

Thomas Edsall's chain reaction essay

[Business](#), [Strategy](#)



Over the past two decades there has been a lot of debate about the legacy of Ronald Regan, especially in regard to his exploitation of backlash of the whites opposed to civil rights campaigns. This controversy however ignores the undoubtedly larger point which is the fundamental role played by this backlash in the emergence of the modern world conservative movements.

The central role played by race particularly the shift of loyalty of southern whites from overwhelmingly supporting Democrats to Republicans has been significantly observed from voting patterns. It is obvious that most white people turned away from overwhelmingly supporting Democrats over issues of national security, God and guns. In the 1992 presidential elections as pointed out by research studies, over 40 percent of non-white southern population voted for democrats. In the presidential election of 2004, this statistics remained virtually unchanged. Over four decades have passed since the enactment of voting rights act described later as humiliating to the southern states in the 1980s by Ronald Reagan. However, the voting patterns as exhibited by the southern white population remain distinctive. The Democratic Party won overwhelming majority in House elections of 2006 yet the voting pattern of the southern whites predominantly voted for the Republican Party by a two to one ratio.

This shift of voting pattern by the southern whites has been admittedly acknowledged by the leaders of G. O. P as a political strategy. Many members of the republic party have give up on wowing African-American votes and therefore have turned to exploit racial polarization to benefit politically (Oshinsky, para3). This exploitation of racial polarization can be traced back to Ronald Reagan presidency.

As observed by Thomas and Mary Edsall in their book published in 1991 known as “Chain Reaction: The impact of race, rights and taxes on American politics,” Ronald Reagan used similar policies successfully employed by Nixon in attacking policies geared towards black minorities without regard to race. These policies exploited by conservatives resulted into the polarization of electorates along ethnic and racial backgrounds. The authors of Chain Reaction focused on the reasons for the rapid decline of the Democrats basing their arguments on two groups.

The first group comprised of reformists who were highly educated and prejudiced often prejudiced. This group gained enormous control over the presidential primary elections in the early 1970s and continue to exert their influence in the modern politics. These groups disregarded their conventional democratic constituencies which were predominantly working class conservative white population. According to the Edsalls, this alienation catalyzed the debate about the black minority issues such as poverty, unemployment, dependence on welfare and family structures.

They labeled any groups that opposed this view as racists and forced their presidential candidates into defending the rights of the minority against the popular majority principles. The second group of Democrats described by the Edsalls was the members of the congress. This group lacked innovative proposals and were reluctant to act boldly, sticking to power by exploiting the corrupt campaign finance system and thereby limiting the potential of independent thought.

This led to the loss of control of the legislative front of the Democratic Party which at that time needed revitalization of new direction and ideas (Krugman, para5). As maintained by the Edsalls, the Democratic delegates supported rights revolutions which exceeded what they had advocated in the past. Furthermore, they proposed devolution of political and cultural power in the United States.

At the height of unprecedented criminal rate in the United States, the Democratic Party devoted more efforts in restoring constitutional and human rights as opposed to combating violence. This led to the humiliating defeat of the then democratic presidential candidate McGovern in 1972. However, this defeat was erased by the victory of Jimmy Carter in 1976.

The leaders of the Democratic Party misinterpreted the implication of this win terming it as a response to the Watergate scandal and the sanction of their new social ideologies. This misinterpretation led to the alienation of the core democratic party agenda which formed the core of their support among the middle and working white class constituency. They appeared ignorant of the reality that articulating racial equality policies such as affirmative action benefits one group at the expense of the other.

This emphasis on minority rights left them vulnerable to soft charges ranging from drugs, sexual abuse and crime. In addition the collapse of the economy in 1978 worsened this disintegration. The problems of joblessness, escalating interest rates, and the stagnation of the industrial sector severely impacted on the Democratic Party's principle of reliance on sustainable growth to provide benefits to the less fortunate. This resulted into a backlash with

conventional democrats doubting the ability of the party to safeguard their jobs and future. They became furious with the principle of favoritism accorded to the special interest groups arguing that the decline in the standard of living was uniform to all groups.

