The reversal in the parties' positions on civil rights is widely viewed as one of the most important political transformations in the last century. Drawing upon new indicators of members' support for civil rights—which more effectively gauge preferences than do the roll-call-based measures analyzed in previous studies—we show that northern Democrats displaced northern Republicans as the leading advocates of civil rights in the House beginning in the mid-1940s, and that the gap gradually increased thereafter. Rather than a relatively sudden change driven by national party elites, we argue that the civil rights realignment was a response to the two parties' coalitional partners.

When a Republican Congress pushed legislation to protect African Americans' voting rights in 1890, virtually all northern and southern Democrats were intensely opposed and cooperated to kill the bill with a prolonged Senate filibuster.\(^1\) Thirty years later, when an antilynching bill passed the House of Representatives—only to be scuttled by another Senate filibuster—the partisan divide over civil rights was similar. Only eight House Democrats supported the bill and 103 voted against it, while 221 of 238 House Republicans voted for it.\(^2\) But four decades later, when the landmark civil rights legislation of the 1960s came to the House and Senate floor, there had been a significant shift in the coalitions supporting civil rights. Northern Democrats had become the strongest advocates of civil rights, while Republicans were split and southern Democratic opposition persisted. Over the course of the following decade, Democrats became the party of civil rights while Republicans were increasingly identified with racial conservatism.

The reversal in the parties' positions on civil rights is widely viewed as one of the most important political transformations in the last century. Carmines and Stimson (1989), in their landmark account of this change, argue that the critical shift occurred in 1963–64, with rapid changes set in motion by Lyndon Johnson, Barry Goldwater, and other national political leaders. The Democratic majority in Congress that emerged in the wake of the New Deal is often depicted as an alliance of conservative southerners and economically liberal northerners, with both contingents largely content to ignore civil rights issues that threatened to split the party. While scholars recognize that a handful of northern Democrats—particularly high-profile 1948 Senate victors Hubert Humphrey (D-MN) and Paul Douglas (D-IL)—advocated for civil rights, most northern Democrats are generally portrayed as indifferent or less supportive than Republicans. In fact, if one takes second dimension DW-NOMINATE scores as a measure of civil rights liberalism during this period (Poole and Rosenthal 1997, 109–11, 230), northern Democrats consistently vote more conservatively than do Republicans in the 1930s–50s.

By contrast, we argue that the partisan shift on civil rights began much earlier and proceeded more gradually than the conventional wisdom states. Analyzing new measures of legislators’ support for civil

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\(^1\)We categorize the 11 Confederate states, plus Kentucky and Oklahoma as “southern.” For simplicity, “northern” refers to all other states.

\(^2\)The handful of northern Democrats in the House split evenly on the bill: seven voted in favor, six voted nay, and nine abstained. Thus, even northern Democrats were much less supportive of the bill than were northern Republicans.
rights, we find that northern Democrats—who generally constituted a majority of their party—became more legislatively active on civil rights than Republicans during the early to mid-1940s, and the gap increased gradually during subsequent decades. We argue that congressional Democrats’ early support for civil rights measures can be traced to prodding from the party’s core coalitional allies. During the New Deal period, the Democratic Party outside of the South was transformed by a coalition forged by Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) unionists, African Americans, Jews, and liberal intellectuals, initially for reasons having little to do with race. As these groups increased their civil rights advocacy, congressional Democrats responded with increased support for civil rights legislation, gradually reorienting the Democratic Party.\footnote{3See Karol (2009) for a broader account of the relationship between the parties’ choice of issue stances and coalition group alignments.} Contrary to the view that partisan transformation results from elite-driven choices at critical junctures, the civil rights realignment reveals a more gradual process of change rooted in broad social, political, and demographic shifts. The rise of CIO unions, the migration of African Americans to northern cities—and these voters’ increased Democratic identification—and the growth of big cities as bastions of New Deal liberalism converged in the 1930s and early 1940s to strengthen northern Democrats’ incentive to respond to civil rights demands. Meanwhile, congressional Republicans’ support for civil rights waned as they faced considerably less pressure to pursue civil rights from their party’s constituent groups. Whereas prevailing accounts suggest that the connection between New Deal economic liberalism and racial liberalism is tenuous at best, the early willingness of economically liberal northern Democrats to defy their southern colleagues by attempting to force civil rights bills to the floor shows that the new coalition forged in the New Deal was, from the start, incompatible with the historically dominant southern branch of the Democratic Party. The break-up of the Democratic North-South coalition can thus be traced to the transformation in the northern wing of the party brought about by the New Deal and evident in Congress during World War II.

In the analysis that follows, we first summarize scholarship on the partisan dynamics of support for civil rights, most of which relies on analyses of roll-call votes. We then explain the limits of the roll-call record as a gauge of preferences on civil rights and introduce three improved measures of legislative support in the House—signing discharge petitions to advance civil rights bills bottled up in committee to the floor, speaking in favor of civil rights on the floor, and sponsoring civil rights legislation. Our findings reveal significant differences in the coalition alignment on civil rights issues from studies based on roll-call analyses. Finally, drawing upon our coalitional partners theory, we link congressional Democrats’ previously undetected support for civil rights legislation to pressure from key Democratic constituencies.

