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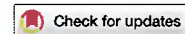


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Switching sides but still fighting the Civil War in southern politics

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ABSTRACT

It is well-established that the realignment of the past half-century sorted southern whites into the Grand Old Party (GOP) while southern blacks have remained stalwart Democrats. Surprisingly, however, there has been little systematic investigation of the relationship between party identification and opinions toward the South's Confederate legacy. If it is indeed the case that race played the dominant role in the partisan sorting of southern whites into the Republican Party, then it should follow that contemporary GOP adherents have also taken a more favorable view toward Confederate symbols. In this study, we present data from numerous surveys that show southern whites of opposing parties have polarized on opinions toward the Confederate legacy in a historical reversal so that those aligned with the party of Abraham Lincoln are now the staunchest defenders of the "Lost Cause."

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... as long as we have a politics of race in America, we will have a politics of Civil War memory. (Blight 2001, 4)

In *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, V. O. Key (1949, 10) remarked that "Attachments to partisan labels live long beyond the events that gave them birth." In the course of American political history, the longest adherence to a major party was that of white southerners to the Democratic Party. The almost religious devotion of Dixie's native whites to their southern Democracy was borne out of the Civil War and later reinforced during Reconstruction (Foner 1988).

During the many-decades reign of the Democratic Solid South, this regional party became synonymous with white supremacy (Bateman, Katznelson, and Lapinski 2018), and its roots were firmly tied to Confederate defeat in a Civil War in which "northern aggression" was perpetrated by a Republican enemy. As Eric Schickler (2016) demonstrates, cracks were beginning to show in the foundation of Democratic dominance of the South as early as the 1930s. Driven largely by migration to the North, by the late

1940s, African American voters living outside the South had for the most part left the Republican Party. This process then continued in the following decades as the Democratic Party began to embrace civil rights while the Grand Old Party (GOP) became increasingly conservative (Baylor 2017).

The process of partisan realignment accelerated during the long civil rights movement (Hall 2005), and was punctuated by Democratic President Lyndon Johnson's advocacy for the 1964 Civil Rights Act and Republican Challenger Barry Goldwater's repudiation of this signature achievement. Hence, the 1964 presidential election continued to rotate the racial axis of national party politics (Miller and Schofield 2008), with the party of Abraham Lincoln retreating from its historic defense of African Americans while the party of rebellion and secession now became the proponent of black equality (Carmines and Stimson 1989).

The reversal of the national parties' positions on civil rights triggered a relatively rapid shift in southern blacks' allegiance to the Democratic Party (Campbell 1977),¹ while the realignment of southern whites to the GOP was by comparison secular (Key 1959), a transition several decades in the making (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Black and Black 2002; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Maxwell and Shields 2019). To be sure, in southern presidential politics, the Republican Party assumed a dominant position by the late 1960s (Black and Black 1987), but it took almost another thirty years for the GOP to win a majority of southern congressional seats (Black and Black 2002), and then still another decade and a half more to control most southern state legislatures (Cooper and Krotts 2014; McKee and Yoshinaka 2015).

While the above narrative hews closely to the view that the Republican transformation of the modern South was at its core driven by considerations of race (Black and Black 1987; Carter 1996; Hood, Kidd, and Morris 2012; McKee 2012; McKee and Springer 2015; Phillips 1969; Valentino and Sears 2005), this is, of course, not the only perspective. Some scholars have argued that the focus on the centrality of race in the partisan transformation of the South is overstated. For example, David Lublin (2004) argues that economic, rather than racial considerations inspired the initial movement of southern white voters from the Democratic to the Republican Party. Shafer and Johnston (2006, 2) echo this view, claiming that "the engine of partisan change in the postwar South was, first and foremost, economic development and an associated politics of social class." In their view, when race was critical to this story, it was because it interacted with class and economics, not because it provided a distinct pressure point that furthered white realignment.

While much of the story of southern partisan realignment has been told, extant literature is silent about the relationship between partisan realignment and the politics of historical memory. Just as political scientists have not addressed historical memory in their accounts of partisanship, party affiliation as a lens to assess the Confederate past receives scant mention in the literature on historical memory (e.g., Blight 2001; Brundage 2005; Clinton 2019). This research focuses on this understudied but potentially important dynamic.

In addition to its intrinsic interest, the changing relationship between partisanship and historical memory represents a policy area that is meaningful for understanding the role of race, but which is relatively immune from economics. As a result, exploring this topic should allow us to better understand race-based explanations of partisan realignment.

Finally, uncovering partisan polarization on this critically important topic of mass opinion would provide more evidence of the increasingly tribal nature of partisanship in America (Barber and Pope 2019; Mason 2018).

At an empirical level, works that have examined symbols of the southern past, Confederate memory, and partisanship are almost exclusively limited to studies of the Confederate flag (e.g., Huffmon, Knotts, and McKee 2017–18). Indeed, there is scant work that addresses other related symbols such as Confederate monuments and opinions on the Civil War, despite their centrality to this debate.² In this article, we move beyond the Confederate battle flag, by also focusing specifically on the opinions of southern white Democrats and Republicans with respect to their views about Confederate monuments and the Civil War.

In summary, our focus on the contemporary politics of Civil War symbolism provides a new venue to investigate these questions regarding the role of public opinion on the Confederate legacy within the context of large-scale changes in the alignment of race and partisanship in the contemporary South. We expect that a race-centered account of partisan change supports a realignment in partisan views of the Confederate past.

