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The Southern Strategy and the Post-New Deal Dynamics of the U.S. Party System

Stefano Luconi
University of Florence, Italy

The growth of consensus for the Republican Party in the South has been a key feature of the dynamics of the U.S. electoral system since the final collapse of the New Deal coalition in the late 1960s (Black and Black 2002). One of the factors that caused the disruption of the previous alignment of voters was the return of race issues to the foreground of the political debate in the mid 1960s while the two major parties almost turned up side down their traditional stands on these matters (Carmines and Stimson 1989). On the one hand, Democratic President Lyndon B. Johnson disavowed the defense of states' rights, which had characterized the ideology and platform of his own party for one and a half century, and made a point of righting ancient southern wrongs through such federal legislation as the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. On the other hand, the Republican Party, which had advocated African Americans' claims since its establishment in the mid 19th century, tried to become the champion of the opponents of racial integration as its 1964 standard-bearer for the White House, Barry Goldwater, had been among the Senators who had opposed the Civil Rights Act and was against the resort to busing as a means for reducing racial unbalance in public schools. Such a stand certainly let Goldwater carry five Deep South states – Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, and South Carolina – besides his home state of Arizona. Yet it also contributed to his debacle

nationwide against President Johnson, who received 61.1 percent of the ballots, the largest popular majority since Franklin D. Roosevelt 1936 triumph over Alfred Landon with 60.8 percent of the votes (Goldberg 1995, pp. 210-37).

The reception of the grievances of the foes of both desegregation and the enactment of voting rights for African Americans on the part of local and national Republican candidates helped the GOP make inroads into southern constituencies. Actually, the attempt to cash in on white voters' backlash at the alleged encroachments of African Americans during the Johnson administration was the main goal of Richard M. Nixon's Southern Strategy. Paving the way for his own 1972 reelection campaign, President Nixon planned to oppose busing, to resort to a restrictive interpretation of civil rights legislation, and to appoint judges who were conservative on racial issues in order to secure the votes of the disenchanted southern white Democrats who had gone over to racist George Wallace, the third-party candidate for the White House in 1968 (King 1991; O'Reilly 1995, pp. 296-308).

This strategy relied heavily on the findings of *The Emerging Republican Majority*, an analysis of the dynamics of the party system that Kevin Phillips – a top aide to John Mitchell, Nixon's 1968 campaign director, and a key figure in the election team for his mastery of computerized voter analysis (Carter 1996, pp. 42-46) – published a few months after the end of the presidential race. By adding Wallace's 13.5 percent of the popular vote to Nixon's 43.4 percent, Phillips contended that the 1968 election had marked the establishment of a conservative majority, made up primarily of white southerners and suburbanites as well as blue-collar workers alienated by Democratic cultural liberalism, which had definitively replaced Roosevelt's New Deal coalition. Phillips also pointed to the white southern electorate's dissatisfaction with Democrats' enforcement of racial desegregation as the leading issue that would consolidate the

supposed pro-Republican realignment that he himself had perceived in Nixon's 1968 victory over Hubert Humphrey (Phillips 1969).