Scholarly Explanations for Partisan Change

Among political scientists, Carmines and Stimson’s (1989) issue evolution model is arguably the most widely accepted explanation for the parties’ civil rights reversal. Two theoretical claims underlie their argument. First, they state that a dynamic growth model best explains the partisan shift on civil rights issues. Most of the change in this model occurs during a relatively brief “critical moment,” which is followed by a longer period of slower, more gradual dynamic growth, during which the political system fully transitions to its new steady state. In their account, both parties took moderate stances on civil rights during the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s, with the GOP generally somewhat more supportive of civil rights measures.\footnote{4According to Carmines and Stimson, the Democratic Party, which was comprised of southern segregationists and “go-along-to-get-along” northerners, appeared to have a tacit agreement to avoid racial issues. The party’s otherwise disparate southern and nonsouthern wings had a common interest in advancing the New Deal state, which neither side wanted to jeopardize with an internecine feud over race (1989, 62).} In 1963–64, a decisive partisan shift occurred. During this brief “critical moment,” civil rights issues became more salient, and presidential candidates Lyndon Johnson (D) and Barry Goldwater (R) articulated distinct positions, placing their respective parties on opposing sides. Within Congress, the replacement of racially liberal Republicans with racially liberal Democrats during the 1958 and 1964 elections facilitated this partisan shift on civil rights (Carmines and Stimson 1989, 63).

Second, in conjunction with their broader theory of issue evolution, Carmines and Stimson argue that the partisan shift on civil rights was instigated by...
elites. Their theory rests in part on an elites-to-activists-to-masses sequence in which the two parties’ national elites take clear and distinct positions on an issue, activists then receive these new positions and relay them to the mass public, and voters perceive the two parties’ new positions and alter their behavior accordingly (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Carmines and Wagner 2006). Elites are not merely the first mover, they also have broad discretion in deciding which policy positions they introduce (Carmines and Stimson 1989, 179).

Scholars have recently cast doubt on some of the issue evolution model’s key claims. Anthony Chen and David Karol show that in northern statehouses and in Congress, respectively, Democrats emerge as the party more receptive to civil rights far earlier than 1963–64, the critical moment identified by Carmines and Stimson. Chen (2006, 2007, 2009) argues that Republican opposition to state-level civil rights measures took root in the mid-1940s. Karol (1999, 2009) examines congressional roll calls and finds that northern Democrats emerged as slightly more liberal than Republicans during the 1940s, though these differences only become substantial in the 1960s. Lee (2002) questions the notion that party elites drove the civil rights shift. Lee argues instead that a broad-based social movement mobilized mass opinion on civil rights starting in the late 1950s, confronting party elites (see also Chen, Mickey, and Van Houweling 2008). Analyzing a large database of state political party platforms, Feinstein and Schickler (2008) demonstrate that state-level Democrats took the lead advocating civil rights during the mid-1940s across a wide range of northern states. In this article, we provide the most in-depth analysis yet of legislative behavior on civil rights issues in the House of Representatives from 1933 to 1972.

Towards A Better Assessment Of Support For Civil Rights

Roll-Call Analyses of Civil Rights

Roll-call votes are the most common gauge of members’ preferences. Using roll-call-based civil rights support scales, Carmines and Stimson find that Republicans are more supportive of civil rights throughout the 1930s-early 1960s and that this basic pattern holds in both chambers and within each region (though the differences are much smaller and not necessarily statistically significant within regions). They stress that among members outside the South, the two parties take similar positions (albeit with Republicans somewhat to the left), making it plausible that either party, or both parties, could have embraced racial liberalism when the civil rights struggle culminated in the mid-1960s.

We conduct our own analysis of the roll-call record, modeling each civil rights vote separately. Figure 1 presents simulated first differences and 95% confidence intervals for a model that estimates the likelihood of a pro-civil rights vote in a simple logit model, controlling for seniority. We also find that northern Democrats and Republicans generally vote together. Starting in the mid-1940s, northern Democrats are a bit more likely to cast votes in support of civil rights than are northern Republicans, but the point estimates are quite small, indicating that the gap in the probability of a pro-civil rights vote between the two groups is typically in the .05 to .10 range. Our results differ only marginally from Carmines and Stimson’s, and they are consistent with Karol’s (2009) civil rights support scales. Based only on the roll-call record, Carmines and Stimson’s argument that either party could have embraced civil rights liberalism in the mid-1960s seems reasonable. After all, the gap separating northern Democrats from northern Republicans was small, and the Democrats who supported civil rights faced pressure...
from their party’s anti-civil rights southern wing. 8
But as we show below, the roll-call evidence obscures
much more substantial differences in support for civil
rights between northern Democrats and Republicans.

The Need for New Measures of Civil Rights
Preferences
Roll-call votes are a potentially misleading measure of
member preferences because only a small fraction of
items on the congressional agenda reach the floor
(see Clinton and Lapinski 2007). Indeed, despite the
large number of civil rights bills introduced between
1933 and 1948, there were only 19 civil rights roll-call
votes on the House floor during that period, and a
handful of those votes incorporated other issues.

Democrats’ reliance on the seniority system to
determine committee chairs, coupled with southern
Democrats’ disproportionate levels of seniority (due
to their election from safe, one-party districts), meant
that staunch civil rights opponents often chaired the
House committees with jurisdiction over civil rights,
acting as gatekeepers (Rae 1994). An alliance of
Republicans and southern Democrats on the Rules
Committee forged an additional roadblock to the
consideration of civil rights legislation. Rules mem-
bers consistently lagged behind their House col-
leagues in their support for civil rights bills on the
floor prior to 1965 (Bensel 1984; Schickler 2001;
Schickler and Pearson 2009). Only by circumventing
the Rules Committee did civil rights legislation
typically reach the House floor for a vote between
1933 and 1965.