The southern Republican embrace of the Confederate legacy

Like most ideas and movements in the one-party South during the early twentieth century, the embrace of the Lost Cause Myth³ and the symbolism that accompanied it was initially perpetuated by members of the Democratic Party. At the grassroots, it was Democratic white women, like Georgia's Mildred Lewis Rutherford, who created loyalty tests "for school officials to see if they knew the 'South's true history'" (McRae 2018, 42) and advocated for textbooks that exalted the Lost Cause Myth at the expense of historical narratives of African American life (Cox 2013). This embrace of the Confederate legacy was not just an accident of history associated with the majority party in the region, but was rather a central plank in the southern Democratic platform used to further party dominance in the region. As Gaither (1977; cited in Winberry 1983, 117) explains, a "cult of the Confederacy" developed "under the aegis of the Democratic Party."

White southern Democrats' fervent advocacy of the Confederate legacy was on display in the mid-1950s to mid-1960s when its most visible symbol, the Confederate flag (Coski 2005),⁴ was taken up again and vigorously waved as both a literal and symbolic expression of white supremacy and defiance of federal intervention into southern race relations (Huffmon, Knotts, and McKee 2017–18; Hutchings, Walton, and Benjamin 2010). During this volatile era of historic change, the ultimate failure of white massive resistance to African American legal equality set in motion the movement of white conservatives to a GOP that had shown little life in the South since the end of the late 1800s (Heard 1952).

Hence, while the Democratic Party was responsible for the installation and promotion of Confederate symbols and the perpetuation of the Lost Cause Myth, the mantle of the Confederate legacy gradually passed from the Democratic to the Republican Party in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. We contend that this development materialized principally because of the dynamics fueling partisan change and with it, the resulting manifestation of the South's modern Democratic and Republican voter coalitions. First, though there may have been other paths, in the wake of the pivotal 1964 presidential election, the southern (and national) GOP eventually settled upon an

electoral strategy that outwardly shunned black support (Maxwell and Shields 2019; Phillips 1969).

In contrast, by taking up the cause of black civil rights, the national Democratic Party won the overwhelming support of southern African Americans who swelled the ranks of the Democratic Party after passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act (VRA) (Bullock and Gaddie 2009). It appeared that despite the medium-term success of southern Democrats' black-white racial coalitions of the late 1960s through the 1970s (Lamis 1988), in the long-run most whites, and especially those of a racially conservative bent, could not remain affiliated with a party attracting the lion's share of black voters. Indeed, in those areas of the South where black mobilization (e.g., voter registration) was greatest, so was the exodus of whites to the Republican opposition (Hood, Kidd, and Morris 2012).

The primary driver of the partisan transformation of the contemporary southern Democratic and Republican coalitions then is anchored upon a racial cleavage. The near absence of a black presence in the modern Republican Party in the South allows for its adherents to embrace the Confederate past and the symbols tied to it. Conversely, the racially and ethnically diverse modern Democratic coalition, one in which African Americans comprise a plurality of its voters (McKee 2019), is no longer conducive to and welcoming of Confederate sympathizers. So, through well over a hundred years of partisan change, it has finally come to pass that the party once excoriated by southern whites as responsible for the "War of Northern Aggression," is currently home to a white majority that is now the greatest defender of a Confederate legacy originally created and perpetuated by Democrats.⁵

Presentation of the evidence

We claim that Confederate symbols can be packaged and understood as individual components of the Lost Cause Myth. Further, we argue that the racial nature of partisan realignment in the South has caused the Republican Party to "own" the Lost Cause and thus embrace Dixie's Confederate legacy, while Democrats, who must be responsive to a more diverse voter coalition (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016), have largely abandoned the symbols and propaganda associated with the Confederate past.

We rely on a variety of survey data to track and confirm changes in contemporary partisan support of the Confederate legacy among whites residing in the 11 states⁶ that seceded from the Union, invoking a Civil War, whose aftermath still resonates throughout Dixie and the nation. Our data come from five primary sources: (1) southern state surveys made available via the data archive at the University of North Carolina's Odum Institute; (2) a series of Winthrop University Polls that surveyed South Carolinians and in some cases the entire South; (3) a poll of Georgia citizens conducted at the University of Georgia in 2018; (4) a poll of registered Virginia voters conducted at Christopher Newport University in September 2017; and (5) select Pew Research Center surveys in 2011 and 2015.⁷ In short, we rely on a multitude of surveys conducted over the course of more than four decades.

We limit our presentation of the data to our primary question of whether there are partisan differences in white southerners' opinions on the Confederate legacy. Thus, we only show data for white southerners who identify themselves as either Democrats or Republicans. Although we do not report results for self-identified political independents, suffice

it to say that this group's opinions on the Confederate legacy consistently reside somewhere in between those held by Democrats and Republicans.⁸

In order to assess opinions on the Confederate legacy, we partition our study into the following three successive topics: (1) the Confederate flag; (2) Confederate monuments; and (3) the Civil War. While others have identified the correlation between Republican identification and support for a variety of symbols associated with the Confederacy, the majority of this empirical work has focused on the Confederate flag (for a recent review, see Huffmon, Knotts, and McKee 2017–18), not Confederate monuments or opinions about the Civil War. The focus on the flag is not surprising given that this symbol has garnered significant debate since Strom Thurmond and the Dixiecrats reintroduced it to American political life in the late 1940s (Barnard 1984).