The search for whites' support, as Phillips had suggested, long shaped the southernization of U.S. politics on the part of the GOP. Indeed, two decades later, the Republican Party still played on the racial fears of white voters for election campaign purposes. For instance, race-tinged themes shaped both George Bush Sr.'s 1988 notorious Willie Horton ad and Senator Jesse Helms' 1990 commercials. The former pointed to an African-American murderer serving a life sentence who raped a white woman and viciously beat her white boyfriend on a weekend furlough from a jail in Massachusetts, the state whose governor was Michael Dukakis, Bush's Democratic opponent in the presidential contest (Feagin and Vera 1995, pp. 114-22; Wayne 1996, pp. 246-48). The latter emphasized the alleged reverse discrimination of minority programs (Gross 1977) by contending that affirmative action forced employers to bypass qualified white applicants for jobs to the benefit of unqualified African Americans. The best known of Helms' political ads featured two white hands screwing up a letter from a prospective employer, while an announcer said: "you were qualified for that job, but it had to go to a minority because of quotas" (Appleborne 1990; Raber 1990; Berman 1994, p. 152). Aired during Helms' reelection campaign against Charlotte's former African-American mayor Harvey Gantt, the commercial was almost a replica of one of Goldwater's 1964 political ads in Texas, which read "fired" under a white man and "hired" under a black man after explaining that "Johnson's Civil Rights Bill can get you fired from your job and give it to a person of another race" (reproduced in Mayer 2002, photo portfolio). As late as 2002, Republican Sonny Perdue defeated Democratic incumbent Roy Barnes, then a rising political star and a potential 2004 vice presidential candidate, in the first GOP victory in a gubernatorial race in Georgia since 1872 by promising a referendum to restore

the fighting banner of the Confederacy that his opponent had eliminated from the state's flag (Broder 2002; Gettleman 2002; "The Rain Fell" 2002).

Chandler Davidson has pointed out that "*The Emerging Republican Majority* was, in brief, a handbook for Republicans on how to capitalize – and how to encourage – racial polarization along party lines" (Davidson 1990, pp. 232-33). Nonetheless the Republican Party has never pursued race-oriented policies and campaign tactics to the hilt, as Phillips conversely suggested. President Nixon, for instance, matched his Southern Strategy with the Philadelphia Plan, which aimed at integrating blacks within construction unions (Graham 1990, pp. 322-45; Wicker 1991, pp. 522-23; Kotlowski 1998a). He also mandated that a quota of federal contracts be reserved for minority-controlled firms and established an Office of Minority Business Enterprise to help minority businesspeople tender. In both cases, minority meant almost exclusively African Americans and the provisions were devised to let Nixon win the support of the cohort of the electorate that the Republican National Committee called the "Black Silent Majority" (Kotlowski 1998b; O'Reilly 1995, p. 316). As the *Wall Street Journal* remarked, the purpose of the Office of Minority Business Enterprise was to turn African-American rioters into Republican businessmen (Karmin 1969). In late 1991, following in Nixon's footsteps, President George Bush Sr. signed into law a new civil rights bill whose provisions eased the procedures to prove racial and sexual discrimination in the workplace. That Bush had vetoed a similar measure thirteen months earlier because it would allegedly strengthen the quota system in employment offers further evidence of the president's intention to woo blacks (Duffy and Goodgame 1992, pp. 100-1). After all, although Bush was outspoken against racial preferences for unprivileged minorities, when Associate Justice Thurgood Marshall retired from the Supreme Court, the president appointed another African-American judge, Clarence Thomas, in spite of the latter's short experience on the

federal appeals court to replace him and, therefore, acknowledged the existence of a “black” seat on the Supreme Court (Woodward 1999, pp. 180, 183).

In the same pursuit of African-American votes, Ronald Reagan’s 1984 campaign strategists had billboards of the Republican presidential candidate with black sport personalities such as former heavyweight world champion Muhammad Ali displayed in African-American neighborhoods (Mayer 2002, p. 193). Likewise, in the early 1990s, the GOP joined forces with civil rights groups and endorsed an interpretation of the 1965 Voting Rights Act that forced the establishment of majority black congressional districts resulting in the election of more African-American U.S. Representatives, although the main goal of this Republican strategy was to increase the chances of the GOP to carry the adjacent constituencies where whites prevailed (Rhodes 2000, pp. 61-63; Beinart 2003). Moreover, against the backdrop of his own “compassionate conservatism,” presidential candidate George Bush Jr. acknowledge that “racial progress” had been “too slow” in the United States (“Bush Outlines His Goals” 2000). He also turned the 2000 Republican convention into a parade of African-American speakers who took the center stage in the effort to portray the GOP as the party of inclusiveness while concealing that blacks accounted for as few as 4 percent of the delegates as opposed to the fact that 89 percent were whites (“The Republican Delegates” 2000). In an additional display of tokenism, J.C. Watts, an African-American U.S. representative from Oklahoma, was appointed as the 2000 convention co-chair (Sabato 2002, p. 32). For the same reason, Watts himself had been serving as the Republican Conference Chairperson of the U.S. House of Representatives, the fourth highest ranking position in the GOP Congressional caucus, since 1999 (Dickerson 1998). Moreover, in a partial atonement for his previous visit to Bob Jones University, a South Carolina school that prohibited interracial dating among its students, Bush Jr. made a point of having an African-

