in the 43 percent of the popular vote Nixon received but in the 57 percent he shared with Wallace. Republican strategists believed this figure represented a dominant conservative majority that, if successfully tapped, could insure GOP control of the White House for years to come. To build this decisive majority, however, the GOP would need to attract a large number of Wallace’s core southern supporters. This would not be easy. While Nixon and the Republicans had claimed the lion’s share of the region’s electoral votes for the first time in history, his margins had been razor thin in a number of states; less than 4 percentage points over Wallace in Tennessee, and under 6 in South Carolina. If he was to improve on his overall margin of victory, Nixon would need to make even deeper inroads in the South in 1972. The centrifugal force of the Wallace candidacy and the broader white resistance movement on Nixon and the GOP would be evident within months of the latter’s ascension to the White House.

Courting Racial Conservatives: Nixon’s First Term in Office - As Vice-President under Eisenhower and as JFK’s opponent in the 1960 presidential contest, Richard Nixon had, by the Republican standards of the day, earned a reputation for being moderate to liberal on racial matters. President Nixon, on the other hand, was anything but, instead embracing a reactionary brand of racial conservatism almost immediately upon taking office. To understand this transformation, we need only revisit the electoral challenge confronting Nixon coming off his narrow win in 1968. Ever the savvy opportunist, Nixon clearly understood that his chances of being reelected in 1972 would depend on his ability to solidify his southern base by appealing to Wallace’s supporters. And this meant finding a way to exploit racial divisions without appearing to be racist. In his 1969 book, The Emerging Republican Majority, Nixon adviser, Kevin Phillips, articulated the strategy in all its cynical brilliance. Describing the ’68 Wallace movement as a “way station” for disgruntled Dixiecrats not quite ready to embrace the Republican Party, Phillips then goes on to lay out the racial politics that he is confident will drive more southern whites into the GOP. He writes: “The principal force which broke up the Democratic. . . . coalition is the Negro socioeconomic revolution and the liberal Democratic ideological inability to cope with it. ‘Great Society’ programs aligned that party with many

Converse et al. 1969, p.1105
Negro demands but the party was unable to defuse the racial tension sundering the nation.”

The “emerging Republican majority” of his title is to come from creating a home for disaffected Dixiecrats and other whites threatened by the “Negro socioeconomic revolution.”

Later in the book, Phillips underscores the critical importance of defending black voting rights in the South, though not for the principled reason one might expect. As he explains: “maintenance of Negro voting rights [in the South] is essential to the GOP. Unless Negroes continue to displace white Democratic organizations, the latter may remain viable as spokesmen for Deep Southern conservatism.” Translation: as long as southern blacks are free to register and take up residence in state Democratic organizations, white southerners will continue to be driven into the welcoming arms of the GOP. But for this to happen, the national party will also need to disavow the legacy of Lincoln and accommodate the conservative racial politics of the white South. Nixon spent much of his first term in office doing just that.

Among the very first issues Nixon was called upon to deal with as President was filling the Supreme Court vacancy created by the resignation of Abe Fortas early in 1969. In quick succession, Nixon nominated two conservative Southern judges, Clement Haynesworth, Jr. and G. Harrold Carswell, to fill the vacancy. Both men were burdened with controversial records on racial issues—Haynesworth with a series of votes against civil rights interests in key cases before the Fourth Circuit Court, and Carswell with his involvement in the conversion of a public golf course (under a court order to desegregate) into a private whites-only club.

Given their records, and with Democrats in firm control of both houses of Congress, there was very little chance of either nominee being confirmed. In the end, Nixon was forced to withdraw both nominees. It may well be, however, that Nixon anticipated this outcome and, given his long term electoral aims, wasn’t at all bothered by it. For the rebuff gave him the perfect opportunity to draw a sharp contrast between the pro-black, anti-Southern, liberal Democratic Party and the conservative racial principles of the new GOP. Barely two months into his term in office, Nixon seized on the opportunity afforded him by his withdrawal of the Carswell nomination, to issue the following symbolically pregnant statement:

I have reluctantly concluded, with the Senate presently constituted, I cannot nominate to the Supreme Court any federal appellate judge from the South who believes as I do in the strict construction of the Constitution. . . . I understand the bitter feeling of millions of Americans who live in the South about the act of regional discrimination that took place in the Senate yesterday. They have my assurances that the day will come when men like Judges Carswell and Haynesworth can and will sit on the high Court.

It would be hard to imagine a more transparent signal to southern whites regarding the brave new world of racial politics ushered in by Nixon’s victory. For Dixiecrats, it was a world turned upside down, with “their” Democratic Party now in the hands of newly minted black voters and the once dreaded “Party of Lincoln” advocating the posting of “strict constructionists” (read: segregationists) to the Supreme Court. To an increasing number of southern whites, the choice was clear.