Widespread and sustained controversy over the display of Confederate monuments is a recent phenomenon – arguably grabbing the nation's attention in the tragic events that played out in the summer of 2017 in Charlottesville, Virginia. Gauging contemporary opinions on the Civil War has received even less attention and is reflected in the small number of surveys that ask about the conflict. Nonetheless, because of the lasting sectional differences that stem from this hostility and how they manifested in party politics then and now (Goldfield 2002), we anticipate that recent opinions on the Civil War will divide along contemporary partisan lines.

In the sections that follow, we present white southerners' attitudes in tabular form based on their responses to numerous questions asking about the Confederate flag, Confederate monuments, and the Civil War, respectively. We provide the survey question in the table, the name and year of the survey, the percentage of Democrats and Republicans who select the most pro-Confederate response, the partisan difference between these responses, and also whether this difference is statistically significant. Since we anticipate that Republicans are more supportive of the Confederate legacy, we compute the partisan difference as Republican minus Democrat (R-D); and because we expect that it should be positive, we employ a one-tailed test of statistical significance ($p < .05$).

Confederate flag

Table 1 presents data on opinions toward the Confederate flag based on polls conducted in Alabama and Georgia spanning the late 1980s to 2003.⁹ In the case of white Alabamians, from 1987 to 1994, there is no significant difference according to party. Simply put, at this time, opposition to taking down Alabama's rebel flag from the state capitol was considerable but also indistinguishable on the basis of party affiliation. In contrast, the data from Georgia show a consistently significant difference in opinions on the Confederate flag from 1992 to 2003. Although we cannot be sure of the reason for the difference between states, we suspect it is because Georgia was sooner to develop two-party competition than its neighbor, Alabama. In the earliest two Georgia Polls, there is no difference in opinion according to party. Then, with the exception of the Georgia Poll administered in the spring of 1996, Republicans are significantly more likely to oppose altering the Peach State's flag, which contained a Confederate emblem on it. Finally, the 2003 Peach State Poll (No. 7) reveals a wide partisan difference on the question of whether Georgia's flag "was a symbol of [its] segregationist history," with Republicans strongly disagreeing by 18 percentage points more than Democrats.

Table 1. White southerners' opinions on the Confederate flag in Alabama and Georgia.

| (1). Do you favor or oppose taking the Confederate Flag down? Oppose% | | | |
|--|-----------|-------------|------------------|
| ALABAMA | DEMOCRATS | REPUBLICANS | DIFFERENCE (R-D) |
| 1987 Capstone Poll | 85.2 | 84.3 | -0.9 |
| 1988 Capstone Poll | 83.5 | 83.7 | +0.2 |
| 1990 SORS | 86.5 | 85.1 | -1.4 |
| 1994 SORS | 69.2 | 73.9 | +4.7 |
| (1). Should Georgia's state flag be changed to remove the Confederate battle flag, or not? No% | | | |
| GEORGIA | DEMOCRATS | REPUBLICANS | DIFFERENCE (R-D) |
| AJC-GA Poll (October 1992) | 74.5 | 84.8 | +10.3* |
| (2). Do you think that the Georgia State Flag should be changed? No% | | | |
| 1992 Georgia Poll (Fall) | 73.1 | 67.7 | -5.4 |
| 1993 Georgia Poll (Spring) | 62.0 | 61.8 | -0.2 |
| 1993 Georgia Poll (Fall) | 61.1 | 71.4 | +10.3* |
| 1994 Georgia Poll (Winter) | 60.4 | 72.8 | +12.4* |
| 1995 Georgia Poll (Summer) | 75.2 | 84.7 | +9.5* |
| 1995 Georgia Poll (Fall) | 70.1 | 83.1 | +13.0* |
| 1996 Georgia Poll (Spring) | 74.3 | 81.2 | +6.9 |
| 1996 Georgia Poll (Summer) | 70.8 | 83.9 | +13.1* |
| (3). The last flag – that which represented the state from 1956 until January 2001 – was a symbol of Georgia's segregationist history (1 to 4, 4=Strongly Disagree) Strongly Disagree% | | | |
| 2003 Peach State Poll No.7 | 21.2 | 39.0 | +17.8* |

Note: Only data for self-identified Democrats and Republicans are shown. SORS = Southern Opinion Research Survey.

* $p < .05$ (one-tailed test) for difference between Republicans and Democrats (R-D).

Table 2 presents more state data on Confederate flag opinions from residents in North and South Carolina. In the Tar Heel State, the earliest questions in 1970 and the mid-1990s register no partisan difference. However, by 2008, data from the North Carolina Immigration Poll shows that Republicans are markedly (and significantly) more opposed to the banning of displays of the Confederate flag for official and personal purposes. Turning to South Carolina, all of these data are courtesy of the Winthrop Poll, which asked respondents about the Confederate flag in three consecutive years: 2014, 2015, and 2016. Importantly, the Charleston Church Massacre occurred in the summer of 2015, and after this event there is a pronounced decline in support for displaying the Confederate flag (Huffman, Knotts, and McKee 2017–18). With this in mind, the partisan difference is substantial and significant in all but the first question gauging feelings toward the flag. Thereafter, the more pro-Confederate views of Republicans outpace Democrats at a margin ranging from 28.5 to 58.4 percentage points. Lastly, in line with the shift in views after the Charleston tragedy, for the last four questions (3–6) that were asked in 2015 and 2016, Democrats' pro-Confederate opinions decline – by over 11 percentage points on the question asking whether removing the flag from the South Carolina statehouse grounds was the wrong decision.

