

Ten Years After the Republican Surge: 1994 and the Contract with America

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Most observers of politics are well aware of the watershed events of the 1994 elections. Republicans gained 54 seats in the US House of Representatives and 8 seats in the US Senate. Not one single Republican incumbent in the House was defeated, while 34 Democratic incumbents lost. The magnitude of this change is well illustrated by the remarkable transformation in the Washington state delegation, which went from eight Democrats and one Republican to seven Republicans and two Democrats. The Republicans picked up seats in 33 of 41 state senates and 43 of 46 state lower chambers holding elections in 1994. Finally, Republican candidates defeated 5 incumbent Democratic governors and won 15 open seat elections, while all Republican incumbent governors won their reelection bids. These sweeping events caught many of those who studied American politics by surprise. In fact, 1994 saw the publication of *Congress' Permanent Minority? Republicans in the US House* (Connelly and Pitney 1994). Clearly, there were few who predicted these sweeping gains and the return of the Republican party to majority status after a long hiatus.

As a result, after the 1994 elections, there was a flurry of questions and research about what exactly had happened. Tuchfarber and Rademacher (1995, 689) wondered whether “the elections reflect *only* a short-term rebellion against the Democratic party in general and Bill Clinton in particular? Were the results due to *enduring* structural shifts in the parties’ electoral coalitions? Was 1994 a ‘critical election’ indicating that a *realignment* has occurred?” Abramowitz (1995, 874) asked, “can we explain the Republican victory?... Was it a temporary aberration caused by short-term forces or does

it signal a long-term realignment of party strength in the United States?” Many of these studies developed (often-conflicting) theories to explain the Republican gains of 1994, but almost all agreed that looking at this election with a short term focus meant that many questions about 1994 had to remain unanswered. For instance, Little (1998, 188) claimed more time was needed to determine the degree to which the fruits of the Republicans’ successful strategy in this election cycle were merely temporary or more durable.

But despite the near universal agreement on the need for perspective, little research has been done that looks at the implications of the 1994 elections historically. Most research on the 1994 elections was published in 1998 or earlier, and 1994 is the last election included in those studies examining that election as part of electoral trends. This paper returns to the questions surrounding the 1994 elections with the goal of developing more definitive answers now that we have the vantage of time. Was 1994 a watershed election or simply the culmination of gradual processes of change? To what extent have the Republican gains of 1994 persisted through 2004? Are there regional variations to the national trends? Have these changes played out against a backdrop of change with respect to the nationalization of American electoral politics?

To begin answering these questions, we utilize data on the partisan balance in the US Congress and state legislatures and control of the 50 governors’ mansions from 1984 through 2004. Generally speaking, the results reveal that 1994 was indeed a revolutionary election; there was little evidence of Republican gains prior to and immediately after the 1994 elections. Furthermore, while the Republican gains of 1994 have for the most part persisted, there have not been additional gains. However, there are clear regional variations to these trends, particularly at the state level. Southern state

legislatures, rather than being part of the revolution, were undergoing evolutionary change that predated 1994 and continued after. These changes, both nationally and in the south, suggest American politics became more nationalized, although in the period since 1994 southern congressional delegations have become as distinctively Republican as they were Democratic for most of the 20th Century.

Early Explanations for the Republican Surge

On November 8th, 1994, many politicians and political scientists were stunned by the results of the congressional and state elections. Even Republican congressional leaders were surprised—and unprepared for their new role as a majority. As one newly elected Republican US representative noted, “I never dreamed I would serve in the majority. I expected a 20-seat gain...I don’t care what those leaders say, they didn’t know we were going to win either. If they had, they would have known what to teach us in orientation” (Gimpel 1996, 16). Political scientists were caught off guard, too. Abramowitz (1995, 873) described the election as a Republican “tidal wave” while Gimpel (1996, 1) used words such as *landmark*, *spectacular*, and *stunning* to describe the turn of events. Almost immediately, researchers turned to the task of explaining what happened in these elections and why almost everyone failed to predict these results.

Some have argued that these Republican victories were a function of unique conditions in 1994. Tuchfarber and Rademacher (1995) conclude that the 1994 elections were both a rejection of Bill Clinton, the Democratic party and liberalism as well as an embrace of conservatism (694). Little (1998) argues state level victories for the Republican party were a function of unprecedented, coordinated national party activity

that induced state level parties to adopt state-specific Contracts with America.¹ The Republicans also efficiently targeted resources to those races where they would make the most difference, which had a noted impact in these races (Abramowitz 1995). According to these arguments, then, in the absence of these specific conditions in future elections, one would predict that Republican gains would not persist or, at the very least, that such gains would not continue.

But others argued that these victories were simply a part of larger trends or explanations of mid-term elections generally. For example, Coleman (1997) argues that these victories were not altogether surprising due to a longstanding Republican advantage in mid-term elections. The congressional parties have different fortunes in midterm elections where, even when controlling for factors such as presidential approval, economic growth, surge and decline and safe seats, Republicans lose fewer seats than do Democrats. The Democrats lost so badly in 1994 because they were Democrats, serving under a Democratic president. Thus, if presidential party is incorporated into existing models of midterm elections, the results are almost entirely explicable.

Campbell (1997) argues the results of the 1994 elections are consistent with a revised theory of surge and decline. The results of the election are due to a staggered realignment in the south, where the south had become solidly Republican in presidential elections in the 1980s, but only became solidly Republican in congressional elections in the 1990s. The 1994 elections, he claims, mark the unification of the south into the Republican camp. Thus, Republican gains were so large because of two forces, the

¹ Of course, one must question the extent to which the Contract drove voting behavior in the states given that exit polls showed few voters knew about the Contract at the national level let alone the state level. However, Little (1998) argues the importance of these state contracts is that they gave Republicans issues to hang their hats on, issues that resonated with the voters.

realignment of the south and mid-term decline, both of which worked against the Democrats.

Some have argued that changes in the electorate led to sweeping Republican gains (Abramowitz 1995). The electorate had grown less Democratic and more conservative since the 1980s. At the same time, ideology and party became far more important predictors of vote choice in 1994, particularly for Republicans and conservatives. From these findings, then, one could argue that the Republican gains should continue past the 1994 time period. While the changes in the 1994 election may have been large, they are explainable by minor revisions to existing models and are not an historical anomaly.