Our new measures—signatures on discharge
petitions, speeches on the House floor, and bill
sponsorship—provide more information about

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8Two votes in which the parties differ substantially are worth
noting. In 1937, northern Democrats were far more supportive of
an antilynching bill than were Republicans, but the bill was a
weak alternative meant to derail a stronger GOP-backed bill. (See
“House Sidetracks Anti-Lynching Bill,” New York Times, April 8,
1937.) When the stronger bill was considered, Republicans were
more supportive than northern Democrats (though the first
difference estimate is in the .10 range). The second vote in which
the two parties deviate substantially is on the Powell Amendment
of 1956. In that case, more Republicans took the pro-civil rights
position than northern Democrats, but because of strategic
calculations: northern Democrats were reluctant to vote for the
amendment because it threatened to sink aid-to-education
legislation.
members’ support for civil rights than do roll-call votes, allowing us to test our hypothesis that northern Democrats’ embrace of civil rights emerged in the 1940s in legislative behavior undetected in previous studies. Unlike roll-call votes, these indicators are not censored by negative agenda control. They reflect members’ active participation in the legislative process, which as Richard Hall (1996) demonstrates, offers important insight into the intensity of member preferences and priorities (see also Canon 1999).

These indicators reveal both a member’s ideal point (i.e., the most preferred policy) and a member’s preference intensity (i.e., how much the member cares about implementing that ideal point relative to other priorities). Roll-call-based measures are generally good at capturing ideal points—so long as there are enough roll calls with a variety of cutting lines—but for understanding changes in coalitional alignments, measuring intensity is also important. Even if Republicans and northern Democrats had similar ideal points on civil rights policy in the 1940s–50s, there may have been a sizeable gap in how much effort they were willing to devote to the issue, indicating how much they valued civil rights and providing insight into the changing civil rights coalition during the 1930s–60s.

**Discharge Petitions**

We use discharge petition signatures on civil rights legislation as a gauge of members’ support for civil rights. With a simple majority of signatures, discharge petitions provide an opportunity for members to circumvent committee or leadership gatekeeping and bring legislation to the floor. Since the creation of the modern discharge process in 1931, members have had the ability to discharge substantive legislation and special rules from committees. A member of Congress may file a discharge petition once a bill or resolution has been stuck in a legislative committee for 20 days or in the Rules Committee for seven days (beyond which the petition reached the threshold). Roll-call votes, allowing us to test our hypothesis that northern Democrats’ embrace of civil rights emerged in the 1940s in legislative behavior undetected in previous studies. Unlike roll-call votes, these indicators are not censored by negative agenda control. They reflect members’ active participation in the legislative process, which as Richard Hall (1996) demonstrates, offers important insight into the intensity of member preferences and priorities (see also Canon 1999).

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Discharge petitions brought at least four civil rights measures directly to the floor and influenced the consideration of several others. A 1937 antilynching bill and anti-poll tax measures in 1942, 1943, and 1945 came to the House floor for roll-call votes only after successful discharge petitions dislodged them from the Judiciary and Rules Committees. Committees reported other civil rights bills to the floor under threats generated by growing lists of signatures. The Rules Committee, for example, mindful of discharge petitions that were approaching the 218 signature threshold, reluctantly reported special rules on the landmark Civil Rights Acts of 1960 and 1964. Had these discharge threats not existed, it is unlikely that the Rules Committee would have acted (Bensel 1984, 236).

Despite their promise as an indicator of preferences, research on discharge petitions has been limited. Until 1993, the names of the members who signed the petitions were only made public in the 48 cases in which the petition reached the threshold number of signatures and was printed in the Congressional Record. However, recently discovered here-tofore unexamined discharge petitions filed from the 71st through the 94th Congress at the National Archives has made the analysis of all discharge petitions during this time period possible (Pearson and Schickler 2009). There were 34 discharge petitions filed from 1933 to 1976 on pro-civil rights bills, in addition to a handful of petitions on bills to roll back civil rights initiatives—particularly busing—starting in the early 1970s. We have constructed a dataset of all members of Congress from 1933 to 1976 that includes the signatories on each discharge petition, along with the order in which the members signed and information about each member’s party.

9Members could view the petitions and their signatories.

10During the time period we investigate, the threshold was 218 signatures in all Congresses except for the 72nd and 73rd, when discharge petitions only needed 145 signatures.
state and district, ideology, committee assignments and seniority. We restrict our analysis to members’ behavior regarding the 28 pro-civil rights petitions that received more than 25 signatures. The pro-civil rights petitions target antilynching, fair employment practices, anti-poll tax, and other civil rights legislation. For comparison, we also analyze the antibusing discharge petitions that were circulated in 1971–76. Of the 28 pro-civil rights discharge petitions, seven reached the signature threshold needed to discharge the bill from committee. Since members could generally expect that discharge petition signatures would only be made public if the petition reaches 218 signatures, we believe that the decision to sign—particularly for members who sign well before the petition nears the threshold—is an indicator of the signatory’s sincere preferences.

We use these new discharge signatures data to determine the relative likelihood of northern Democrats and northern Republicans signing civil rights-related discharge petitions. We analyze support for each petition separately. Figure 2 presents first differences in the expected probability of northern Democrats and Republicans signing each civil rights discharge petitions (along with 95% confidence intervals), setting other potentially relevant covariates at their mean or modal values and excluding southerners. Positive values indicate that northern Democrats were more likely to sign than northern Republicans. As Figure 2 illustrates, Republicans were more willing to sign discharge petitions on civil rights issues than were northern Democrats during the early to mid-1930s (73rd–75th Congresses), but the two groups seemed indistinguishable during the late 1930s and early 1940s (76th–77th Congresses). By the mid-1940s, the northern Democrats had taken the lead on efforts to move civil rights legislation to the floor. The gap in predicted probabilities was typically in the .40 to .60 range by the late 1940s, indicating a large difference in the propensity of northern Democrats and Republicans to support civil rights. These stark differences are masked in analyses of the roll-call record.