We conclude this section with evidence of opinions on the Confederate flag that come from South-wide surveys administered via the Southern Focus Polls (1992–1994), the Winthrop Poll (2017 and 2018), and Pew Political Surveys (2011 and 2015). The Southern Focus Poll asked respondents on four separate occasions whether the Confederate flag was “more a symbol of racial conflict or of Southern pride.” As Table 3 shows, Republicans always chose southern pride at a higher rate than Democrats and this difference is significant in the last two polls. After years of no polling on this question (the last Southern Focus Poll was conducted in 2001), the Winthrop Poll posed the same question to a sample of southerners in November of 2018. The results are remarkable with regard to both the lack of change registered by Republicans (a quarter-century after the last

Table 2. White southerners' opinions on the Confederate flag in North and South Carolina.

| (1). Do you approve of public schools displaying the Confederate flag? Approve% | | | |
|---|-----------|-------------|------------------|
| NORTH CAROLINA | DEMOCRATS | REPUBLICANS | DIFFERENCE (R-D) |
| 1970–1971 (Circa) SRS III | 68.0 | 66.9 | –1.1 |
| (2). Does the following make you uncomfortable? People who want to ban the display of the Confederate flag (1 to 3, 1=Very Uncomfortable) Very Uncomfortable% | | | |
| 1995 Carolina Poll | 27.1 | 33.0 | +5.9 |
| (3). Does the following make you uncomfortable? People who display the Confederate Flag outside their homes (1 to 3, 3=Not at All Uncomfortable) Not at All Uncomfortable% | | | |
| 1995 Carolina Poll | 67.1 | 72.2 | +5.1 |
| (4). There should be no official use of the Confederate flag by state and local governments – for instance, in state flags or over state buildings (1 to 5, 5=Strongly Disagree) Strongly Disagree% | | | |
| 2008 NC Immigration Poll | 16.2 | 30.1 | +13.9* |
| (5). No one should be allowed to display the Confederate flag, even individuals and private organizations (1 to 5, 5=Strongly Disagree) Strongly Disagree% | | | |
| 2008 NC Immigration Poll | 47.2 | 64.7 | +17.5* |
| (1). Rate your feelings toward each one as very positive, somewhat positive, neutral, somewhat negative, or very negative. Confederate Flag. Very Positive% | | | |
| SOUTH CAROLINA | DEMOCRATS | REPUBLICANS | DIFFERENCE (R-D) |
| 2014 Winthrop Poll (November) | 18.0 | 23.4 | +5.4 |
| (2). Do you think the Confederate Flag should or should not continue to be flown on the grounds of the South Carolina State House? (1 to 4, 1=Strongly Feel It Should Continue) Strongly Feel It Should Continue% | | | |
| 2014 Winthrop Poll (November) | 36.9 | 65.4 | +28.5* |
| (3). Approve or disapprove of the Confederate battle flag flying on the SC Statehouse grounds? Approve% | | | |
| 2015 Winthrop Poll (September) | 25.3 | 76.0 | +50.7* |
| 2016 Winthrop Poll (April) | 20.8 | 79.2 | +58.4* |
| (4). Do you think the flag is more a symbol of racial conflict or Southern pride? Southern Pride% | | | |
| 2015 Winthrop Poll (September) | 33.3 | 76.6 | +43.3* |
| 2016 Winthrop Poll (April) | 25.7 | 79.5 | +53.8* |
| (5). If you had your personal choice, would the Confederate battle flag CONTINUE to fly on South Carolina Statehouse grounds or NO LONGER fly on South Carolina Statehouse grounds? Continue to Fly% | | | |
| 2015 Winthrop Poll (September) | 21.2 | 58.0 | +36.8* |
| 2016 Winthrop Poll (April) | 15.0 | 61.8 | +46.8* |
| (6). The South Carolina Legislature voted to completely remove the Confederate battle flag from the Statehouse grounds. Do you think this was the RIGHT decision or the WRONG decision? Wrong Decision% | | | |
| 2015 Winthrop Poll (September) | 20.6 | 51.8 | +31.2* |
| 2016 Winthrop Poll (April) | 9.2 | 47.8 | +38.6* |

Note: Only data for self-identified Democrats and Republicans are shown. SRS = Southeastern Regional Survey.

* $p < .05$ (one-tailed test) for difference between Republicans and Democrats (R-D).

Southern Focus Poll posed the question in 1994), and the plummeting of Democrats' pro-Confederate views, with now less than one out of four considering the rebel flag mainly a symbol expressing southern pride.

The Winthrop Poll asked two additional Confederate flag questions in 2017 and 2018. First, respondents were asked to rate their feelings toward the Confederate flag on a 0-to-100 thermometer scale with a higher number indicating greater affection. A 30 percentage-point gulf separates Democrats and Republicans, with the latter much warmer in their views toward the Confederate flag. Similarly, 38 percentage points is the distance between Republicans and Democrats with respect to those registering a very favorable view of the rebel flag.