Additionally, there is disagreement over the extent to which these victories were driven by changes in the south. While Campbell (1997) attributes much of the observed change in congressional elections to changes in the south, Little (1998) finds state level gains by the Republican party are not related to region. Thus, it is not clear the extent to which regional changes in the south were generally important or whether such changes were only critical at the congressional level.

Despite their disagreement over the causes of the 1994 Republican victories, all these findings seem to suggest congressional elections are increasingly responding to national level forces. While previous research has shown congressional elections have not become nationalized and are more responsive to state and local forces (Vertz, Frenreis, and Gibson 1987; Claggett, Flanigan and Zingale 1984), the wide-spread nature of the Republican gains in this election cycle suggest that voters have been responding to national forces when making choices in congressional elections. Was this

nationalization of mid-term elections a one time event or have the mid-term elections become more nationalized since the 1980s?

Finally, despite the contradictory claims about the nature of these victories, what all authors seems to agree upon is the fact that it difficult to find definitive answers about the long-term significance of the 1994 elections with a short term vantage point. For example, Tuchfarber and Rademacher (1995, 694) note that only future elections will allow us to tell if 1994 marks the beginning of a period of Republican dominance or a continuation of a period of electoral dealignment. Abramowitz (1995, 885) wonders whether the changes he identifies represent long-term changes in the electorate or short-term reactions to the perceived failures of the Clinton administration and the Democratic Congress. Without examining elections beyond these events, it is difficult to answer these questions or determine to what extent the Republicans continued to make gains in Congress and in the states beyond the 1994 election or even the extent to which the gains made in the 1994 elections persisted.

Reexamining the Surge Ten Years After

In order to develop answers to questions surrounding the 1994 election results, we utilize data on the partisan balance in the US Congress and state legislatures and control of the 50 governors' mansions from 1984 through 2004. This time frame was chosen to allow analysis of the data ten years before and ten years after the 1994 election.

At the national level, we collected data on the partisan balance of each state's delegation to the US House and the US Senate after each election cycle. Information on state delegations to Congress came from the official Biographical Directory of the US

Congress² and was confirmed by the Clerk of the House³ and the official Senate website.⁴ Data were coded so that any gains or losses from a given election were associated with the year of the election, not the year in which the winners actually served. So, for example, changes in a state delegation to Congress in the 1994 election year are reflected in the data for 1994, not 1995. Because the overall data set is yearly, the data for the odd years, when no elections were held, simply reflect the data for the previous year.

Data on state level election returns come from Klarner (2003). For each state, the percentage of Republicans in the upper and lower chamber as well as a variable indicating whether Republicans controlled each chamber is included for each year.⁵ Where there was a tie in a chamber these cases were treated as non-Republican controlled—as the Republicans did not actually control these chambers, they are, for analytical purposes, not Republican. Finally, this dataset contains a variable indicating the party of the governor. There are 26 cases where the party of the governor switched mid-year or there was a non-major party governor. Once again, these cases were treated as non-Republican control of the gubernatorial post. Finally, in this state data, because different states hold elections in different years, the statistics reflect who actually served in that year, rather than gains/losses from elections that year. So, for example, gains in the 1994 election are reflected in the 1995 totals.

Because much of the speculation surrounding the changes in 1994 involves regional variation, the data have also been split into nonsouth and south, with the latter

² bioguide.congress.gov/biosearch/biosearch.asp

³ www.clerk.house.gov

⁴ www.senate.gov/pagelayout/senators/f_two_sections_with_teasers/states.htm

⁵ Of course, this means that Nebraska was excluded from our analysis as their state legislature is unicameral and nonpartisan.

composed of the eleven confederate states (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia).

The primary means of analysis will be an examination of trends in the variables during the 21-year period bracketing 1994. In each figure, a vertical line indicates the first year reflecting the effects of the 1994 elections: for the congressional data, this is 1994; for the state data, this is 1995, because these data record the numbers serving each year, rather than election returns. The analysis also includes an assessment of the trends before and after 1994. To measure these trends, the variable of interest was regressed on the time variable (year) separately for the early period and then again for the later period.⁶ The slope from these regressions serves as a good measure of trend, capturing the average annual change in each period. Two additional statistics are helpful in understanding the dynamics in the time series. First, the difference between the mean level of each variable in the early, pre-1994 period and the later period is calculated. This change, which we have termed “*bump*,” indicates the durable gains made by the GOP. A second statistic, termed “*jump*,” measures the specific increase in the variable as a result of the 1994 election. For the congressional data, the jump is the gain from 1993 to 1994; for the state data, jump is the difference between 1994 and 1995. If the 1994 election was truly a revolution, we would expect to see a large jump that is equal to or larger than the bump; in such situations, all of the change between the two periods would be explained by the jump in 1994. However, if 1994 was part of an evolutionary process, then we would expect to see a bump that is larger than the jump. This would suggest that

⁶ For the congressional data, the early period is 1984-1993 and the later period is 1994-2004. For the state data, the early period is 1984-1994 and the later period is 1995-2004.

while the Republicans made some gains in 1994, there were also gains that occurred outside this election.

The Nature of the Republican Surge in Perspective

The 1994 election is often referred to as the Republican revolution, but to what extent were the changes truly revolutionary? Did any of the outcomes reflect evolutionary processes that had been unfolding in the years prior? The story told by the data initially appears fairly clear: 1994 was truly a revolution. Consider first the Republican share of seats in the US Congress. Figure 1 graphs the series for the House and Senate separately. The trend in the House prior to 1994 is essentially flat—the slope during this period is -0.03 . At this rate, it would have taken the Republicans over 33 years to lose one percentage of their seats. The trend is similarly flat after 1994—the slope is an equally small but positive 0.03 . As a result, almost all of the change in the average percentage of Republicans in the House comes as a result of 1994. The “*bump*” in the Republican percentage—the increase from the mean level in the early period to the mean level in the later period—is 11.3%, as Republicans went from controlling about 40% of the seats to having a bit over half. But most of this comes from the “*jump*” from 1992 to 1994—10.5%. Indeed, no one could have seen this revolution coming. And, moreover, once the revolution was over, equilibrium returned.

The story is similar in the Senate, although the first two years reflect the Republican majority during the Reagan era. As a result, the slope in the early period is negative and sizeable (-1.31). This also means the bump in the average percentage Republican, 7.0, is smaller than the jump in 1994, 11.0. So, although the Republicans

picked up 11 Senate seats in 1994, their average in the post-1994 period was only 7 seats greater than in the 10 years prior to 1994. Despite this characteristic of the changes, there is certainly no evidence of secular gains prior to 1994 and equally little evidence of continuing progress after the revolution—in fact, the slope in the later period is slightly negative (-0.28).