The growing partisan differences are not attributable to changes in the substance of civil rights issues. For example, Republicans were more likely than northern Democrats to sign discharge petitions for the antilynching bills in the 74th–75th Congresses. But in the 78th Congress (1943–44), northern Democrats were significantly more likely to sign the petition for the antilynching bill—and this difference persisted on the antilynching petitions in the 79th and 80th Congresses. We find a similar pattern on poll tax bills: Republicans were only slightly less likely to sign the petition to bring a poll tax bill to the floor in the transitional 76th Congress than were northern Democrats, but the gap increased noticeably by the 78th–79th Congresses.

The sequence in which members sign the petitions indicates the intensity of their support. Early signers are likely more vigorous, proactive supporters of civil rights measures. In addition, early signers likely incur greater risks from acting against members of the targeted committee and others invested in preserving committee autonomy than do members who sign after it is clear that a petition has wide support. An analysis of the sequence of member signatures confirms our earlier finding. At the start of the period, during the 73rd through 75th Congresses, Republicans were not only more likely to sign the petitions than Democrats, but among the signatories, they were more likely to sign early, revealing that intense support was more concentrated among Republicans. Between the 79th and 91st Congresses, however, northern Democrats tended to sign petitions before the Republicans. The petition to discharge legislation to ban the poll tax in the 79th Congress (1945–46) underscores the shift. Northern Democrats accounted for 42 of the first 50 signatories, while Republicans accounted for just six, with one minor party member and one southern Democrat also signing. By contrast, Republicans accounted for 39 of the last 50 signatories. More generally, across the 79th–91st Congresses, the median Democratic signature occurred earlier in the signature sequence than the median Republican signature in 12 of the 14 civil rights discharge petitions; this difference was greater than would be expected from chance (i.e., if the signatories’ order had been random) in 11 out of the 14 cases.12

The first difference between northern Democrats’ and Republicans’ likelihoods of signing is 0.103, with a 95% confidence interval of 0.007 to 0.204.

12By contrast, during the 73rd–78th Congresses, the median Republican signature occurred earlier in the sequence than would be expected from chance in six out of the ten cases. To determine whether the difference between the placement of the median Democrat’s signature in the actual petition sequence and the expected placement assuming a random signature order is statistically significant, we employ simulation. Conditioning on the total number of signatures and on the number of Democratic and Republican signatories, we randomly assign ranks (i.e., the order of signatures) for 1,000 simulations for each petition. When the actual median Democratic signatory’s rank is lower than the simulated rank in at least 950 of these 1,000 simulations, we conclude with 95% confidence that the observed placement of the median Democratic signature is not due to chance.
Representative William Moorhead (D-PA) fore- shadowed our findings in a 1959 floor speech. He argued that with both parties offering “cheap-talk” on civil rights, one ought to examine discharge petitions as an indicator of the parties’ differing levels of support. Moorhead charged that while “[b]oth Republican and Democratic platforms have proclaimed support for civil rights, ... the fact that only a pitiful minority of Republican Members have signed the petitions gives us [a] reliable political divining rod on civil rights.” 13 Fifty years later, we have empirically tested Moorhead’s argument and confirmed his suspicions. Evidence from discharge petitions shows that northern Democrats had become the most vigorous supporters of civil rights legislation by the mid-1940s, and Republicans were privately less supportive of civil rights bills than the roll-call record alone suggests. While this analysis cannot show whether this gap was due to their sincere preferences or, as Moorhead also alleged, part of a deal with southern Democrats, it is clear that the GOP’s eventual racial conservatism was presaged by their willingness to join southern Democrats to keep civil rights initiatives off of the floor starting in the 1940s. Republicans’ lack of willingness to sign discharge petitions stands in sharp contrast to their floor voting record and to northern Democrats’ efforts to move civil rights legislation.14

**Floor Speeches**

Members’ opportunities to speak on the House floor are constrained by the demands on their schedules

and competition for time on the floor. Floor speeches therefore provide some insight into members’ top priorities, whether the intended audience is their constituents, interest groups, or their colleagues in the chamber. To measure members’ support of civil rights expressed in House floor speeches, we searched the Congressional Record, coding each member making a floor speech in support of civil rights in each Congress. We found that members delivered a mean of 16.6 pro-civil rights speeches per Congress (with relatively little temporal variation) between 1933 and 1950, when the volume of speeches began a gradual ascent, reaching an average of 41 in the 84th Congress (1955–56) and generally continuing to increase into the 1960s, when it peaked at 91 in the 89th Congress (1965–66). It appears, therefore, that no one particular Congress stands out as a period of rapid increase in civil rights’ salience.

We analyze the relative likelihood of northern Democrats and Republicans delivering pro-civil rights speeches on the floor of the House. The dependent variable is coded as “1” if a member delivered one or more pro-civil rights speeches in a given Congress. We estimate a logit model separately for each Congress. Figure 3 presents first differences and 95% confidence intervals in the expected probability of northern Democrats and Republicans giving pro-civil rights speeches. Since junior members during this period were less likely to engage in publicity-seeking activity, including giving floor speeches (Asher 1973), we include a variable indicating members’ seniority, which is held at its mean in calculating the first differences.

A partisan difference in members’ delivery of pro-civil rights speeches did not emerge until approximately the 79th Congress (1945–46), when northern Democrats were slightly more likely to deliver civil rights speeches than were Republicans. In subsequent Congresses, there is a gradual increase in the northern Democrats’ edge over Republicans. While there are small dips in some Congresses (and one large jump, between the 89th and 90th Congresses), the overall trend in Figure 3 mirrors the discharge petition analysis; there is a gradually growing gap between Democratic and Republican members’ actions in support of civil rights on the House floor.