In 2011 and 2015, the Pew Research Center asked a handful of questions on the Confederate flag. In these Pew Political Surveys, Republicans are significantly more likely to display the Confederate flag and approve of its display. In addition, compared to white southern Democrats, white southern Republicans were much more likely to oppose South Carolina's

Table 3. White southerners' opinions on the Confederate flag in the 1990s and 2010s.

| (1). Do you think the [Confederate] flag is more a symbol of racial conflict or of Southern pride? Southern Pride% | | | |
|--|-----------|-------------|------------------|
| Southern Focus Polls | Democrats | Republicans | Difference (R-D) |
| 1992 (Spring) | 83.2 | 86.1 | +2.9 |
| 1993 (Spring) | 84.1 | 86.3 | +2.2 |
| 1993 (Fall) | 78.8 | 87.5 | +8.7* |
| 1994 (Fall) | 78.9 | 89.1 | +10.2* |
| Winthrop Poll | | | |
| 2018 (November) | 24.6 | 89.6 | +65.0* |
| (2). Where would you place the Confederate Flag on the feeling thermometer? (0 to 100, 100=most positive) Mean% | | | |
| Winthrop Poll | | | |
| 2017 (November) | 31.8 | 61.8 | +30.0* |
| (3). Is your view of the Confederate Flag very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable? Very Favorable% | | | |
| Winthrop Poll | | | |
| 2018 (November) | 8.3 | 46.3 | +38.0* |
| (1). Do you display the Confederate flag, in places such as at your home or office, or on your car or clothing, or not? Yes% | | | |
| Pew Political Surveys | Democrats | Republicans | Difference (R-D) |
| 2011 (April) | 2.2 | 26.0 | +23.8* |
| (2). When you see the Confederate flag displayed, do you have a positive reaction, negative reaction or neither? Positive% | | | |
| 2011 (April) | 10.3 | 33.0 | +22.7* |
| 2015 (July) | 20.1 | 30.2 | +10.1* |
| (3). How much, if anything, have you read or heard about recent debates over the Confederate flag around the country? A lot, a little, or nothing at all? A Lot% | | | |
| 2015 (July) | 76.6 | 86.4 | +9.8* |
| (4). As you may know, the South Carolina state government recently voted to take down the Confederate flag from statehouse grounds. In your view, was this the right decision or wrong decision? Wrong Decision% | | | |
| 2015 (July) | 31.6 | 59.2 | +27.6* |

Notes: Data are limited to white residents of the 11 states of the former Confederacy. Data only show the percentage of respondents providing the most favorable opinion (response option) toward the Confederate flag on these questions. Only data for self-identified Democrats and Republicans are shown.

* $p < .05$ (one-tailed test) for difference between Republicans and Democrats (R-D).

furling of the rebel flag in the wake of the Charleston church shooting. Perhaps most interesting, however, beyond Republicans expressing decidedly more pro-Confederate views (as expected), is that they also register a greater awareness with respect to “recent debates over the Confederate flag around the country.” This may indicate the defensiveness of Republicans since the southern GOP has embraced the Confederate legacy.

Confederate monuments

The tragic events that unfolded in the melee over the removal of a statue of Civil War General Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville, Virginia in the summer of 2017, has brought considerable national attention to the question of American opinion toward the removal of these Confederate memorials. Indeed, it would seem that this issue, at least for now, has received more focus and attention than the perennial fights over flying the Confederate flag.¹⁰ In this section, we examine support for Confederate monuments based on recent surveys of residents located in Georgia, Virginia, and South-wide.

Georgia

In January of 2018 the School of Public and International Affairs (SPIA) Survey Research Center at the University of Georgia (UGA) conducted a statewide poll of registered

Georgians for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. One of the questions specifically pertained to the issue of Confederate monuments and memorials. In Georgia, state law protects these types of monuments from removal or relocation. Monuments located on public property under the control of county or municipal governments are also protected by statutory law. Thus, on the basis of Georgia law, the SPIA-UGA Poll asked respondents, “Should city and county governments in Georgia be granted authority to relocate Confederate monuments?” Table 4 shows that more than seven out of ten white Republicans were opposed to allowing local control, while just over a quarter of Democrats agreed with this pro-Confederate stance, a statistically significant 46 percentage-point difference.

Virginia

In September of 2017 the Wason Center for Public Policy at Christopher Newport University conducted a statewide poll of registered Virginia voters that focused on the gubernatorial and state legislative elections. While Virginia law prohibits removal of monuments or memorials for war veterans once they are erected, a debate over the status of Confederate monuments had been injected into these gubernatorial and legislative contests as a result of the August 11–12 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville. The Charlottesville rally was ostensibly organized to protest the proposed removal of a statue of General Lee from Emancipation Park (Stolberg and Rosenthal 2017).¹¹ After the rally, Democratic Governor Terry McAuliffe and others called for the removal of Confederate statues (Nirappil 2017). Given the nature of the dispute, the Wason Center Poll posed this question: “Recently there has been a lot of debate and controversy surrounding Confederate statues and monuments in Virginia. Do you support or oppose removing Confederate statues and monuments from public spaces around Virginia?”

As documented in Table 5, even more striking than the partisan split found in Georgia, among white Virginians, more than nine out of ten Republicans opposed the removal of Confederate monuments versus roughly a third of Democrats who shared this view. This 60 percentage-point partisan gulf is the second largest margin we have found in this study, only the divide over the symbolic meaning of the Confederate flag in the 2018 Winthrop Poll (at 65 percentage points) is larger.