Fairness became the topic of discussion as observed in chain reaction. This led to most southern white voters losing trust in the Democratic Party and their ability to provide healthcare facilities and education among other programs (Edsall, T. & Edsall, M, p150). These concerns were brilliantly exploited by the Republican Party and their then presidential candidate. Their main objective as contended by the Edsalls was to exploit the underlying racial basis supported by the democratic coalition while swaying white electorates that their basic interests were not represented by Franklin Roosevelt. Reagan constantly drew comparisons of the opposing visions articulated by the different parties. The Republican Party proposed equal opportunity and for all whereas the Democratic Party proposed policies in support of welfare and special relief for minority groups.

After been defensive for several years on the issue of race, Ronald Reagan presented himself as a social populist preaching against reverse discrimination. However, the reality was that the strategy used by the Republican Party revolved around the old technique of resentment. Reagan repeatedly narrated the exaggerated story of welfare fraud of Cadillac-driving queen. The Republican Party reinforced the perception among the working class white electorates that their main enemies were the undeserving minorities and big governments. They also hit back at the

federal bureaucracy and court's affirmative action which threatened their jobs as well the open housing and busing systems. They also attacked the expenditure of the federal government by proposing programs such as social security which are racially neutral and family aid programs (Oshinsky, para7). Chain reaction has had a lot of influence in American politics especially attracting increasing interests from the Democratic Party leaders after a series of election defeats. This book comprehensively illustrated the mistakes made by the party and their consequences.

The democrats need to honestly debate the long overdue causes of crime and poverty among the minority groups. It is evident that the Democratic Party has been split by the liberal agenda of the activists. The fury by the white voters over favoritism accorded to the minority groups has not been adequately addressed by the party too. The Edsalls have not given out their stand on these issues and one wonders exactly what they would have advised the Democratic Party to do since affirmative action has only worsened the situation. In the United States, politics has been dominated by race rather than class.

However, this has begun to change. The United States is increasingly becoming more diverse and gradually becoming less racist. The incident of the macadam where the use of racial remarks led to the defeat of Senator George Allen symbolizes how the American politics has changed over time. The ascendancy to power of conservatives has heavily depended on racial backlash.

However, statistics from voting patterns has shown decline in issues such as religion and values. This has been particularly changed by the declining power of racial backlash. Questions of whether anti-immigrant speeches could replace the obsolete racial politics however still linger in the minds of many. The anti-immigrant rhetoric would further mobilize the diminishing pool of whites and isolate the increasing numbers of voters from Latino descent. This trend can be further explained by the recent presidential elections in the United States. Obama's candidacy for presidential elections came against the historical backdrop of poor performance of black candidates.

Although the issue of race still has significant influence on the attitude of American voters, a lot of progress has been made with regards to racial relations. Despite the poor record of black performance in statewide presidential elections, the recent presidential elections recorded shifts in these trends. During the democratic presidential primaries, most of Obama supporters termed as cynical arguments that his electability would be hindered by race. Sarcastically, the invocations of racism to refute critics of Obama have been found to be the reason behind losing several contests during the primaries. In addition many commentators argued that racism would play against Obama during the elections. These arguments disregarded the fact that the Democratic Party has only managed to elect President Clinton for two terms since the time of Roosevelt.

Therefore race would only explain why certain people not all voted for president Obama (Krugman, para15). Closer examination of race and politics

during the recent cycle of presidential elections gives the impression that racial issues has not been part of presidential politics until last elections or that it influence only non-white candidates. This assumption would greatly distort the history of the politics of the United States. Race has indeed influenced earlier elections and has substantially affected white candidates.

Undisputedly, the election of Barrack Obama would leave historic marks in the racial history of American politics. However, as the liberals continue to celebrate this victory, they should not be swayed away from the roles that race has played in the history of the United States politics. This victory has not altered the fundamental ideologies of American politics and therefore race would remain a critical factor in presidential election politics for some time. Work cited: Edsall, T. B & Edsall, M. D. Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics. ISBN 0393309037.

Norton, 1992. Krugman, P. Republicans and Race. 2007. Retrieved March 27, 2009 from http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/19/opinion/19krugman.html?_r=3

Oshinsky, D. What Became of The Democrats? 1991. Retrieved March 27, 2009 from <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/10/20/books/what-became-of-the-democrats.html?sec=&spon=&pagewanted=all>