Bill Sponsorship

We also measure support for civil rights using bill sponsorship data. Members may sponsor legislation for a variety of reasons (Schiller 2000), but regardless of their motives, bill sponsorship is a necessary precondition for legislative action and a public sign of strong support for a particular policy. A comparison of Democratic and Republican sponsorship of civil rights bills from the 80th through 92nd Congress (1947–72) provides a third test of the timing and sequence of the partisan shift on civil rights. We obtained data on bill sponsorship from Adler and Wilkerson’s Congressional Bills Project website. We examined each bill that Adler and Wilkerson classified as pertaining to “general civil rights,” “ethnic minority and racial group discrimination,” and “voting rights and issues,” and determined whether each bill met our criteria for inclusion.

From 1947 to 1972, members introduced 492 distinct civil rights bills. Figure 4 maps the number of civil rights bills per Congress, by party, with the associated lowess regression line. Democrats introduced more civil rights bills than Republicans in 12 of the 13 Congresses we analyze; only in the 80th Congress did Republicans introduce more civil rights bills (six versus four bills). The gap between the

15Our use of speechmaking as a measure of priorities is consistent with Hall’s (1996, 3) view that differential participation in various committee activities provides an indicator of “revealed intensities.” For a specific application of Hall’s approach to congressional speechmaking, see Canon (1999, 188).

16To identify pro-civil rights speeches, we search the Congressional Record for the following terms: antilynching, civil rights, colored [citizens, rights, etc.], desegregation, fair employment, fair housing, FEPC, integration, Jim Crow, lynching, Negro [rights, etc.], and segregation. A speech is defined as over four contiguous lines of text delivered by one speaker on any of the above subjects. We exclude all text in the Record that was not delivered orally on the House floor.

17The main difference between the results of these two indicators is that the distance between the two parties on petition signatures grew until approximately 1950 and remained relatively steady after that. By contrast, the partisan gap on speeches continued to increase steadily over time.

18Bills with the expressed purpose of limiting civil rights (e.g., H.R. 383 in the 92nd Congress; a bill “[t]o repeal the Civil Rights Act of 1964”) were excluded, as were bills that focused on expanding civil rights to groups other than racial, ethnic, and/or religious minorities (e.g., H.R. 2120 in the 80th Congress, a proposed constitutional amendment lowering the voting age to 18).

19The results hold up when we estimate a negative binomial model analyzing the number of bills introduced by each member, controlling for seniority and excluding Southerners.
parties became appreciable by the early 1950s and continued to widen over the rest of the period.

Our analyses of discharge petitions, floor speeches, and bill sponsorship challenges Carmines and Stimson’s (1989) account in two important ways. First, the partisan reorientation on civil rights proceeded incrementally. No one particular Congress stands out as a time of dramatic change. Instead, we observe a long realignment in which the earliest appearance of a more racially liberal northern Democratic delegation can be placed at approximately the 78th or 79th Congress (1943–46), and the gap separating northern Democrats from Republicans became substantial by 1950. Second, coupled with the incremental nature of the shift, the breadth of the partisan reorientation across congressional backbenchers and a wide variety of state party organizations (Feinstein and Schickler 2008) casts doubt on Carmines and Stimson’s (1989, 179) claim that national elites have broad discretion in determining their parties’ positions. As elaborated below, our results suggest that the transformation was rooted in an earlier shift among the core constituencies of the Democratic coalition rather than the choices and pronouncements of a few key elites.

Explaining the Partisan Shift on Civil Rights

Before providing evidence for our coaltional partners explanation for the parties’ shift on civil rights, we rule out an alternative hypothesis; partisan shifts were the result of pro-civil rights districts electing pro-civil rights Democrats to replace equally pro-civil rights Republicans. Carmines and Stimson highlight the 1958 election, which they claim replaced many pro-civil rights northern Republicans with equally pro-civil rights northern Democrats (1989, 76).
district characteristics and party on members’ civil rights positions. Assessing the impact of these variables is challenging, however, because it is difficult to control for district preferences.21

The competitive nature of some House elections—where a razor-thin margin between candidates can separate winners from losers—allows us to sidestep these issues with a regression discontinuity (RD) design. Although a variety of factors influence election outcomes, the outcome in very close elections is akin to random assignment.22 In other words, for elections where the winning candidate receives very close to 50% of the two-party vote, the district essentially is randomly assigned to the treatment (or control) group of being represented by a Democrat (or a Republican), and therefore is considered exchangeable with districts in the other group. Analyzing whether Democrats from narrowly won districts are more supportive of civil rights measures than Republicans from narrowly won districts, therefore, allows for an evaluation of whether a member’s party has an effect on civil rights support independent of district preferences.

We conducted a regression discontinuity analysis for each of the 16 Congresses between 1933 and 1972 during which at least one civil rights discharge petition received at least 25 signatures. For these pooled analyses, the dependent variable indicates whether each member signed each civil rights discharge petition in the given Congress.23 The assignment variable, Z, is defined as the Democratic candidate’s share of the two-party vote in the previous election minus the Republican candidate’s share.24 Thus, observations for which \( Z < 0 \) signify

![Figure 4 Civil Rights Bills Sponsored by Democrats and Republicans](image)

21When we estimated models of discharge petition signatures for all northerners controlling for a set of available district and state-level demographic variables that could affect a district’s relative civil rights liberalism, the impact of partisanship was substantively identical to that found in the original analysis reported in Figure 2. That is, controlling for district demographics did not attenuate the pattern that northern Democrats became more likely to sign civil rights discharge petitions than northern Republicans starting in the 78th Congress.

22According to Lee (2008) if one accepts that random factors such as the weather on Election day or the placement of candidates’ names on the ballot have a decisive effect at the knife-edge, the placement of districts into the treatment or control group is randomly assigned (see also Lee, Moretti, and Butler 2004; Pettersson-Lidbom 2008).

23Observations are pooled by Congress (that is, each Congress is analyzed separately).