American educator, Phyllis Hunter, introduce his celebration speech after winning enough delegates to secure the Republican nomination (Lind 2003, pp. 8, 109; Clines and Ayres 2000). Similarly, Bush decided to address the national convention of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (Anderson 2000). After his election to the White House, he also appointed prominent African Americans to key positions in his own administration such as secretary of state and national security adviser. Colin Powell became secretary of state and Condoleezza Rice national security adviser. Both had already played an active role in candidate Bush's presidential campaign (Daadler and Lindsay 2003, pp. 22, 30-31). But, in the aftermath of the controversy over the supposed undercounting of black votes and partial disfranchisement of African Americans in Florida (Jackson and Sweeney 2000; Von Drehle and Baltz 2001, pp. 74-77, 158-59, 243), their nominations were also an attempt by Bush to show off that he was sincere about representing this racial minority (Knowlton 2000).

In particular, despite his previous experience as national security adviser and chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff, Powell was hardly involved in the elaboration of Bush Jr.'s foreign policy strategy before Election Day and his own speeches during the campaign – especially his address to the National Convention of the Republican Party – focused primarily on welfare issue, including the defense of affirmative action (Berke 2000). His almost exclusive function was to promote the new Republican ideology of “compassionate conservatism” among African Americans and to strengthen Bush's appeal to the black cohort of the electorate (Mann 2004, pp. 253-54). Powell's appointment to head the Department of State, too, served mainly this latter purpose because it intended to demonstrate that Bush Jr. did care about African Americans' integration within U.S. society. Indeed, before the secretary of state regained some prominence in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (Mathews 2001), his presence in the

cabinet had been so little more than a display of tokenism to stress Republican inclusiveness that *Time* magazine pointed to Powell's virtual disappearance from the decision-making process (McGeary 2001).

Furthermore, as hostility toward African Americans' alleged encroachment had spread northward among white working-class voters within the ranks of the Democratic Party since George Wallace made an unsuccessful bid for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1964 (Scammon and Wattenberg 1970, p. 35; Durr 1996, p. 324-31), a few Republican candidates for local offices ended up championing school and housing desegregation. This was, for instance, the case of Republican W. Thacher Longstreth in Philadelphia's 1971 mayoral election, when he challenged Frank L. Rizzo, a Democrat who enjoyed a national reputation for his heavy-handed methods against African-American civil rights activists while serving as the city's police superintendent (Longstreth with Rottenberg 1990; Paolantonio 1993). Likewise, the conservative approach to race relations by Police Officers' Federation President Charles Stenvig in his successful bid for mayor of Minneapolis as an independent in 1969 turned his Republican opponent, City Councilman Dan Cohen, into a moderate in the eyes of both voters and commentators although Nixon had endorsed this latter (Wehrwein 1969; Alsop 1969; Teaford 1990, pp. 193-94).

In particular, over the years, the Republican Party has distanced itself from that pro-white supremacist stand that, conversely, in Phillips' view, would be pivotal for the consolidation of the following of the GOP. Especially young Republican politicians, even those from southern districts, became aware that racial prejudice and bigotry were a counterproductive platform because they would prevent their own party from reaching out to such a growing cohort of the eligible voters as African Americans. As one of them, South Carolina U.S. Representative Bob

Inglis, pointed out after the triumph of the GOP in the 1994 mid-term elections, “The southern strategy [...] has been very destructive for the Republican Platform. [...] You can’t be a majority party if you write off 30 percent of the vote. You can’t hold on. You’ve got to prove that conservative doesn’t equal racist” (as quoted in Balz and Brownstein 1996, pp. 241-42).