The national-level changes clearly fit the revolution mold, but what about the dynamics in the states? Figure 2 graphs the number of Republican governors along with the number of state upper and lower houses controlled by Republicans. Here, too, the changes are much more revolutionary than evolutionary. The Republicans were gaining a governor at the rate of about one every five years in the period before 1994 (slope = 0.20). This was progress for the GOP, but pales in comparison to the jump in 1994 of 11 gubernatorial positions. This largely accounts for the bump of 10.3 positions from the early to later period. Interestingly, the Republican party has been handing back keys to a number of governors' mansions since 1994, losing one position every two years on average (slope = -0.56).

The patterns in Republican control of state legislatures follow the same revolutionary mold. The trends in both upper and lower house control in the early period and later period are essentially flat, although the GOP is gaining one upper house every five years or so in the post-1994 period (slope = 0.22). The changes occur almost completely in the jump from 1994 to 1995—8 upper houses and 10 lower houses move into the Republican column. Both of these jumps account for almost all of the bump in average number of chambers owned by the GOP—8.9 upper houses and 10.7 lower houses. Of course, it is possible that this singular jump in Republican party control after

1994 reflects slowly growing Republican percentages that only constitute a majority after 1994. However, this does not appear to be the case. As Figure 3 shows, Republicans were not gaining any state legislative seats in the ten years before 1994—and they are not gaining or losing any since then.

So far the conclusion about the nature of change is clear: 1994 was a truly remarkable election in which the Republicans made major gains that were not part of any gradual process of increasing electoral success. Similarly, little has happened since that revolution to alter the basic partisan balance in Congress and in the states. The gains have persisted. On the one hand, given the popular characterizations of the Republican revolution, this conclusion is not surprising. On the other hand, there are good reasons to expect *some* build-up to the big bang in 1994. For one, it has been known from survey data that the population has been trending Republican since the mid- to late-1970s. Second, a secular realignment in the south has been underway for some time and started to reach its maturity in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Both of these trends are displayed in Figure 4, which tracks yearly Republican partisanship in the CBS/New York Times polls.⁷ Republican identification in both the nonsouth and south increases dramatically from the late-1970s into the mid-1980s and then stabilizes. The changes in the south are especially pronounced, as the percentage of Republicans roughly doubles in about a decade. The southern change is even more pronounced among whites (see Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson 2002). And all of the increases occurred well before the 1994 election.

Certainly, it is reasonable to speculate, these changes in mass partisanship must have had some effects on partisan control of government before 1994. Or did the

⁷ The data are from Gerald Wright: <http://php.indiana.edu/~wright1/>.

disparity between macropartisanship and party control simply create increasing tension that was abruptly released in 1994? The answer is that there were, in fact, signs of increasing Republican ascendancy before 1994, but only in the south and particularly in state legislatures.

This becomes apparent when the trends examined above are broken down by region. Figure 5 displays the Republican percentage in the US House for nonsouthern and southern states—in other words, the Republican percentage of the members from these regions.⁸ Technically, both series are basically flat in the pre- and post-1994 periods—all of the slopes are less than 1 in magnitude. So, on average, gains in each period were offset by losses. But the southern series rises consistently between 1990 and 1996. This suggests the Republic revolution in the southern congressional delegations played itself out over four election cycles. A good indicator of this fact is that only 12.8 percentage points of the 21.8% bump in average Republican percentage in the south was due to the jump from 1993 to 1994. In other words, just under half of the durable Republican gains in the House over the last 20 years occurred in elections besides 1994. In contrast, the 1993-1994 jump in nonsouthern states was 9.7% but resulted in a bump of only 7.5%. The much smaller, durable change outside the south was therefore clearly limited to 1994.

A similar story emerges for the Senate—see Figure 6. The increases in the percentage of southern Republican senators start in 1992 and continue through 1996. This is a shorter span than in the House, but it is still evidence of evolution. In contrast,

⁸ More specifically, it is the number of Republicans from each region divided by the total number of House seats in each region (not the average of each state's delegation).

the nonsouthern series looks remarkably stable in both periods and exhibits only a minor jump in 1994 that really only served to make up lost ground in 1992.

The increasing Republicanism of southern governors occurred more abruptly: almost all of the remarkable 30.3% bump happened in the 27.2% jump after 1994 (see Figure 7). But there are also indications it occurred over a more extended period. In the early period, the collection of southern Republican governors was growing about 1% a year (slope = 0.99). Moreover, there were gains in 1992 and 1996 as well, though this certainly reflects the fact that many gubernatorial election calendars did not fall on 1994. But, as was true with the US Congress, nonsouthern change was almost wholly confined to the 1994 election.

Are signs of evolution equally apparent in southern statehouses? Figures 8 and 9 show the percentage of upper and lower chambers in each region under GOP control. The nonsouthern series both show the expected jump, though there were some gains in the years prior. But in the south, there were *no* Republican-controlled chambers prior to 1995. After the 1994 elections, however, there is a notable trend upward in both upper and lower houses with GOP majorities. Unlike the congressional trends in the south, which seemed to suggest a series of years surrounding 1994 that were responsible for the Republican “Evolution,” the state legislative data portray 1994 as the push that started the ball rolling. In the post-1994 period, the Republicans picked up 4.5% of southern upper houses and 1.8% of southern lower houses per year on average. The immediate post-1994 jump is clear in the lower chambers, but for the upper chambers it is not unusually large compared to change later in the period. It looks like something happened in

southern statehouses in 1994, but it was not the radical, instantaneous change evident in the rest of the country and in Washington.

In fact, what happened in 1994 was simply that longstanding increases in Republican membership in southern state legislatures had finally led to majority status for the GOP. This is clear in Figures 10 and 11, which display the mean Republican percentage in upper and lower houses in the nonsouth and south. What is remarkable in these figures is the relatively smooth, unbroken trend upward in the south. In contrast to almost all of the previous figures, one would be hard pressed to identify any particular point as a clear jump indicative of revolutionary change. Republicans were making steady progress in southern statehouses long before 1994 and have continued to do so at mostly the same rate.⁹ What happened in 1994 was simply that some of these increases started to create GOP majorities in some southern states. As the GOP presence continued to increase in the south, more and more chambers fell into Republican hands, as Figures 8 and 9 show.

