

polarized electorate were the culmination of factors that resulted not only in sudden and historical electoral success for the GOP, but sustained dominance in a state that was arguably the most Democratic in the nation as recently as 2008 (Davis, Dowdle, and Giammo 2017; Davis, Dowdle, and Giammo 2021). The following is a study on partisan change in Arkansas. However, I contend the findings could also be applied to explain the dynamics of partisan changes in other states, more generally.

Three generations of the Modern GOP in Arkansas

First Generation, 1966-1992

The first generation of the modern Republican Party in Arkansas began in 1966 with the statewide elections of Winthrop Rockefeller, the first Republican governor in Arkansas since Reconstruction, and then-Chairman of the Arkansas Republican Party, John Paul Hammerschmidt to the U.S. House of Representatives. Governor Rockefeller, who first ran and lost in 1964, would be re-elected to another two-year term in 1968, only to lose a bid for a third term in 1970. At the time of Rockefeller's historical victory in 1966, and subsequent re-election two years later, the Republican Party's national brand was undergoing a dramatic change following the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the party's nomination of Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater for President of the United States. Rockefeller, a reform-minded progressive, represented a wing within a party that was losing influence. Rockefeller built a party organization in Arkansas in his likeness, with his own personal fortune that would not be sustained after his departure from the political scene (Urwin 1991).

Nationally, during and immediately following Rockefeller's two terms as Governor of Arkansas, the Republican Party began to shift to a more consistently conservative position on issues from civil rights, to state's rights, feminism, and abortion. It seems, as Rockefeller was investing his fortune in a progressive movement in Arkansas, his party's brand was moving away from him. In short, Rockefeller's historical electoral success was purely his own, and failed to translate into coattails for others running under his party banner. Meanwhile, the more conservative national positions might well have been in line

with many Arkansans at the time, and their approval is reflected in their Presidential vote choices beginning in 1972—when Arkansans begin a pattern of favoring the Republican Presidential candidate in all cycles with exception to Carter and Clinton that continues today. However, the Republican Party of Arkansas largely failed to connect the GOP successes at the top of the ticket to statewide and local races in a state that remained overwhelmingly Democratic.

The 1970s and 1980s, for Republicans in Arkansas, were for the most part electorally bleak. Despite the occasional upset victory, such as the defeat of Bill Clinton in his re-election bid for Governor in 1980 to Republican businessman Frank White, the only consistent electoral success enjoyed by Republicans in the state was for the party's Presidential nominees. When Republicans were victorious, it was usually in an open seat race. For example, in 1978, Ed Bethune, a Republican attorney and former FBI agent who had previously lost a contest for state's Attorney General, sought and won election for an open U.S. House seat that encompassed Little Rock—the state's largest city—and surrounding areas, only to then challenge a Democratic U.S. Senator, David Pryor, and lose in 1984.

The Post-Rockefeller years were a time of transformation for the GOP in Arkansas, and nationally. The party was wrestled away from Rockefeller loyalists for a more conservative, Goldwater/Reagan-inspired brand, as reflected by changes in party leadership and platform (Blair 1988). Despite Arkansas' voting population being largely white and moderate to conservative, with an already established reputation for favoring Republicans for President, Democrats remained effective at beating back national brand at the state-level and maintaining personal connections with voters in a state accustomed to a more parochial, personality-based politics.

The "Big Three"

national party's stances—

surprised when Bill Clinton announced his intention to seek his party's nomination for President of the United States in October of 1991. Clinton would then go on to secure his party's nomination for President and unseat George H.W. Bush, the Republican incumbent. A native son of the state who, after earning degrees Georgetown and Yale, and being selected as a Rhodes Scholar, returned to his home state to serve as its Attorney General and Governor, the story of Clinton's ascendance to the most powerful political position in the world is, in and of itself, well-documented. However, his campaign and eventual victory in 1992, while setting up much of what followed in the state's politics, is not the primary interest for the scope of this book. In short, Clinton's victory is significant to the eventual overtaking of the state's politics by the GOP in the way it created a political power vacuum the likes of which had never been seen in the state known for its political stability and—to that point in time—one-party dominance.

Open Seats and Opportunities

In addition to favoring their own governor, Bill Clinton, in the 1992 Presidential election, Arkansas voters made other impactful decisions for the state's political future. In 1992, Arkansas voters supported a ballot initiative that imposed some of the strictest legislative term limits in the U.S. at the time. Once enacted, a few years later, legislative term limits took away the advantages of incumbency for Democrats in the General Assembly, thus creating opportunities for the GOP. As expected, over time, term limits did result in more Republican legislators in the General Assembly as long-time Democratic incumbents were forced out of their positions, resulting in open seat contests (English 2003).