The attitude of the Republican establishment toward David Duke offers a case in point. A former grand wizard of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan and the founder of the National Association for the Advancement of White People, Duke was the winner of the 1989 Republican primary elections for the nomination for a seat on the Louisiana House of Representatives. As a result, however, former President Reagan, incumbent President Bush Sr., Republican National Chairperson Lee Atwater, and the whole leadership of the GOP in Louisiana came out against Duke and endorsed his opponent, John Treen, in November’s elections (Powell 1992, pp. 26-27). It is worthy of note that Atwater had been the architect of the Horton campaign for Bush just a few months earlier (Brady 1997, pp. 181-92, 201-10).

Senate Republican leader Trent Lott did not meet with better fate within his own party fourteen years later. After contending that the United States would have avoided numerous problems if segregationist candidate Strom Thurmond had been elected to the White House in 1948, Lott was forced to resign as Republican leader in December 2002 although he managed to retain his seat on Capitol Hill in order to let the GOP keep its 51-to-49 edge in the Senate (Edsall 2002; Dewar and Allen 2002; Stolberg 2003). One might easily suggest that Lott’s words were nothing more than a naïve, though politically incorrect, tribute to Thurmond on the occasion of his 100th birthday party. Yet the implications of Lott’s statement were enough to interfere with Republican efforts to reach out to African Americans and to suggest that he had become a liability for the GOP. His praise of Thurmond infuriated both fellow Republican senators and the

White House (Knowlton 2002). Indeed, according to a *New York Times* – CBS News poll of ninety-seven members of the Republican National Committee, only as few as 20 percent of the respondents thought that he should continue as the Senate majority leader (Stevenson 2002). In particular, President Bush Jr. played a significant role in Lott's forced resignation because the president was demonstrably harsh in his condemnation of the senator and his statement. As Bush pointed out, "comments by Senator Lott do not reflect the spirit of our country. [...] Every day our Nation was segregated was a day that America was unfaithful to our founding ideals. And the founding ideals of our Nation and, in fact, the founding ideals of the political party I represent was, and remains today, the equal dignity and equal rights of every American" (Bush 2002, p. 2153). This sharp reprimand and call for racial fairness specifically intended to distance the president and the GOP from Lott because Bush's aides were worried that the senator's salute to segregationist Thurmond would imperil Republican endeavors to compete with the Democratic Party for African-American support (Milbank and VandeHei 2002).

All these endeavors on the part of the GOP to woo the black electorate, however, turned out to be fruitless. Democratic George McGovern easily carried the African-American vote against Nixon in 1972 (Ambrose 1989, p. 651). Reagan received only 9 percent of support from the black electorate in 1984 (Ladd 1985, p. 14). George Bush Jr.'s performance at the polls among African Americans in 2000 was even worse than Bob Dole's four years earlier. Bush captured as little as 8 percent of the African-American vote as opposed to Dole's 12 percent (Pomper 2001, p. 138). In addition, African Americans' shifting away from the Democratic Party did not cause an increase in blacks' affiliation with the GOP. Indeed, the percentage of African-American voters who identified themselves as Democrats fell from 74 percent in 2000 to 63 percent two years later. Still, the decline in Democratic attachment resulted in a growth of

registrations as independent voters (roughly a quarter of black adults characterized themselves as such in 2003) rather than in a rise in Republican attachment especially among African Americans aged 18 to 35 years old (Clemetson 2003). After all, notwithstanding Powell's and Rice's appointments as well as his reprimand of Senator Lott, President Bush Jr. received only about 10 percent of black votes in 2004, which meant a small increase over his own performance four years earlier contrary to Republican expectations that he could double his share of the African-American electorate (Broder and Morin 2004, p. A20). His Democratic opponent, John Kerry, was of little inspiration to African Americans (Seelye 2004). Nonetheless, Bush was unable to equal the 12 percent of the black electorate that Dole had drawn in 1996 while running against Bill Clinton, a candidate who had been very popular with African-American voters and had enjoyed a high approval rate among them even during the most difficult moments of his presidency (Wright 2000, p. 223).