These patterns are the clearest evidence of evolutionary change. Southern state legislatures were simply not part of the Republican revolution. Ironically, though the Republican pick-ups in the south in 1994 are often presented as part of the evidence for a sweeping, critical realignment in 1994, the timing of the gains is purely accidental. They coincide with the other clear jumps in partisan control in 1994 not because they all share some common source but simply because that happened to be the year the secular realignment in the south yielded some GOP majorities.

⁹ The slopes are largely unchanged: for upper houses, 1.7 in the early period and 0.7 in the later period; for lower houses, 1.0 before 1995 and 1.2 after. These numbers do suggest the upward trend flattens a bit for upper houses.

One thing is relatively clear: both the sharp and gradual gains together have nationalized American politics. At the beginning of the time frame considered here, the south was clearly less Republican than the rest of the country. By the end of the period, the south was much less distinctive and in many instances had become even more Republican than the nonsouth. In the states, gubernatorial control had become almost identical in the nonsouth and south (Figure 7) and both Republican control and mean percentage in the southern state legislatures had approached convergence with the nonsouth (Figures 8-11). In the US House (Figure 5) and US Senate (Figure 6), there is evidence of nationalization, but only for a short period around 1994; since then, the south has become as distinctly Republican as it was Democratic in the earlier era. It will be interesting to see whether the trends in the states will similarly tilt the balance away from regional similarity and toward a solid Republican south.

Conclusion

On one hand, some previous analyses of the 1994 elections suggested that the gains were a function of specific conditions that were present in that election. The Republican revolution, according to this model, was a spectacular event that would probably not be replicated. On the other hand, some argued the 1994 gains were part of a larger process of political change in the United States and thus were more evolutionary, rather than revolutionary, in nature. Of course, it was difficult to determine which of these viewpoints was correct without the benefit of perspective.

When looking at the Republican surge ten years later, it becomes clear that these changes were truly revolutionary. In the US House and Senate, almost all of the gains

made by Republicans came in the 1994 elections despite the fact that mass partisanship was gradually becoming more Republican in the period preceding the 1994 elections. The same is true at the state level. Changes in Republican control of the executive branch and state legislatures almost all occur in the 1994 election. There is little evidence of evolutionary change at the aggregate level.

However, it is also true that the south had gradually tilted more Republican during this time period, and there is evidence to suggest that the changes in the south were happening much more gradually than in the rest of the country. Republican gains in nonsouthern states—in congressional delegations, in governorships, and in state legislatures—were almost entirely confined to the 1994 election. However, southern congressional delegations were becoming more Republican throughout the 1990s. This evolutionary process is even more clearly evident in southern state legislatures, particularly when looking at the percentage of Republicans in these chambers. In these legislatures, Republican representation increased smoothly across the 21 years with little evidence of a surge at all.

So, it seems clear that the 1994 Republican revolution was a remarkable confluence of events. A gradual process of evolutionary change in the south was reaching its culmination at the same time a number of conditions favoring the Republicans occurred. The Republicans were in an excellent position to capitalize on these two factors and capitalize they did, making tremendous gains. However, while these gains have not evaporated, they also have not continued. There is a new equilibrium in congressional politics, much to the Democrats' disadvantage.

As a result of the 1994 elections, it appears that politics became more nationalized. In state legislatures, southern Republican gains have brought them to levels similar to those in the rest of the country, and their growth continues. If trends remain the same, in just a few years the typical southern statehouse will be virtually indistinguishable from its northern counterpart. At the national level, increasingly Republican congressional delegations made them look similar to those from nonsouthern states overall, and for a brief time region seemed to disappear as a variable predicting the party composition of Congress. However, the overall change during the era surrounding the 1994 election has resulted in a southern congressional delegation that is as equally distinctive as its 20th Century ancestor, only now it is clearly more Republican.

The shift of the south from solidly Democratic to staunchly Republican must surely be seen as a realignment of some sort, though it appears to have happened—and is still happening—in waves. The shift occurred in presidential elections earliest. The Republican “L” has been a staple of the electoral map for decades. Then, state legislatures started moving in a Republican direction. This change is still underway, but signs point toward Republican dominance in southern statehouses soon. The element of these partisan shifts that most resembles the classic critical realignment was the change in Congress, which occurred primarily in 1994 but also extended over surrounding elections in the south. The Republican gains in the 1994 surge have persisted, giving the GOP a durable majority in Congress.

Many people, of course, have described the Republican surge in 1994 as a realignment. With a ten-year perspective on these events, it is now possible to better understand the complexity of this realignment process. This complexity only confirms

what many students of realignment theory have believed for years: there is no *typical* realignment. Perhaps we should drop the term altogether and simply discuss *partisan change*. Either way, the 1994 election was part of a major transformation in American politics with lasting consequences for the two major political parties.

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Figure 1: Republican Percentage in the US House and Senate