Another contest in 1992 held significant, if not immediately obvious, ramifications for the partisan balance of the state. One U.S. Senate seat, occupied by former Democratic Governor Dale Bumpers since 1975, was up for re-election in 1992. Bumpers' Republican opponent was a relatively unknown pastor and media broadcaster from South Arkansas, Mike Huckabee. Despite losing to Bumpers in 1992, Huckabee's campaign garnered nearly 39% of the vote against a popular incumbent (Secretary of State). Immediately following his Senate bid defeat, Huckabee was recruited by then-GOP Chairman Asa Hutchinson to run for Lieutenant Governor in a 1993 special election to fill the vacancy created when,

pursuant to the state constitution, Democratic Lieutenant Governor, Jim Guy Tucker, succeeded Clinton. Recalling this period, Asa Hutchinson, former Chairman of the Republican Party of Arkansas and current Governor of Arkansas said,

The talent pool of the Democratic Party was deep in the early 90s. And a lot of people were waiting for Clinton to leave so that they could have an opportunity to be governor or and have a shuffling of the offices so their talent pool could run. And so with Clinton finally going to the White House, that freed up a number of positions, of course, Jim Guy Tucker, became governor. He was elected in that race. That turned sour and gave an opportunity for the Lieutenant Governor Mike Huckabee, to succeed to that office. And so yes, it created openings. And that's what we had to have. We had to have open seats, that you could compete on an even keel with the other side. We didn't fare well in the 90s running against incumbents. It was still tough power of incumbency, but an open seat in a fair playing field. We could compete now. Mike Huckabee had just lost the race against Dale Bumpers for the United States Senate. He came out as a former Baptist minister from south Arkansas. He runs for the United States Senate. I was state party chairman he set my office and said he was interested in running ran a great race and it was grassroots. It was it was folksy. It was he raised money for it any loss because he's running against an incumbent, but he gained name recognition. And so shortly after that loss, he actually went in the hospital to recover from that emotional drain and physical drain of the campaign. And that's when Jim Guy Tucker succeeded to be governor when Clinton went to the White House. So we had to have a special election for lieutenant governor. And I immediately called him in the hospital and said, You've got name ID statewide. You just finished a campaign. You've got organization it's a special election (Hutchinson 2021).

Mike Huckabee, narrowly defeated the Democrat in the race, Nate Coulter, by a narrow margin to fill the position of Lieutenant Governor in the off year special election.

Huckabee would

the parties pay for it. The state should pay for it. And we'll have joint primaries everywhere. And so that changed dramatically. So in Arkansas County and to Desha County, you had equal opportunity for Republican to vote as a Democrat, winning that case and having joint primaries publicly funded, change the

Arkansas voters could somehow still disengage from the nationalization of partisan politics in a way that continued to advantage Democrats in the state.

Clinton Administration—leaving a political vacuum of sorts for the future, and voter-supported term limits which created open seats and more competitive contests for the GOP. The close of the 2008 cycle, similarly, favored Democrats in the state who, in hindsight, were enjoying as much—if not more—complete dominance as a state than anywhere else. The GOP, as noted earlier, failed to recruit a candidate for the highest in-state race on the ballot that cycle, the party organization was struggling, and despite the signs that the party was poised for success from events which occurred the decade before (reforms to primaries, a GOP governor, continued support for Republican presidential candidates, etc.), the future must have looked murky, at best. The election cycle in 2008 may have been a low point—a floor—for the

and even made extraordinary gains in county and local offices. In four years, Arkansas had gone from one of the most Democratic states to one of the most Republican—trading the one-party dominance of one party for that of the other.

While it might be tempting to see Arkansas politics today and say, “well, it is no surprise that the state’s politics are dominated by Republicans. After all, Arkansas is predominately white, rural, conservative, and in a geographic region that, up until recently, has been largely dominated by Republicans for decades,” such a cursory glance at the state minimizes the historical significance of the quick and dominating series of political events and conceals the multiple elements that led to the party’s growth.

GOP Party Organization

For decades, as Arkansas Democrats enjoyed unparalleled and uncontested dominance in the state, its political structure was loosely built around individuals instead of any organized entity (Key 1949; Blair 1988; Blair and Barth 2005; Dowdle and Wekkin 2007). In 1999, as Democrats continued to be the dominant party in the state, Aldrich, Gomez, and Griffin conducted the “State Party Organizations Study.” This survey assessed the self-reported roles and responsibilities of state party organizations. In 2013, Davis and Kurlowski (Davis 2014; Davis and Kurlowski 2017) sought to update and build upon this previous work to evaluate the changes that have taken place with regard to the operations and organizational strength of state parties. Both major party organizations in Arkansas participated in each study. Taken together, these studies cover a period of significant change in Arkansas politics that allows for comparisons between the GOP organization in Arkansas in the late 1990s and early 2010s.