The South

Two recent Winthrop Polls asked a South-wide sample of survey respondents about their opinions on the removal of Confederate monuments. Two slightly different questions were asked. One question from 2017 and 2018, asked respondents what should be done about “monuments or memorials to Confederate soldiers who died during the Civil War?” The

Table 4. White southerners’ opinions on support for local authorities to relocate Confederate monuments in Georgia.

| (1). Should city and county governments in Georgia be granted authority to relocate Confederate monuments? No% | | | |
|--|-----------|-------------|------------------|
| SPIA-UGA Poll | Democrats | Republicans | Difference (R-D) |
| 2018 (January) | 25.6 | 71.9 | +46.3* |

Note: Only data for self-identified Democrats and Republicans are shown.

* $p < .05$ (one-tailed test) for difference between Republicans and Democrats (R-D).

Table 5. White southerners' opinions on support for removal of Confederate statues and monuments in Virginia.

(1). Do you support or oppose removing Confederate statues and monuments from public spaces around Virginia? Oppose %

| Wason Center Poll | Democrats | Republicans | Difference (R-D) |
|-------------------|-----------|-------------|------------------|
| 2017 (September) | 32.3 | 92.9 | +60.6* |

Note: Only data for self-identified Democrats and Republicans are shown.

* $p < .05$ (one-tailed test) for difference between Republicans and Democrats (R-D).

second question, only asked in 2017, queried respondents as to what should be done about “statues honoring Confederate war heroes?” Both questions offered the same exact set of response options: (1) leave them just as they are; (2) leave them, *but* add a plaque or marker for context and historical interpretation; (3) move them to a museum; or (4) remove them completely. Response option 1, leave them just as they are, is the most pro-Confederate answer and therefore in Table 6 we present the percentage of Democrats and Republicans who chose this option. Once again, as was true in the case of Georgians and Virginians, throughout the South it is Republicans who are much more resistant to the proposition of removing Confederate monuments in the twenty-first century.

The Civil War

In this last empirical assessment of partisan differences over the Confederate legacy, we examine opinions on the Civil War. Here, we find a notable shift in partisan views registered in the mid-1990s versus those recorded in 2011 and 2018. The Southern Focus Poll conducted in the Fall of 1994, asked a battery of questions on the Civil War. Table 7 presents the bulk of these questions, with the most pro-Confederate response shown for Democrats and Republicans. Note that the first two questions do not directly invoke the Civil War but instead probe respondents' interest in (southern) history. Nonetheless, in the ordering of the survey, these questions were bookended by others asking about the Civil War and therefore “history” implicitly refers to this conflict. Still, it is not a cumbersome task to summarize the findings from Table 7. Except for the first question, the partisan difference (R-D) always favors a pro-Confederate Republican margin. Nonetheless, the partisan difference for every question is never substantial enough to register statistical significance. In short, in the 1994 Fall Southern Focus Poll, the views of white Democrats

Table 6. White southerners' opinions on support for removal of Confederate monuments.

(1) Which of the following comes closest to your opinion about what to do with monuments or memorials to Confederate soldiers who died during the Civil War? (1 to 4, 1=Leave Them Just as They Are) Leave as They Are%

| Winthrop Polls | Democrats | Republicans | Difference (R-D) |
|---|-----------|-------------|------------------|
| 2017 (November) | 28.4 | 66.2 | +37.8* |
| 2018 (November) | 24.6 | 63.9 | +39.3* |
| (2). Which of the following comes closest to your opinion about what to do with statues honoring Confederate war heroes? (1 to 4, 1=Leave Them Just as They Are) Leave as They Are% | | | |
| 2017 (November) | 27.8 | 59.9 | +32.1* |

Notes: Data are limited to white residents of the 11 states of the former Confederacy. Data only show the percentage of respondents providing the most favorable opinion (response option) toward the Confederate legacy on these questions. Only data for self-identified Democrats and Republicans are shown.

* $p < .05$ (one-tailed test) for difference between Republicans and Democrats (R-D).

Table 7. White southerners' opinions on the Civil War in 1994.

| (1). I have a great deal of interest in the history of the South (1 to 4, 1=Strongly Agree) Strongly Agree% | | | |
|--|-----------|-------------|------------------|
| Southern Focus Poll | Democrats | Republicans | Difference (R-D) |
| 1994 (Fall) | 38.1 | 36.8 | -1.3 |
| (2). We would be better off if we paid less attention to history and put the past behind us (1 to 4, 4=Strongly Disagree) Strongly Disagree% | | | |
| 1994 (Fall) | 40.5 | 44.3 | +3.8 |
| (3). It's important to remember our history, but the Civil War doesn't mean much to me personally (1 to 4, 4=Strongly Disagree) Strongly Disagree% | | | |
| 1994 (Fall) | 31.4 | 34.5 | +3.1 |
| (4). Can you name any Civil War battles, right off hand? Yes% | | | |
| 1994 (Fall) | 65.7 | 66.5 | +0.8 |
| (5). If I had an ancestor who fought in the Confederate Army, I would be ashamed, knowing what I know about the reasons for the war (1 to 4, 4=Strongly Disagree) Strongly Disagree% | | | |
| 1994 (Fall) | 41.0 | 48.2 | +7.2 |
| (6). If I had an ancestor who fought in the Confederate Army, I would be proud that he fought for what he thought was right (1 to 4, 1=Strongly Agree) Strongly Agree% | | | |
| 1994 (Fall) | 63.0 | 72.5 | +9.5 |
| (7). It's a good thing the South lost the Civil War (1 to 4, 4=Strongly Disagree) Strongly Disagree% | | | |
| 1994 (Fall) | 16.4 | 21.0 | +4.6 |
| (8). The Civil War was more about slavery than it was about states' rights or any other issue (1 to 4, 4=Strongly Disagree) Strongly Disagree% | | | |
| 1994 (Fall) | 24.8 | 25.2 | +0.4 |