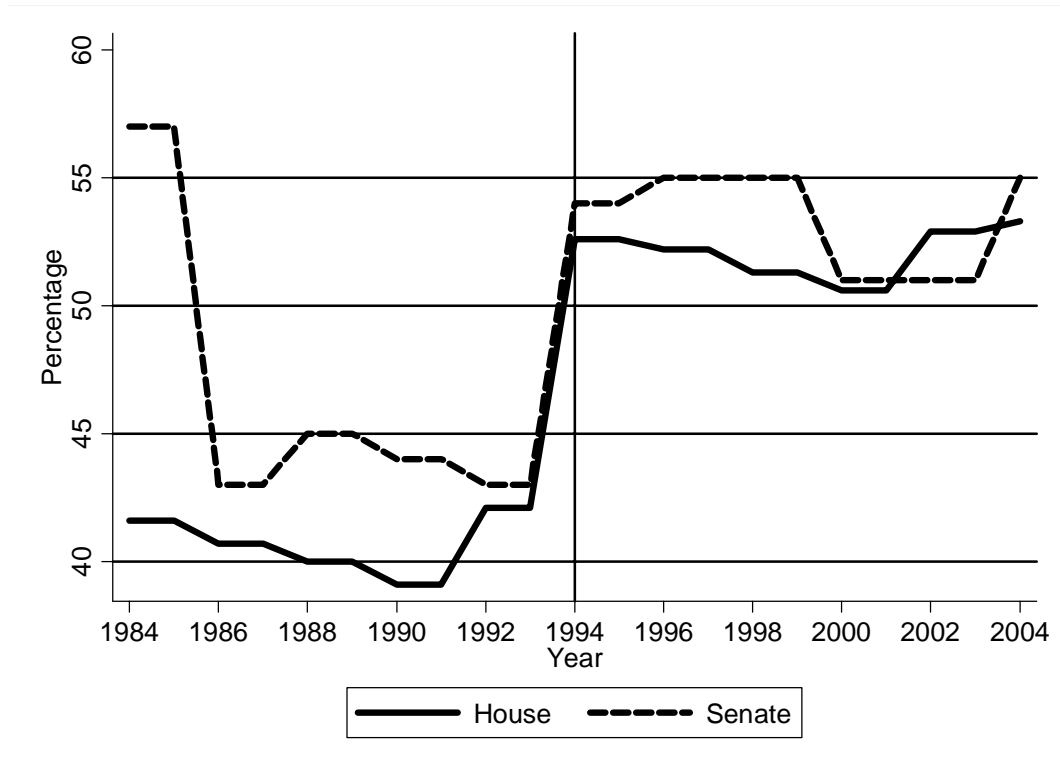


Figure 2: Number of Republican Governors and State Upper and Lower Houses Controlled by Republicans