One might suggest that the failure of the GOP to make significant inroads into the black electorate has resulted from the discontinuity in the Republican approach to racial matters. Indeed, Duke's rejection and Senator Lott's rebuff were isolated incidents rather than part of a consistent policy of inclusiveness within the GOP perhaps because, as former President Clinton remarked at the 2004 National Convention of the Democratic Party, Republicans need division to win the presidency (Clinton 2004).

On the other hand, it does not seem that the electoral relevance of racial issues in the post-New Deal party system was as large as Phillips had assumed in his 1969 essay. The voters who agreed with the segregationist stand of George Wallace and, therefore, cast their ballots for him in 1968 were as few as 2.4 percent of the total electorate. Remarkably, such a percentage was much lower than the 13.5 percent of the popular vote that Wallace received that year. In addition, the

percentage of voters who thought of race questions as a key determinant of their behavior at the polls dropped from 28.4 percent in 1964, in the aftermath of the passing of the Civil Rights Act, to 15.9 percent four years later, in spite of Wallace's bid for the White House as the self-proclaimed champion of segregation (Lawrence 1996, pp. 68-70). It further fell to 8.1 percent in 1972, when Nixon was supposed to cash in on his own Southern Strategy, according to Phillips' hypothesis, especially because Wallace had withdrawn from the presidential contest and, thus, was no longer a competitor of the Republican candidate for the capture of the segregationist vote (White 1973, p. 238). Scholarly conventional wisdom holds that "it took sixteen years to count the ballots from the election of 1964, and it turned out that Barry Goldwater won" (George Will as quoted in Kennedy 1995, p. 17). Yet, in the year of Reagan's first election to the presidency, race mattered only to 4.9 percent of the participating voters (Lawrence 1996, p. 70).

These data refer to the United States as a whole. But figures for southern white voters are even more revealing to highlight the decline of racial issues in presidential campaigns. Policies and programs concerning race relations affected the voting behavior of 32.3 percent of the white electorate in the former Confederate states in 1964. This percentage, however, declined to 11.7 percent in 1968, 6.8 percent in 1972, and 1.6 percent in 1980. Specifically, the share of the southern whites who cast their ballots for the Republican Party because of the stand of the GOP on race collapsed from 25.9 percent in 1964 to 6.6 percent in 1968 (Lawrence 1996, p. 70). Not even Wallace's withdrawal in 1972 managed to place more race-conscious white voters in the Republican camp in the South. As the 1968 Wallace supporters went over to Nixon by three to one four years later, the president carried the whole "Solid South" in 1972 (White 1973, pp. 434-44). Nonetheless the voters who stood for segregation and cast their ballots for the GOP on that

ground accounted for only 4.8 percent of the total southern white electorate in 1972 and as little as 0.5 percent in 1980 (Lawrence 1996, p. 70).

Actually, in the following years, other issues added to racial conservatism in order to let the Republican Party make inroads into the South. Reagan resorted to a stronger military force and the defense of traditional values. George Bush Sr. followed suit as for this latter pledge. Furthermore both relied on deregulation as well as fiscal conservatism based on cuts in taxes and expenses for welfare in order to reach out to new business-minded southerners who made up one of the two main cohorts of the conservative electorate along with the race-concerned small-town or rural working-class Protestant whites (Berman 1994, p. 115). As Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary Edsall have suggested, a fiscal revolt and racial worries combined in encouraging the desertion of southern whites, especially male voters, from the Democratic Party in the 1980s (Edsall and Edsall 1991).