24We excluded members from the South, members of the committee targeted by each discharge petition, and members with only token opposition in the previous election (i.e., who received greater than 75% of the two-party vote). The bandwidth is set at 0.025, meaning that the discontinuity is estimated by drawing from observations where the Democrat won or lost by fewer than 2.5% of the two-party vote. Election data was obtained from King (1994).
Republican incumbents, while observations for which $Z_i > 0$ indicate Democrats.  

Figure 5 shows that in the 73rd Congress, the random assignment of a Democrat instead of a Republican in a given district is associated with decreased support for civil rights discharge petitions from that district’s representative. By contrast, the random assignment of a Democrat in a given district is associated with an increase in support for civil rights discharge petitions from the district’s representative during the 78th, 83rd, and 88th Congresses (See Figure 5). Similar regression discontinuity analyses for the other Congresses during the period under study reveal that a switch occurred around the 78th Congress. In nine of the eleven Congresses between the 78th and 92nd Congresses, the presence of a Democrat is associated with an increased likelihood of signing civil rights discharge petitions. These analyses show that, controlling for district characteristics, Democrats were more likely to support civil rights discharge petitions than their Republican colleagues, and this difference was not simply a product of partisan replacement. It is worth noting that our analysis cannot tell us the extent to which the aggregate change among Democrats was a product of individual conversion (i.e., members changing their positions) as opposed to Democrats being replaced by other Democrats. Importantly, the results do reveal that the emergent Democratic-Republican gap in support for civil rights was not driven by pro-civil rights districts electing liberal Democrats to replace liberal Republicans.

**Coalition Partners and Partisan Change**

We argue that the Democratic Party’s core coalition partners were instrumental in transforming the party to embrace civil rights. These coalition partners included not only civil rights organizations, but also labor unions, religious- and ethnic-affiliated groups—e.g., the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress, and the Catholic Church—and broad-based progressive policy groups, such as Americans for Democratic Action (ADA). These organizations, which were drawn into the Democratic Party during the New Deal for reasons having little or nothing to do with race, became among the most vocal proponents of civil rights measures, pulling the party towards their position (Anderson 1964; Berman 1979; Kesselman 1948; Sitkoff 1971).

Labor emerged as an important force early on. Farhang and Katznelson (2005) show that the CIO’s strong support for civil rights contributed to the “braiding of labor and race politics.” Even the traditionally more conservative AF of L, with CIO prodding, supported fair employment practices legislation in 1945 (Kesselman 1948, 151). African American voters, who flocked to the Democratic Party as early as 1936, also encouraged northern Democrats to support civil rights. The Great Migration of African Americans to the North, spanning the 1910s–40s, turned these voters into a vital swing constituency in several northern states. In addition, organizations associated with ethnic or religious groups lobbied the Democratic Party on civil rights. The ADL, American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress, and the Catholic Church all played key roles in both the Democratic and civil rights coalitions (Anderson 1964; Berman 1979). With African Americans, Jews, and other ethnic minorities ensconced in the Democratic coalition, popular perceptions of the parties shifted so that, by the 1950s, the Democrats were seen as the party of minority groups and the Republicans as the party of the Protestant establishment (Berman 1979; Brock 1962).

Progressive policy groups, most prominently ADA, reinforced the connections between Democratic Party politics and civil rights advocacy. Indeed, 110 of the 1,234 delegates to the 1948 Democratic convention were ADA members (Brock 1962). ADA organized a series of rallies and public events to lobby...
other Democrats on civil rights during the 1948 presidential campaign (Sitkoff 1971, 606). Individuals such as Walter Reuther and Joseph Rauh—with one foot planted in the Democratic Party leadership and the other in these pro-civil rights groups—encouraged the party’s progress on civil rights (Sindler 1962, 233).

Feinstein and Schickler (2008) find that Democrats’ coalitional partners influenced the civil rights planks in Democratic national and state-level platforms throughout the 1940s and 1950s; the connections between these groups and Democrats in Congress were similarly strong. When the Union for Democratic Action (the predecessor group to ADA), the ACLU, the NAACP, and various Christian and Jewish groups joined together in 1943 to form the National Council for a Permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission, northern Democrats in Congress, who drew many of their activist supporters from these groups, had incentives to promote the Council’s agenda (Kesselman 1948, 29–31). As early as 1944, for instance, *Time* magazine claimed that northern Democrats and Republicans supported an anti-poll tax measure because of “prodd[ing] by church, liberal, labor and Negro organizations.”

Since the Democratic Party was more closely linked with these groups, the Democrats were more likely to be targets of, and sympathetic to, such efforts than Republicans.

28 *Time*, 22 May 1944; as quoted in Bolling (1965, 19).
The same dynamic could be seen in 1952 and early 1953, when Reuther (CIO president, former UAW president and a founder of ADA) and others called upon the Senate to end its rule permitting unlimited debate, which had doomed many civil rights bills. Northern Democrats supported the move, including presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson, whom Senator Richard Russell (D-GA) bemoaned was “influenced strongly by the CIO Political Action Committee and the Americans for Democratic Action” (Fite 2002, 297). In response, conservative Republicans and southern Democrats banded together to oppose the proposal (Fite 2002, 329). Later that decade, unions and the NAACP together played a key role in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1957 (Bolling 1965, 175–76).