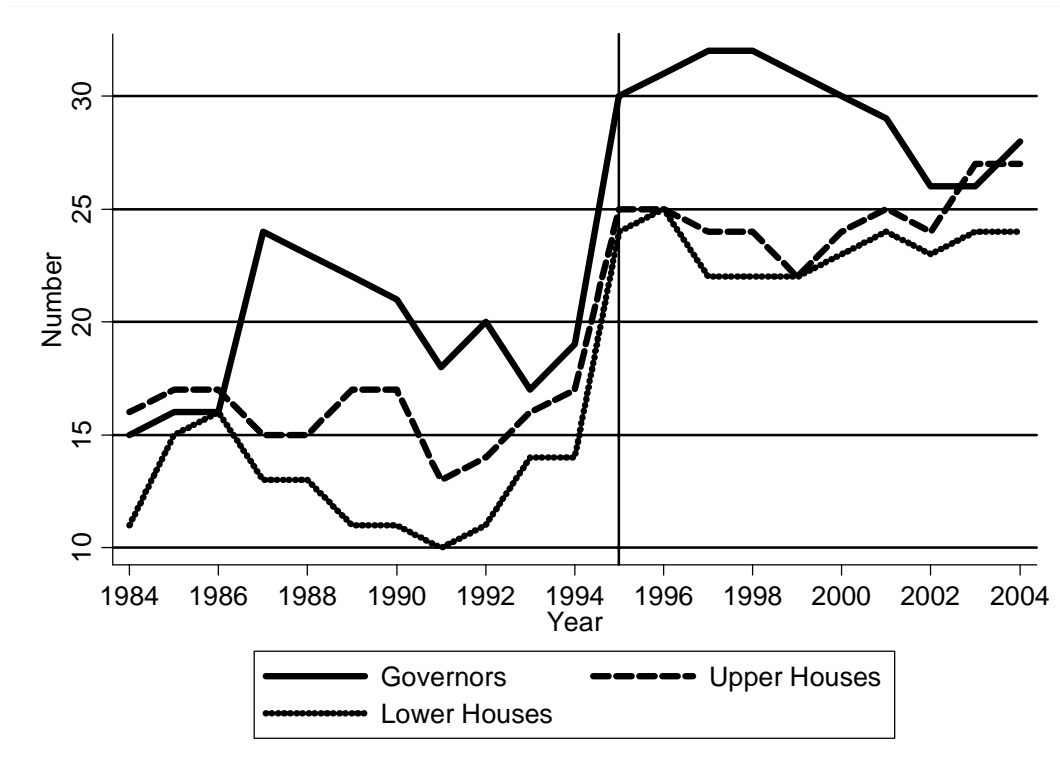


Figure 3: Mean Republican Percentage in State Upper and Lower Houses

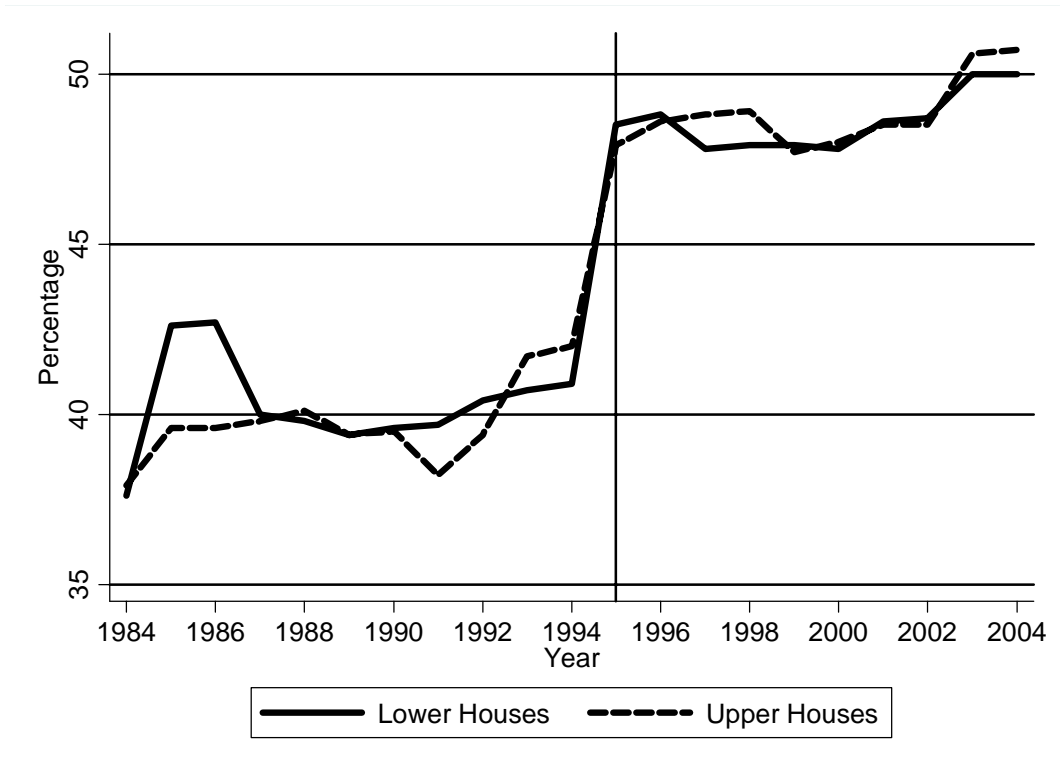


Figure 4: Republican Partisanship in CBS/New York Times Polls, By Region

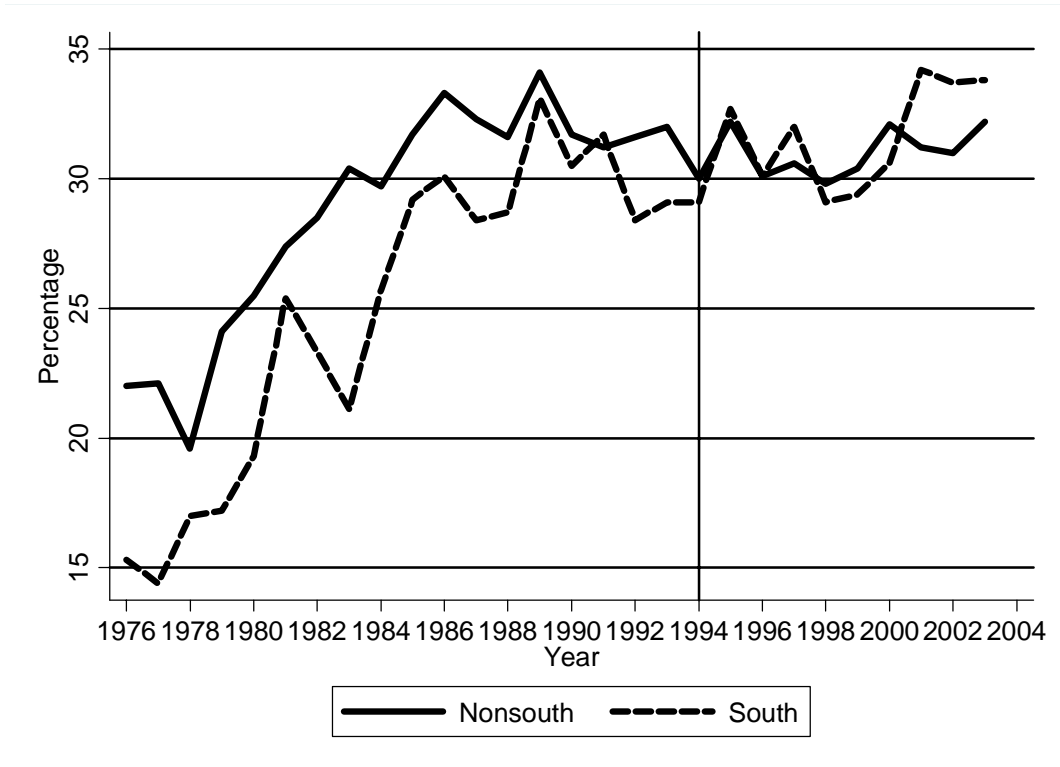


Figure 5: Republican Percentage in the US House, By Region