Notes: Data are limited to white residents of the 11 states of the former Confederacy. Data only show the percentage of respondents providing the most favorable opinion (response option) toward the Confederate legacy on these questions. Only data for self-identified Democrats and Republicans are shown.

and white Republicans regarding several Civil War questions are essentially the same, or in statistical terms, indistinguishable.

Fast forward to the 2010s and even though the Civil War has become even that much more of a historical relic, we now find notable partisan differences over the conflict. Table 8 presents three questions asked on a 2011 Pew Political Survey and also one question from the November 2018 Winthrop Poll. First, the Pew poll asked respondents if the Civil War still held "relevance to American politics and public life today?" A clear majority of Democrats and Republicans see ramifications of the Civil War as still relevant today. However, it is the Democrats who see the conflict as more relevant today. This partisan difference is statistically significant.

Table 8. White southerners' opinions on the Civil War in 2011 and 2018.

| (1). As you may know, this April will be the 150th anniversary of the start of the American Civil War. Do you think The Civil War was important historically, but has little relevance to American politics and public life today? Still Relevant% | | | |
|--|-----------|-------------|------------------|
| Pew Political Survey | Democrats | Republicans | Difference (R-D) |
| 2011 (April) | 69.1 | 59.9 | -9.2* |
| (2). Do you generally think it is appropriate or inappropriate for public officials today to praise the leaders of the Confederate States during the Civil War? Appropriate% | | | |
| 2011 (April) | 45.6 | 64.7 | +19.1* |
| (3). What's your impression of the main cause of the Civil War? Was the Civil War mainly about slavery, mainly about states' rights, both equally? States' Rights% | | | |
| 2011 (April) | 31.8 | 51.6 | +19.8* |
| Winthrop Poll | | | |
| 2018 (November) | 9.7 | 35.8 | +26.1* |

Notes: Data are limited to white residents of the 11 states of the former Confederacy. Data only show the percentage of respondents providing the most favorable opinion (response option) toward the Confederate legacy on these questions. Only data for self-identified Democrats and Republicans are shown.

* $p < .05$ (one-tailed test) for difference between Republicans and Democrats (R-D).

In contrast, the next two questions directly probe respondents' views toward the Confederate legacy. First, Republicans are much more likely to believe it is appropriate "for public officials today to praise the leaders of the Confederate States during the Civil War"; a significant 19 percentage-point partisan difference. Second, and what we consider to be perhaps the most important question one can ask about the Civil War: the cause of the conflict, Republicans are much more likely to subscribe to the notion that the controversy was mainly about states' rights as opposed to slavery or both issues equally. Finally, in what we see as an indication of the broader trend in partisan polarization, although both Democrats and Republicans were less likely to take the states' rights position in 2018 as compared to 2011, the partisan difference has actually increased because of the massive drop in Democrats' support for the pro-Confederate view (from 31.8 percent in 2011 to less than 10 percent in 2018).

Discussion and conclusion

Not only does an overwhelmingly white electorate now favor the GOP in southern politics (McKee 2019), but in this article we have also shown with an inventory of public opinion data that the party's adherents have reached back in time to defend the Lost Cause Myth. Thus, in this regard, our findings support racially motivated explanations for partisan change in the South. Further, these findings reinforce that public memory is not immune from the influence of partisan lenses. To the contrary, the Democratic abandonment of the Confederate legacy suggests that the politicization of the past is a key component of the broader story of southern realignment and partisan polarization. After all, slavery was the distinctive social institution in the Confederate states, an institution defined by racial hierarchy (Bateman, Katznelson, and Lapinski 2018). Hence, it stands to reason that contemporary debates over Confederate symbolism and public memory reflect ongoing conflict over racial inequality (Goldfield 2002). Today's racialized partisan cleavage reflects a similar divide over views of a racially charged past.

Our findings implicate multiple factors contributing to the southern partisan reversal of white opinions toward Confederate symbols and the Lost Cause Myth more generally. First, this development speaks to the reality that the white Republican realignment in Dixie was propelled by conservative voters who naturally fit better with a party that seized upon a conservative position on a panoply of issues (Abramowitz 1994) in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement. Influential leaders like Goldwater in 1964 (Cosman 1966), President Reagan in the 1980s (Black and Black 2002), and Congressman Newt Gingrich in the 1990s (Carter 1996) catalyzed and spearheaded southern Republican ascendancy. But it also required a phalanx of Republican activists (Carmines and Woods 2002; Layman et al. 2010) who espoused the conservative shift of the GOP and then promulgated the party's newfound more racially conservative views so the message could eventually seep into the consciousness of the mass public.