The Republican Party, by contrast, did not experience civil rights pressure from its key constituencies. Instead, the GOP’s connections with local Chambers of Commerce, manufacturers’ groups, real estate organizations, and other business interests pulled the party in the opposite direction as early as the mid-1940s on issues such as fair employment practices legislation (Chen 2006, 2009; Karol 2009). Kesselman (1948) points to additional factors to explain the lack of Republican support for the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC), including the “reluctance of Republican congressional leaders to antagonize the southern Democratic bloc in Congress,” given that they had been working with the GOP to thwart Roosevelt and Truman’s domestic programs. Kesselman also cites a newspaper report of a House Republican caucus from 1945 that suggested that about 90% of party members opposed a permanent FEPC Act, primarily because of their more general opposition to government bureaucracy (1948, 201–02). Furthermore, Republicans increasingly doubted that the bill would help the party win over African American voters.29

Despite their lack of support for FEPC, Republicans generally tried to avoid taking public stands against civil rights for fear of further alienating the party’s remaining African American voters or pro-civil rights northerners. Thus, Kesselman’s account of the 1945 FEPC bill concludes that Republican leaders hoped that the bill would never reach the House floor, “sparing many Republicans from having to vote against their convictions for fear of the reaction of minority voters back home” (203). The weak GOP support for civil rights discharge petitions beginning in the early 1940s is consistent with Kesselman’s account, although we cannot determine whether most congressional Republicans were sincere opponents of civil rights, indifferent to the issue, or simply attempting to maintain their informal coalitional alliance with southern Democrats by helping them keep civil rights off of the agenda.30

The Civil Rights Act of 1957 illustrates how limited the Republican commitment to civil rights was in this period. Attorney General Herbert Brownell was an ardent pro-civil rights Republican and played a crucial role in pushing the reluctant Eisenhower administration to (trepidly) endorse a bill with some enforcement powers (Anderson 1964). While southern Democrats are widely blamed for weakening the Civil Rights Act, Eisenhower and most GOP leaders in Congress also favored only modest legislation with limited enforcement powers. For example, Senate Republican leader William Knowland (R-CA) fought to water down the bill before it was introduced (Anderson 1964; Montgomery and Johnson 1998, 213). Knowland’s biographers conclude that, due to weakening amendments, “by the time the legislation was enacted into law, Knowland had come around to believing that perhaps passage of a civil rights bill was the right thing to do” (Montgomery and Johnson 1998, 213). A focus on roll-call votes, however, misses the efforts of Knowland and other Republicans in helping southern Democrats to weaken civil rights legislation. Indeed, despite his behind-the-scenes efforts to scale back the civil rights bill, Knowland took the pro-civil rights position on all 13 Senate roll calls pertaining to the 1957 Act.

The qualitative evidence that we have presented thus far, which relies on historical accounts of the

29House Speaker Joe Martin (R-MA) voiced this doubt before an African American audience in 1947, telling them that the GOP would not push for a FEPC bill because of the party’s past failures to win African Americans’ votes following previous civil rights efforts. According to Martin, it would have been politically imprudent to assist in passing a measure that would anger the GOP’s business base, particularly without any offsetting GOP gains among African Americans (cf. Pittsburgh Courier, January 4, 1947, 4; quoted in Berman 1970, 59).

30Critics at the time speculated that Republicans were cooperating with the southern Democrats to keep civil rights off the floor in exchange for help on economic legislation (Berman 1962, 73; Evans and Novak 1966, 30; MacNeil 1963). For example, when the House was considering the antilabor Landrum-Griffin bill in 1959, reporter Joseph Alsop claimed that Rules Chair Howard Smith (D-VA) and GOP leader Charlie Halleck (R-IN) had “an understanding on the civil rights issue … Halleck has undertaken, in effect, to help Smith block action on civil rights, if Smith helps him with the labor bill and other measures of special interest to the Republicans.” While Smith genuinely supported the GOP’s labor position, Alsop claims that many of his southern colleagues would have been amenable to Speaker Sam Rayburn’s (D-TX) pleas that they back a more moderate Democratic alternative had it not been for Halleck’s behind-the-scenes help on civil rights (Washington Post, August 12, 1959, p. A13; see also Washington Post, August 15, 1959, p. A9).
positions of national organizations and their leaders, demonstrates instances in which the leadership of groups aligned with Democrats helped move the party’s position. It is likely that these national organizations also influenced Democrats indirectly, through the presence of large numbers of coalition group members (or sympathizers) in Democratic members’ districts. To assess these coalitional pressures on members, we estimate separate models predicting northern Democrats’ and northern Republicans’ propensity to sign pro-civil rights discharge petitions with three key independent variables: the district’s African American population share, the percentage of district residents living in Census-defined urban areas, and the share of the state’s population belonging to unions. Ideally, we would use district-level data on membership in organizations such as the CIO, NAACP, and ADL, but such data are not available. The measures we have are best viewed as imperfect proxies for the presence of constituent groups that support civil rights; as a result, the findings ought to be treated as suggestive—and complementary of the qualitative evidence above—rather than as definitive.

Following Pearson and Schickler (2009), we estimated a pooled logit model for each Congress, including a separate intercept for each petition and controlling for seniority, membership on the committee targeted by the discharge petition, and holding a senior leadership position. Figure 6a presents first differences and 95% confidence intervals when one shifts the percentage of a district’s residents that are African American from the 20th to the 80th percentile of all northern districts. To assess these coalitional pressures on members, we estimate separate models predicting northern Democrats’ and northern Republicans’ propensity to sign pro-civil rights discharge petitions with three key independent variables: the district’s African American population share, the percentage of district residents living in Census-defined urban areas, and the share of the state’s population belonging to unions. Ideally, we would use district-level data on membership in organizations such as the CIO, NAACP, and ADL, but such data are not available. The measures we have are best viewed as imperfect proxies for the presence of constituent groups that support civil rights; as a result, the findings ought to be treated as suggestive—and complementary of the qualitative evidence above—rather than as definitive.