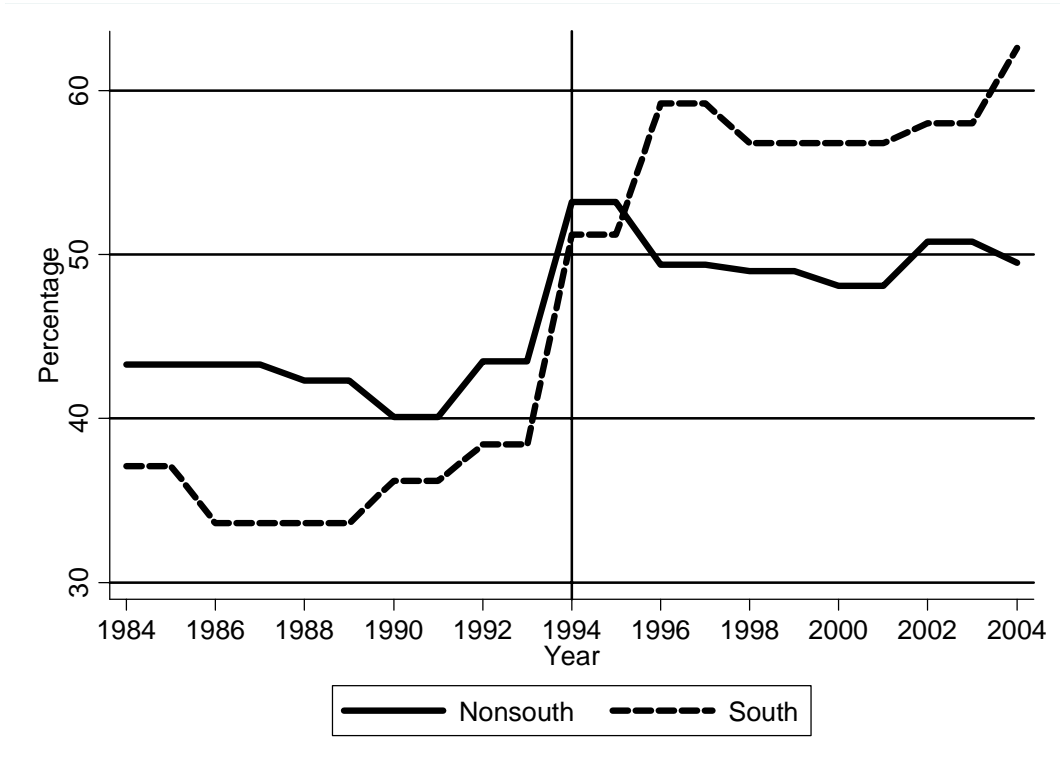


Figure 6: Republican Percentage in the US Senate, By Region

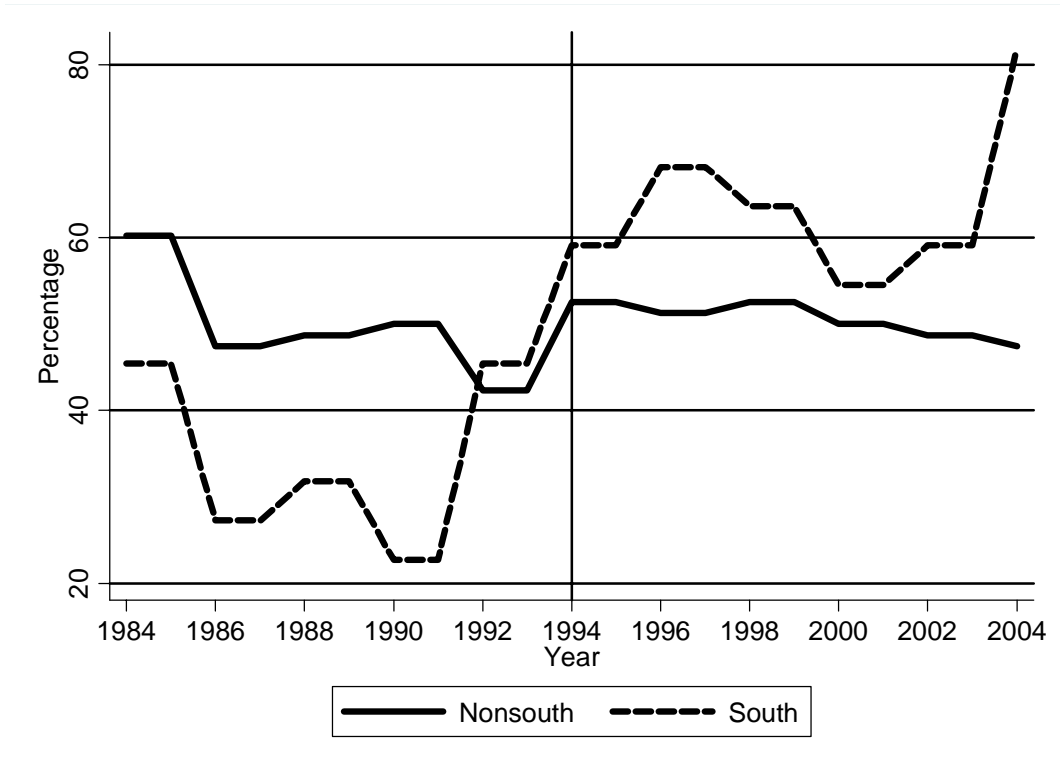


Figure 7: Republican Percentage of Governors, By Region

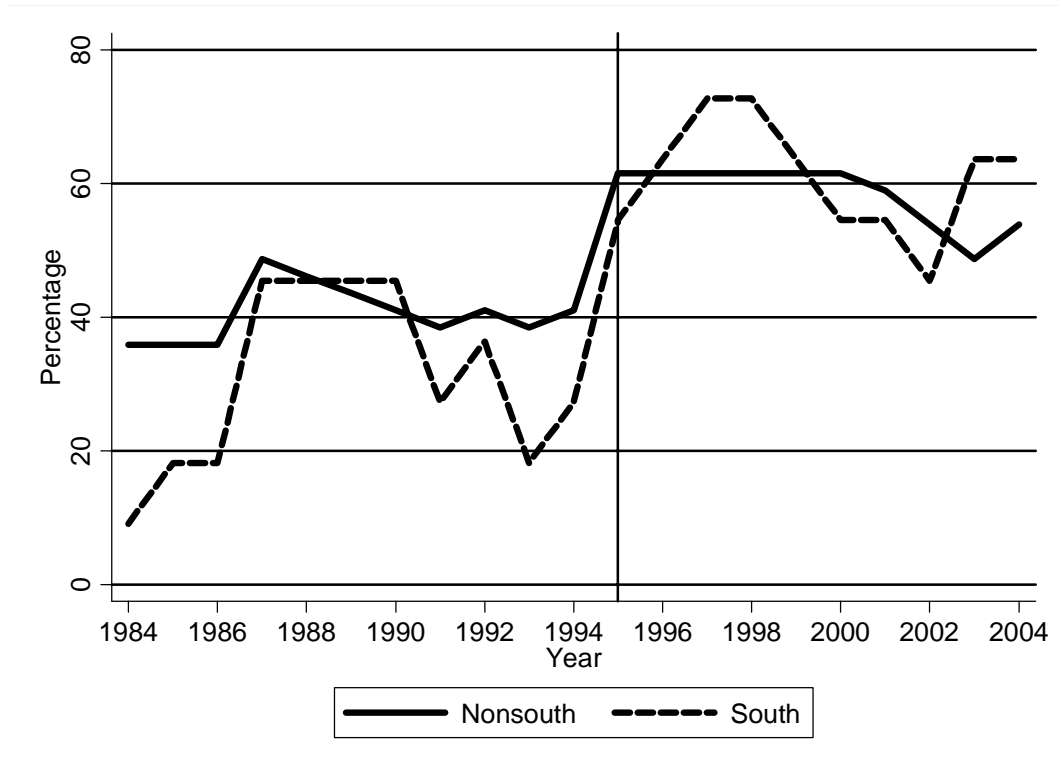


Figure 8: Percentage of State Upper Houses Controlled by Republicans, By Region