All those economic issues, besides Republicans' denunciation of the cultural liberalism of the Clinton administration, also contributed to the success of Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America" among southern voters in the 1994 mid-term elections, when the GOP won a majority of the seats in the former Confederate states for the first time ever (Jacobson 2000, pp. 15-21). Specifically, cultural values accounted for a 9-percent increase in the vote share of Republican candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives in southern states between 1990 and 1994 (Shafer 1998, pp. 24-25). Tax cuts recurred in George Bush Jr.'s platform, too, along with a pledge to improve education standards, in his successful campaign for the capture of 100 percent of the electoral votes of the South in 2000 (Wirks 2001, pp. 103-4).

The experience of South Carolina offers a case in point in order to highlight the other-than-race-relation issues that helped trigger off the southern realignment toward the GOP. The

home state of Dixiecrat 1948 presidential candidate and subsequently Republican switcher Strom Thurmond, South Carolina was a forerunner in the southern bolt to the GOP. Actually, before Nixon carried all the forty-six counties of this state in 1972 after winning a plurality in fifteen counties four years earlier, twenty-five counties had gone Republican in 1952, twenty-one had already supported Nixon in 1960, and thirty-three had followed suit in casting a majority of their ballots for Goldwater in 1964. Opposition to the expansion of the federal powers in regulating the national economy under Democratic administrations in the 1940s and 1960s, however, was more influential than racism in causing such early defections from the Democratic Party (Kalk 2001).

As early as 1970, several southern states revealed a changing attitude toward the politics of race and elected four Democrats who were moderate on this issue as their respective governors. Such candidates were Dale Bumpers in Arkansas, Reubin Askew in Florida, John West in South Carolina, and Jimmy Carter in Georgia. These Democrats refused to play on racial fears and usually downplayed civil rights issues during their election campaigns. Voters eventually rewarded such moderation although opposition to busing was still strong in the region. When Orval Faubus claimed that his own rejection of school integration qualified him for another term as governor of Arkansas, Bumpers retorted that nothing could be done before the Supreme Court ruled. The other candidates ignored or dodged the issue. All the winners, however, pledged to end state-supported racism in their inaugural addresses (Sanders 2002).

After all, even Thurmond eventually realized that the Republican Party had to deal with the growing presence of African Americans within the participating electorate and began to take care of his black constituents. Likewise, Republican Carroll Campbell – who pledged that he would continue to fly the Confederate flag over the state capitol during his successful 1986 campaign for governor of South Carolina – did not refrain from wooing the black electorate by

means of the distribution of his own political patronage among African Americans (Balz and Brownstein 1996, pp. 220-22).

While the Republican Party made at least cosmetic efforts to accommodate black voters and tried to prevent racial conservatism in its own ranks from becoming blatant segregationism, the Democratic Party ended up restraining its racial liberalism in order to appeal to the dissatisfied white electorate as well. If one assumes that welfare reform is “a code word” to cash in on white resentment against African Americans (Judis 1988, p. 150), it can be easily suggested that Jimmy Carter was the initiator of the Democratic retreat from policies that allegedly benefited blacks to the detriment of whites and a forerunner of both the New Democrats and the Democratic Leadership Council whose ideology was to provide the foundation for Bill Clinton’s campaigns and presidency in the 1990s (Baer 2000). With one third of blacks living below the poverty line in 1977, as opposed to 8.9 percent of whites, African Americans were the largest cohort of the roughly eight million recipients of welfare that year (Mooney and Brown 1979, p. 257). But Carter had other political priorities than the consolidation of a safety net for the poor. Fighting inflation and overcoming the energy crisis bulked large in his domestic agenda (Barone 1990, pp. 562-63). Indeed, as Carter himself clearly stated when he started his campaign for the 1976 Democratic presidential nomination, “when there is a choice between government responsibility and private responsibility, we should always go with private responsibility. [...] When there is a choice between welfare and work, let’s go to work” (as quoted in Witcover 1977, pp. 546-47).