51 Phillips 1969, p.37
52 Ibid, p.287
53 Edsall and Edsall 1992, p.82
54 Quoted in Edsall and Edsall 1992, p.82-83
For Nixon, the dust-up over his Supreme Court nominees was just the first of several opportunities afforded him to highlight the stark difference in the evolving racial politics of the two parties. Two other issues arose early in his first term that allowed him to curry favor, not just with Dixicrats, but white voters in all regions, frightened by the rhetoric of Black Power, and the threats they saw assertive blacks posing to their jobs, their neighborhoods and especially their schools. Once in office, Nixon acted quickly to align himself with racial conservatives on the increasingly controversial issue of school integration. Less than six months into his term, Nixon’s Departments of Justice and Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) jointly announced that they would no longer require school districts to comply with strict, court ordered timetables for integration. The announcement and subsequent Justice Department motion to delay desegregation marked “the first time since the start of the modern civil rights revolution [that the Department] had placed itself on the side of the white South against black plaintiffs.”  

As with the Haynesworth and Carswell controversies, in the end, Nixon was not able to make this particular policy change stick. In an October brief, the Supreme Court rejected the administration’s motion and reinstated the order requiring immediate adoption of court ordered desegregation plans. Once again, however, whatever substantive frustration the Court’s actions may have caused him, Nixon seized on the moment to unambiguously embrace the southern segregationists position on the matter. In the immediate aftermath of the Court ruling, Nixon warned “the many young liberal lawyers [in the Justice Department]” not to view the brief “as a carte blanche for them to run wild through the South enforcing compliance with extreme or punitive requirements. . . . formulated in Washington.”  No doubt the image of Nixon heroically interposing himself between an oppressive federal establishment and a defenseless region was purely intentional and designed to resonate with longstanding Southern grievances stemming from the War of Northern Aggression, Reconstruction, and federal intervention during the civil rights era. Nixon’s determined assault on court ordered bussing in the run up to the 1972 election certainly burnished his reputation on the issue of school desegregation, but his fundamental position on the matter had been forcefully set in year one of his presidency. Through all of his actions in this area Nixon, as the Edsalls so perceptively note, “succeeded in defining forced desegregation as the responsibility of the courts, not of his administration, and simultaneously declared that he supported a far more slow and cautious approach to integration than did the Supreme Court—a critical step in wedding 1968 Wallace voters to Nixon’s own re-election bid.”

On one final issue—voting rights—we see the same pattern of a conservative racial proposal by Nixon blocked at the federal level by determined liberal opposition, allowing him to further solidify his southern support by drawing a sharp contrast between the GOP position and aggressive civil rights advocacy by the Democrats. The specific issue at hand was the “preclearance” provision of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. The provision required states and local jurisdictions in the South to secure the approval of the Justice Department before implementing any changes in election laws or procedures. Given the creative penchant southern authorities had shown, since the end of Reconstruction, for devising ingenious rules to deny or limit the franchise to African-Americans, the preclearance provision remained essential to the realization of the aims of the ’65 Act. That is precisely why the region’s white political elite sought to

55 Edsall and Edsall 1992, p.82
56 Quoted in Ambrose 1989, p.316-17
57 Edsall and Edsall 1992, p.82
eliminate the provision. As black voter registration rates soared throughout the region—with especially dramatic gains in the Deep South—white politicians were increasingly drawn to legal and procedural subterfuges that would allow them to retain power in the face of declining numbers. By including a proposal to eliminate the preclearance provision in a broader bill he brought to Congress in 1969, Nixon clearly aligned himself with those whites who sought to maintain political supremacy in the South. Reflecting the sea change in the racial politics of the GOP since the passage of the original Voting Rights Act, the proposal to eliminate the preclearance provision initially survived a narrow vote in the House, with nearly three-quarters of all Republican House members—but only a third of all Democrats—voting in favor of the plan. The more liberal Senate, however, opposed the measure and in conference succeeded in getting the House to reverse its position. In the end, Congress voted to extend the Voting Rights Act—including the critical “preclearance” procedure—for another five years. Once again, however, “Nixon. . . .had realized his central goal, clearly aligning himself with the white South in a battle with the Democratic Congress, and distancing his own administration [and party] from a program of stringent federal enforcement.”

To say that Nixon’s efforts to court southern whites were rewarded would be an understatement. The results of the 1972 election make it clear just how successful Nixon was in winning over Wallace supporters and white voters in general. Not only did he carry every southern state—the first Republican candidate to do so—but he also claimed nearly two-thirds of all white voters. It turns out that Nixon’s much celebrated “silent majority” had a distinctly racial cast to it. This, of course, was by design. But it was Wallace’s candidacy and the more amorphous white resistance movement of the mid to late 1960s that motivated the racial politics of Nixon’s first term and moved the GOP ever more decisively to the right in the early 1970s.