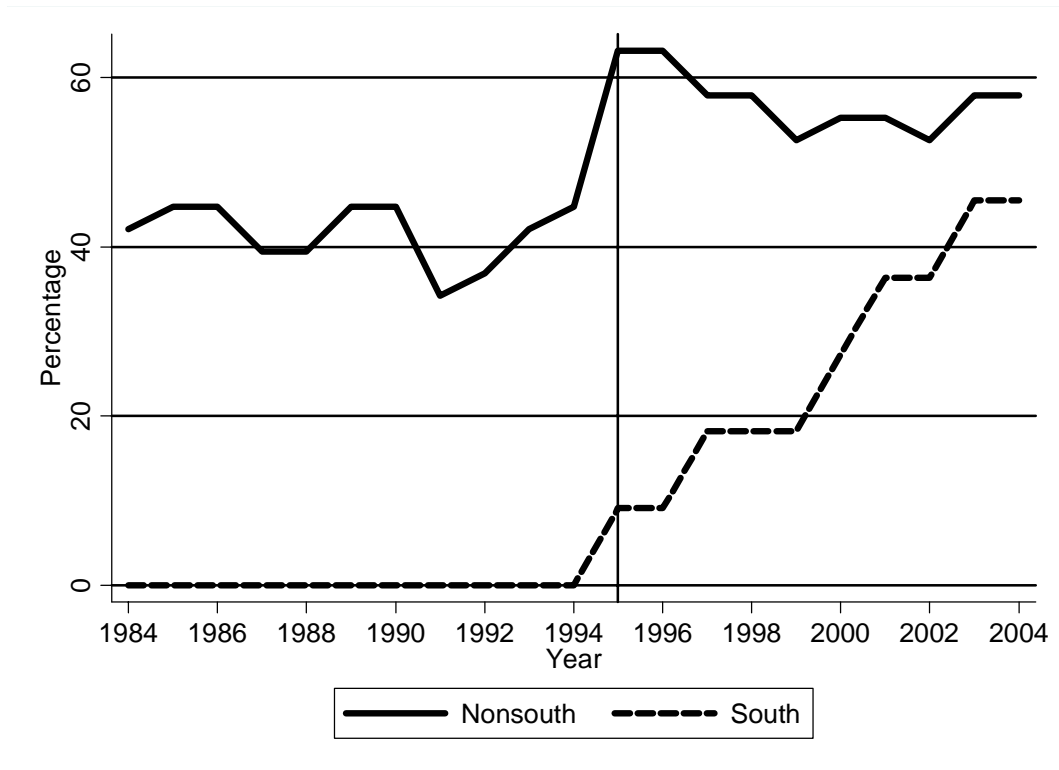


Figure 9: Percentage of State Lower Houses Controlled by Republicans, By Region

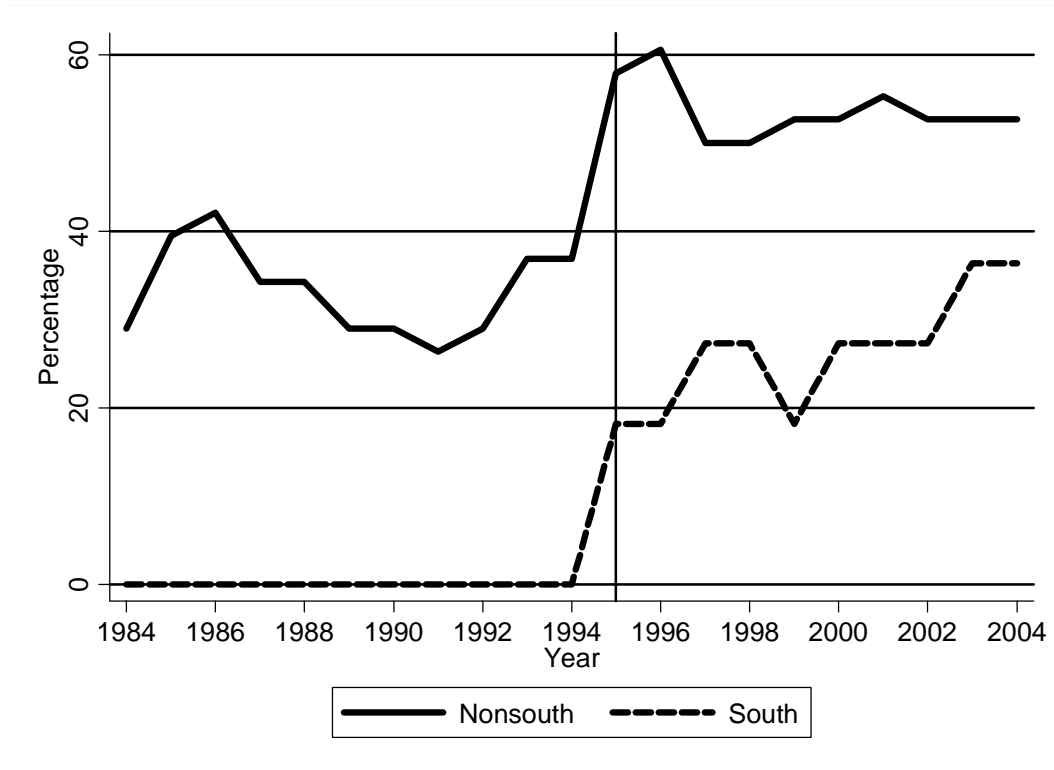


Figure 10: Mean Republican Percentage in State Upper Houses, By Region

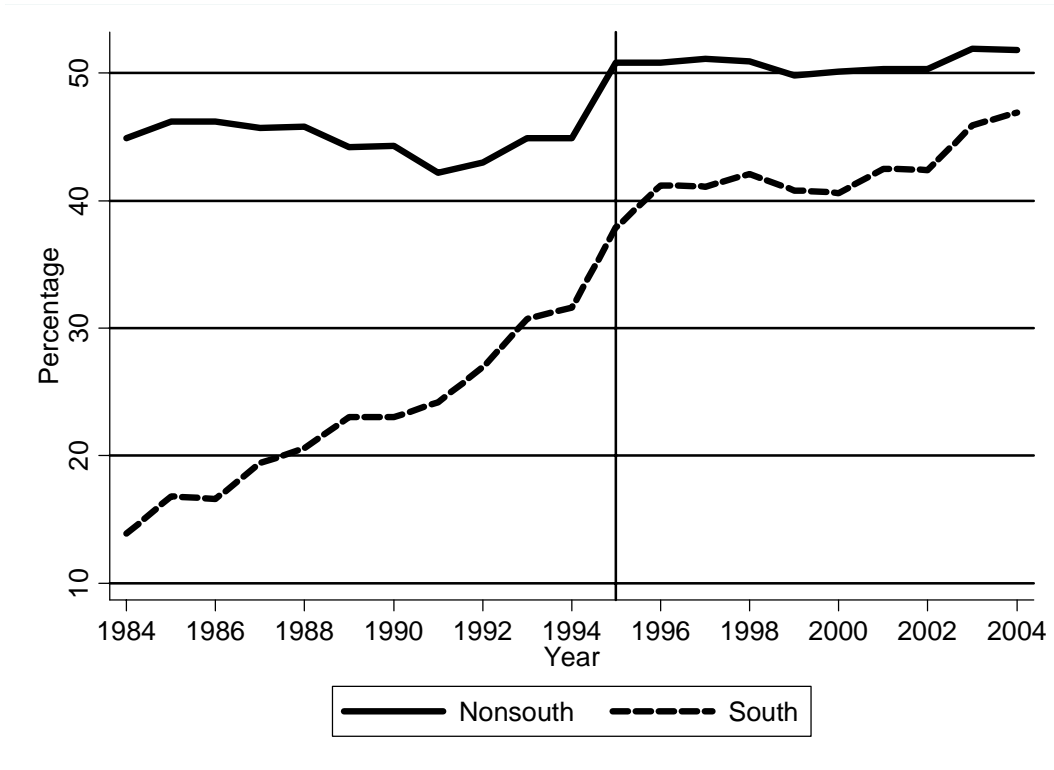


Figure 11: Mean Republican Percentage in State Lower Houses, By Region