This strategy gained momentum as the Democratic Party endeavored to win back those southern and working-class white voters that had gone over to the GOP during the 1980s and had polarized the partisan cleavage along racial rather than class lines (Edsall 1989, pp. 282-83).

Remarkably, after bulking large in Democratic platform in the 1970s and 1980s, commitments to affirmative action, racial justice, and equal opportunities for African Americans were conspicuously missing in Bill Clinton's agenda in 1992 (Hacker 1993, p. 14). Conversely, Clinton pledged to "end welfare as we know it" (Clinton and Gore 1992, p. 165). At the time of this race for the White House, Governor Clinton also made a point of suspending his campaign for one day in order to go back to Little Rock and preside over the execution of Rickey Ray Rector, a disabled African American who had been sentenced to death for killing a police officer. After the Horton commercial had contributed to shatter Dukakis' presidential dreams, Clinton wanted to show that he was not soft on black crime (Germond and Witcover 1993, pp. 178, 184). Likewise, while attending a convention of the National Rainbow Coalition, a key preserve of Democratic support among African-American voters, he outspokenly censured black rapper Sister Souljah. The singer had reportedly urged her fellow ethnics to stop killing each other and take on whites at least for one day. In his address, therefore, Clinton made a point of demonstrating that the Democratic Party no longer identified itself with African Americans and their claims (O'Clery 1993, pp. 50-54; McWilliams 1993, pp. 203-4).

Taking almost for granted that African-Americans voters would not withdraw their support from the Democratic Party because this latter was anyhow a better alternative than the GOP for blacks (Sapiro and Canon 2000, pp. 176, 180), Clinton continued to pursue a radical reform of welfare after he entered the White House. In a 1993 impromptu address before African-American ministers in Memphis, the president even came to share the same Republican stereotypes and code words about the negative impact of welfare benefits for single teenage mothers on black families. Imagining what Martin Luther King Jr. would have said if he had been able to talk in the early 1990s, Clinton had the African-American leader state that "I fought for

freedom [...] [but] not for the freedom of children to have children and the fathers to walk away and abandon them as if they don't amount to anything. [...] This is not what I lived and died for" (Clinton 1994, p. 1984).

The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act witnessed the climax of Clinton's endeavors to distance his party from its putative pro-black attitude in welfare legislation. The provisions that Clinton enacted placed a time cap on benefits in a partial response to concerns that a disproportionate number of African Americans made a living on federal subsidies (Berke 1996; Alter 1996). Welfare reform in the 1990s was clearly racially motivated and the eventual capitulation of the Clinton administration to such claims offers an illuminating example of the "Dixification" of U.S. national politics (Cochran 2001). White House Chief of Staff Leon Panetta advised Clinton to veto the welfare bill, but the president signed it because, in his wife's words, he knew the feelings of "angry white males" (Klein 2002, pp. 150, 153).

The racial policies of both major parties well epitomize the search for middle ground that has shaped U.S. politics since the 1970s. The resounding defeats of Goldwater in 1964 and McGovern in 1972 seemed to prove that radicalism did not pay at the polls. As a result, Republicans and Democrats have generally retreated to the center of the political spectrum and blurred their partisan divide by resorting to such rhetorical issues as "values" for the former and "third-way politics" for the latter (Pouzoulet 2001). Their attitude toward African Americans' claims and white voters' resentment was no exception to this trend.

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*Direct correspondence to:

Stefano Luconi
University of Florence
Faculty of Political Sciences "Cesare Alfieri"
Polo delle Scienze Sociali
Building D-1
via delle Pandette, 32
50127 Florence
Italy
email Stefano.Luconi@yahoo.com

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