On the whole, the data from these studies suggests the Democratic Party of Arkansas and the Arkansas Republican Party each enhanced the organizational structure of their respective state parties. However, the Arkansas Republican Party’s state organization gains proved to be more impactful as it improved its ability to recruit, coordinate, brand, fundraise, and assist its candidates for office. The state

GOP made considerable gains between the years 1999 and 2013 (a period that bridges the second and third generations of the party in Arkansas) that helped the party reach its goals of winning elections and maintaining electoral successes from one cycle to the next—something it had struggled to do in the past

Most Arkansans didn't pay attention to cloture votes in the United States Senate, but they shared it in 2010. Because that was a big issue, and Blanche Lincoln and losing her US Senate seat because they pay attention not to the actual vote on the floor, but to the cloture vote that allowed it to be brought to the floor to begin with. How do you know anything about that if you're not an if you're not a political insider, but framed by cable news, distributed by social media and the interconnectivity through the web with a lot of folks. And then lastly, I think the presidency of Barack Obama really brought to bear the schism that had occurred between the conservative Arkansas voter and what their members were being forced to vote on a national level. You had an administration and a president that sort of favored sort of big city urban politics, and they felt like they were being disenfranchised from that and they didn't understand why that Blanche Lincoln would support this or Mark Pryor would support something. He forced the hand of a lot of folks to have to vote on legislation

their party identifications, as seen in Table 3. Table 3 reports the Arkansas Poll's² partisanship question between 1999 and 2021. The surveys asked, "Do you think of yourself as Republican, Democrat, Independent, or other?" For this analysis, the small portion of respondents who were reported to refuse or could not answer have been excluded. From 1999 to 2020, the portion of those polled who reported being an "Independent" consistently hovers to roughly one-third of the sample while the percentage of those polled appear to decrease among Democratic identifiers and modestly increase for Republicans until more recently, when the GOP began to have a plurality of those identified.

[TABLE 3 HERE]

Compared over time, the percentage of respondents reporting to identify as Republican in 1999 nearly doubles by 2020 and Democratic identifiers drops by a margin of nearly 15%.

Table 4 reports the follow-up question from The Arkansas Poll data to "independents" only from 1999 to 2020. The following table illustrates the party with which self-reported independents lean, according to The Arkansas Poll. Since 2008, Republicans have held the advantage among those who identify as "independents," but lean to a party. The figures in parentheses are the percentage of

point was in the period between 2008 and 2014 where Arkansas shifted from overwhelmingly Democratic to Republican with arguable no period of strong two-party competition.

Conclusion

This study presents the partisan change in Arkansas in three parts, or generations. From the 1960s to the early 1990s, the GOP's electoral victories were rare, short-lived, and limited to open-seat contests. The success of Winthrop Rockefeller in 1966—while historical—failed to usher in a new Republican era in the state. The first generation of the modern GOP in Arkansas closes with another bruising election

The story of partisan change in Arkansas is a story of white conservatives, over a relatively short amount of time, rejecting their generations-old voting habits, and voting more consistently Republican. It may be tempting to see 2010 as the stand-alone watershed moment that set the course for where the state's politics are today, but that would fail to recognize other pivotal points in the state's political history that had previously failed to usher in this level of lasting dominance the GOP now enjoys in the state. I argue that the current state of Arkansas partisan politics is the result of a culmination of events and efforts, successes, and failures, dating back decades, that enabled the GOP in the state to finally seize the political moment in a way that it had previously not been able accomplish.

Table 1. House Membership by Party, 1992-2020

Election Year	Democrats	Republicans

Table 2. Senate Membership by Party, 1992-2020

Election Year	Democrats	Republicans

Sources: Wekkin 2003; Arkansas Secretary of State

Table 4. Independents Leaning to a Party

Year	Republican	Democrat	Independent
1999	33%	29%	34%
2000	35% (39%)	25% (26%)	35% (30%)
2001	29%	36%	31%
2002	30% (31%)	32% (34%)	33% (33%)
2003	33%	34%	33%
2004	39% (41%)	31% (32%)	30% (26%)
2005	30%	35%	32%
2006	33% (35%)	34% (34%)	30% (23%)
2007	34%	37%	29%
2008	35% (38%)	30% (29%)	33% (31%)
2009	39%	32%	27%
2010	44% (50%)	21% (16%)	33% (33%)
2011	42% (48%)	29% (28%)	26% (22%)
2012	41% (46%)	26% (22%)	28% (27%)
2013	43% (51%)	21% (22%)	31% (22%)
2014	38% (43%)	25% (23%)	30% (28%)
2015	42% (52%)	23% (20%)	30% (25%)
2016	37% (45%)	18% (19%)	40% (35%)
2017	37% (38%)	26% (26%)	32% (31%)
2018	39% (43%)	25% (25%)	35% (32%)
2019	40% (43%)	27% (31%)	31% (27%)
2020	45% (52%)	32% (30%)	19% (15%)

Source: 2020 Arkansas Poll

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