Further, as our data suggest, there was a turning point in which southern white Republicans' support of the Confederate legacy started to outstrip that of their white Democratic counterparts. This appears to have taken place around the mid-1990s as the GOP began to make substantial and permanent electoral gains in office-holding below the presidential level (Black and Black 2002; McKee 2010, 2019). The timing of the GOP embrace of the Confederate legacy would also reflect the fact that many older white "Dixiecrats" who most likely voted Republican for decades (at least in presidential politics), but

never shed their Democratic affiliation, had finally exited the southern electorate via the end of the life cycle. In their place remained a generation of white southerners who came of age during the Reagan years and were, by comparison to their parents, much more likely to have aligned their symbolic self-identified conservative ideology with an attachment to the Republican Party (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998).

Finally, Green, Palmquist, and Schickler (2002) contend that party identification is not just, or principally, a psychological attachment to a political party (Campbell et al. 1960). Rather, as they conceive of partisanship, it is foremost the acceptance of an identity that is tied to the social groups that align themselves with the major parties. Viewed in these terms, the massive re-enfranchisement of southern African Americans and subsequent one-sided black allegiance to the Democratic Party – the very party that was the progenitor of the Lost Cause – made it perhaps impossible over the long term for conservative white southerners to remain aligned with the same party.

Put simply, how could conservative whites see themselves as part of a Democratic coalition of voters that at the national level had firmly committed itself to defending and actively promoting black civil rights? In hindsight, of course, we know most of these whites did not remain within the Democratic fold and if they did, then at least based on their Republican voting behavior, they appeared as Democrats in name only or perhaps just unreconstructed, “Old South” Democrats. Hence, the exodus of conservative southern whites from the Democratic Party appears to have also involved the transactional embrace of the Lost Cause. That is, as the more conservative party in modern southern politics on the most important and perennial issue shaping Dixie’s political landscape: race (Key 1949); defense of the South’s Confederate legacy transferred to the GOP.

It is true that the modern southern Republican Party stands for a host of things beyond being more racially conservative than its Democratic opponent (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016). But it is also undeniable that the successful GOP strategy of attracting southern whites by capturing the conservative position on African American civil rights (Phillips 1969) has ultimately led to the reality that the Republican Party has now become the defender of the very flag that white southerners once raised against the party of Lincoln on bloody battlefields and later in violent skirmishes over black equality. In addition, modern-day GOP adherents are also much more supportive of honoring the Confederate fallen, as we have shown with public opinion data on Confederate monuments. Finally, contemporary southern white Republicans are also the primary apologists for an almost universally disavowed historical argument that the “War Between the States” was mainly about states’ rights, as opposed to slavery. This development has come to fruition despite the fact that our data clearly show that white southerners very much value the South’s history and a large majority still think the Civil War remains relevant to American politics. Thus, the weight of the evidence shows that in “still fighting the Civil War” (Goldfield 2002), white southerners have rewritten history, at least with respect to switching partisan sides in their defense of the Lost Cause.

Notes

1. As Campbell (1977) shows, many southern blacks who were disfranchised prior to the 1965 Voting Rights Act were not partisans, but were then mobilized to support the Democratic Party because of its embrace of racial equality.

2. While Historians have long debated issues of Confederate symbols (e.g., Cox 2013), empirical political scientists have only recently begun to examine these questions (see Grose and Peterson 2020; Johnson, Tipler, and Camarillo 2019; Ryan and Hetherington 2018).
3. The “Lost Cause Myth”, consists of three tenets: “the Confederacy’s cause was noble and just and the war was fundamentally about states’ rights, not slavery. Second, slavery was benevolent and slaves were content in their station, so much so that the Civil War and Reconstruction upset a natural racial hierarchy. Third, Confederates were among the greatest soldiers in history and they were only defeated due to the Union’s superior manpower and resources” (Domby 2020, 4).
4. The waving of the Confederate flag first saw its revival in the 1948 Dixiecrat presidential campaign, but its sustained use in southern politics was a reaction to the black Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s.
5. This development has roots elsewhere in the literature. For example, McVeigh, Cunningham, and Farrell (2014) demonstrate that areas that once exhibited high levels of Ku Klux Klan activity are precisely the areas today that are more likely to have a large number of Republican identifiers. Racial attitudes once associated with Democrats are, therefore, now associated with the Republican Party. Similarly, Avidit, Blackwell, and Sen (2016) find that due to the process of behavioral path dependence, racial attitudes acquired by whites during slavery are passed down from one generation to the next, so that places with higher rates of slavery in 1860 have higher support for the Republican Party and Republican candidates today—despite the fact that it was the Democratic Party, rather than the Republican Party that was primarily responsible for reinforcing traditional racial hierarchies in the century after the Civil War.
6. Throughout this essay, the South consists of the 11 former Confederate states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.
7. The state surveys can be found at the UNC Dataverse: <https://dataverse.unc.edu/>.
8. Similarly, the sheer number of datasets presented in this paper makes it extremely unwieldy for us to present the data in a way that shows every response option. Further, the results do not change in any substantive way based on alternative methods of presentation.
9. While these are adjacent states in the Deep South, there are important distinctions between them. Nonetheless, we are limited by the state data available and the consistency with which certain questions were asked. Pairing Alabama and Georgia (bordering states), and then pairing South Carolina and North Carolina (bordering states), allows us to compare these states and provide consistent reporting of similar questions that were asked in a chronological progression.
10. Of course, given a large decline in official and unofficial displays of the Confederate flag (Huffman, Knotts, and McKee 2017–18), it follows that there are now naturally less conflicts over this symbol.
11. As of this writing, the Robert E. Lee statue still stands.

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