Although nearly 50 years have elapsed since Nixon was first elected, one can hardly miss the eerie parallels between the preclearance issue then and now. In the late 60s, white elected officials in the South at all levels were scrambling to retain political control in the face of rapidly rising numbers of black voters. Had Nixon been able to do away with the preclearance requirement, the challenge confronting the region’s longstanding white political elite would have been eased considerably. All sorts of possibilities for creative redistricting or alterations in voting rules would have opened up, had the need to secure Justice Department approval for any such changes been eliminated. Fast forward to today: nationwide the GOP faces the challenge, not of newly registered black voters, but a shrinking white electorate and a rising tide of Democrat-aligned non-white voters. What hasn’t changed is the GOP response to this new demographic challenge. As before, their efforts to retain political and electoral control continue to turn on a steady stream of demographically gerrymandered districts and a flood of racially restrictive new voting laws. There is, however, another difference between these otherwise familiar efforts, then and now. Forty-three years after Nixon failed in his bid to overturn the preclearance requirement of the Voting Rights Act, the Supreme Court did just that by decreeing in *Shelby County, Alabama v. Holder, Attorney General et. al* that the formula used to determine which districts were subject to review was out of date and therefore invalid. The practical significance of the decision should be clear on its face. Heading into the 2014 midterms and 2016 general election, white racial conservatives are going to face much less federal “interference” in their efforts to fashion electoral districts and procedures motivated by a desire to mute the voice of Democratic leaning minority voters. The more things change, the more they remain the same.

Ironically, while the Supreme Court was among the institutions which acted to constrain Nixon’s efforts to reverse federal civil rights policy, it was the Court’s 2013 decision in *Shelby County v. Holder* which accomplished what Nixon had first sought to achieve 44 years earlier: invalidate the crucial “preclearance” provision of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. We will have much more to say about the worrisome implications of this reversal in the last chapter of the book.

58 Edsall and Edsall 1992, p.84
60 census.gov
Summing Up

The 1960s are, of course, already remembered as a period of significant social change in the United States. In our view, however, one of the most consequential changes to mark the era has gone largely unrecognized. Throughout most of American history, politics and the prospects for social change have been powerfully shaped by the interaction of social movements, parties, and governmental institutions. One of the striking features of the 1940s and 50s was the almost total absence of grass-roots movement activity. This unusual quiescence spared the major parties the normal challenge of having to manage mobilized movements at their ideological margins, allowing both to hew close to the moderate center of the left-right continuum. The result was a sustained period of unprecedented bi-partisan cooperation on the major issues of the day. This all changed in the 60s, however, with the dramatic return of social movements as a significant force in American life and politics. The chapter was given over to a detailed recounting of three movements and their effects on the Democrats and Republicans respectively. Here we revisit the two most consequential and tightly coupled of the movements.

Revitalized by the 1960 sit-in campaign, the civil rights movement roared back to life and over the next half dozen years put unrelenting pressure on the American state and two Democratic administrations to enact fundamental changes in the social, political and economic status of African-Americans. In the end, this pressure proved decisive in a number of important ways. Not only was it key to the major legislative and judicial victories of the period, but it also had the effect of pushing the Democratic Party decisively to the left, alienating the southern wing of the Party, and ultimately breaking apart the New Deal coalition that had allowed the Democrats to effectively dominate federal policymaking since 1932.

The above story and its larger social and political significance have been recognized by scholars for some time. The second story, however, has gone generally unremarked. It too was set in motion by the rebirth of the civil rights movement in 1960. We refer to the segregationist countermovement that rapidly mobilized in response to the sit-ins and grew apace of the civil rights struggle over the next few years. Overwhelmingly confined to the South in the early years of the decade, the countermovement spread northward in the mid-1960s, inspiring a more general “backlash” by racial conservatives all over the country. Aiding and abetting this process was arch-segregationist, George Wallace, whose presidential campaigns in 1964 and especially 1968 gave voice to and helped galvanize a nationwide politics of racial reaction. If the civil rights revolution had the effect of pushing the Democrats decisively leftward, something similar happened to the GOP as a result of the white resistance movement. Although the move to the right was already discernible in the early 1960s, the pace of the shift picked up markedly with the “white backlash” of the mid-60s, and even more so following Nixon’s narrow capture of the White House in ’68. Simply put, the results of the election virtually compelled further movement to the right by the GOP. With Nixon and Humphrey basically splitting 86 percent of the vote, and Wallace commanding the remaining 14 percent, it was clear where the balance of power was likely to lie in 1972.

For the Republicans, the narrow victory suggested that the party’s future would be best served not by trying to cut into Humphrey’s 43 percent of the vote, but rather the 14 percent garnered by Wallace. Nixon and his Republican strategists believed that the 57 percent he
shared with Wallace represented a racially conservative majority that, if successfully tapped, could well ensure GOP control of the White House for years to come. As Peter Goldman commented at the time, “it suggested...a strategy that could keep the Presidency Republican for a generation—precisely by isolating the Democrats as a party of the blacks and building the rickety Nixon coalition of 1968 into a true majority of the white center.”

When Nixon captured every southern state and 65 percent of the white vote en route to a landslide win four years later, it looked, for all the world, as if this strategic vision had been realized. Alas, for the Republicans, Watergate would muddy the waters and delay the full realization of this vision for another eight years. The 1970s would, in general, prove to be a confusing, transitional period in U.S. politics, very different in this regard from the 1960s. The decades did, however, share something very important in common. If the 1960s marked the return of social movements as a consequential force in American politics, a little remembered institutional revolution engineered by New Left activists between 1968 and 1972, would dramatically increase the structural leverage available to future grass roots movements. In the next chapter we take up this and other stories from the strange limbo decade of the 1970s.

---

62 Goldman 1970, p.102