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The analyses show that the proportion of district residents that are African American is unrelated to Democrats’ behavior. Republicans representing substantial African-American populations are more supportive of civil rights than are other Republicans until around 1948, but the relationship disappears after 1948, suggesting that Republicans largely gave up on the notion that there were substantial gains to be had from appealing to African American constituents following Truman’s 1948 victory. Second, the proportion of state residents that are union members has some impact on Democrats’ (but not Republicans’) propensity to sign civil rights petitions. This relationship appears to be strongest early in the period examined (1943–55) and then fades to insignificance in later Congresses, consistent with the notion that labor constituents played an important role in inspiring the initial shift among Democrats to civil right liberalism, and that by the mid-1950s, even northern Democrats without a sizeable union base had embraced the party’s emergent position. Third, representing an urban population has a large and consistent impact on members’ support for civil rights discharge petitions. This finding holds within each party, although the first differences tend to be greater in magnitude for the Democrats. While the district-level analysis relies upon admittedly blunt measures, it reinforces the argument that the parties’ civil rights reversal had deep roots in the electoral coalitions that emerged during the New Deal.

Conclusion

Broadening the study of congressional behavior on civil rights issues beyond analyses of roll-call votes provides an important revision in scholars’ understanding of the nature and timing of the Democratic Party’s embrace of civil rights liberalism. Analyses of congressional civil rights politics using roll-call votes have shown that northern Democrats and Republicans were roughly equivalent in their support for civil rights through the 1950s, leading scholars to argue that either party (or both) could have become the party of civil rights in the 1960s. Indeed, given northern Democrats’ ties to their racially conservative southern counterparts, it is easy to conclude from the roll-call record that the GOP was really the party most closely associated with civil rights in the 1940s–50s. But relying on the roll-call record obscures the emergent gap between northern Democrats and Republicans in the 1940s–50s. Committee gatekeeping limited the types of civil rights bills that could reach the floor. Specifically, the only bills likely to reach the floor were those that could attract wide northern Democratic and Republican support (in order to overcome southern Democratic gatekeeping), which meant that the range of “cutting lines” observed in the roll-call record would not be likely to include those that distinguish strong and weak civil rights supporters. Additionally, roll-call votes do not indicate members’ preference intensity, which is important for understanding changing partisan alignments on emergent issues. If one group of members cares deeply about civil rights while another group is

31 Adler (2002).
only mildly supportive, the latter group should be more willing to abandon its initial support if doing so promises to win over a new constituency (e.g., Barry Goldwater’s call for Republicans to “hunt where the ducks are”—that is, in the South). Our analysis of three new measures of congressional support for civil rights—signing discharge petitions, speaking on the floor, and sponsoring legislation—shows that partisan shifts in support for civil rights began long before these changes were evident in the roll-call record, underscoring the importance of analyzing multiple forms of legislative behavior.

In a departure from conventional wisdom, we show that the partisan shift in support for civil rights in Congress did not occur at a critical juncture in 1963–64; instead, it was incremental and had taken hold long before Barry Goldwater’s challenge to Lyndon Johnson. As early as the mid-1940s, northern Democrats had clearly embraced civil rights while Republicans had drifted away from their historic role as the leading advocates of protections for African Americans. We present evidence that this partisan divergence is rooted in the parties’ differing coalitions of supporting organizations. Pressure from Democratic coalitional partners accounts for the party’s gradual embrace of civil rights liberalism, while Republicans, with a markedly different set of interest group allies, experienced no such pull.

Our evidence indicates that by the early 1940s, northern Democratic elites confronted a political environment in which key constituencies favored civil rights, while their GOP counterparts did not face similar pressure from their own party’s base. Rather than a sudden, elite-driven choice, the realignment among elites emerged as part of a gradual response to pressures rooted in the changed coalitional bases of the parties that emerged during the New Deal. The pattern is suggestive of secular change, trickling-up to the national party through party activists, state parties (Feinstein and Schickler 2008), and members of Congress. Future work is necessary, however, to discern the specific roles of group leaders, organizational networks, and mass opinion in driving this process. For instance, to what extent were individuals such as Reuther at the UAW,
Roy Wilkins at the NAACP, and Joseph Rauh at ADA pushing Democrats, and to what extent were Democrats responding to rank-and-file voters? At the mass level, preliminary analysis of opinion data indicates that northern Democratic identifiers became more supportive of civil rights legislation than their Republican counterparts in the late 1930s, suggesting a broadly-based fusion of New Deal economic liberalism and racial liberalism at the mass-level, well before national elites took clear sides (Schickler 2009). Analyses using better measures of group membership and organizational strength at the district level, combined with public opinion data broken down by subgroup, could illuminate the complex process by which civil rights forces transformed the Democratic Party.

Our study also has important implications for understanding the Democratic coalition in Congress that emerged from the New Deal. While President Roosevelt may have been largely content to cater to the southern wing of his party by shying away from civil rights advocacy, most northern Democrats in Congress took legislative action in support of civil rights by the mid-1940s. Their early willingness to defy the southern Democrats through signing discharge petitions, speaking on the House floor, and sponsoring legislation suggests that the ultimate break-up of the New Deal coalition was built into the structure of the alignment that emerged during Roosevelt’s administration. The core supporters of the civil rights cause—union leaders, African Americans, ADA liberals, and Jews—were the same groups that northern Democrats most depended upon for votes and activist support. Once grassroots civil rights advocates gained sufficient popular strength to force a decision, there was little doubt that the majority of Democrats who hailed from outside the South would be the strongest backers of civil rights legislation. The willingness of northern Republicans to provide tacit assistance to the southern Democrats to stall civil rights legislation was also a harbinger of the future.

34The public opinion data indicate that economically-liberal Democrats were more supportive of civil rights than economically-conservative Republicans starting in the late 1930s. The interparty gap holds up when the analysis is restricted to white northerners.

35See McMahon (2004), however, for an account emphasizing FDR’s contributions to the civil rights cause.
partisan alignment. Barry Goldwater’s embrace of racial conservatism thus represented the culmination of a long process of change within the Republican Party, just as Lyndon Johnson’s transformation into a racial liberal reflected deep currents in his party.

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