The Evolution of the Normal Vote in the 1990s

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The question of what individual-level factors are implicated in the voting decision by citizens has been of interest in the literature for a great many years. In the middle of the 20th century, surveys of mass public opinion became feasible and several groups of scholars derived models of this decision calculus (e.g. Berelson et al. 1954, Campbell et al. 1960, Downs 1957). However, these approaches failed to incorporate plausible explanations for long-term changes in the voting behavior of individuals. Converse (1966) attempted to rectify this omission through his conceptualization of a "normal vote"—that is, a relatively stable underlying political predisposition by particular social groups that might be influenced by changes in candidates and salient issues—but he left unexplained how this normal vote might itself change in response to changes in the political environment. At approximately the same time, scholars such as V.O. Key (1955, 1959) advanced the first theories of partisan realignment in the electorate; the focus of these and subsequent works, however, was on determining triggering events for these changes in the partisan loyalties in groups, as reflected in changes in electoral outcomes, without necessarily demonstrating changes in vote choice by members of these groups. Can the normal vote concept shed some light on the underlying dynamics of shifting group loyalties?

This paper attempts to answer this question by testing for a real shift in voting behavior by certain groups in the early 1990s, coinciding with a change in control of the House of Representatives for the first time in 40 years. Is the shift due to changes in the demographic composition of the parties' support bases, or the result of increasing polarization of the electorate along preexisting lines of cleavage? The findings of this paper suggest that the shift in voting behavior cannot be attributed to changes in the behavior of

social groups, lending support to the common perception that as moderate voters have become disaffected with politics as usual, mobilization of ideologically polarized groups has become the dominant theme of electoral competition. However, the data do demonstrate some interesting trends in group behavior nonetheless.

Theoretical Background. The post-World War II period saw a proliferation of studies of the voting behavior of individuals, conducted primarily by scholars who had been trained in the study of public opinion in support of the United States' war effort, the most famous of which are the Columbia and Michigan studies of voter behavior. Earlier studies had relied primarily on aggregate-level data, such as the ethnic and religious composition of communities, or shifts therein, to draw tenuous inferences about the effects of individual behavior; these newer studies, by contrast, relied on individual-level measures taken from a random sample of the target population.

Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee's (1954) contribution to the literature, the sociological (or "Columbia") school of voting behavior, was based on studies of Elmira, New York. Their model argued that the group and social identifications of individuals were the primary determinants of their voting behavior; specifically, that members of lower socioeconomic strata, ethnic minorities, and minority religions tended to support Democrats, while whites, Protestants, and professionals tended to support Republicans. While most scholars today believe the voting calculus is at least somewhat more complex than a reference to group identity, their model did provide a first glimpse at the role that social interactions at the individual level might play in the voting decision[1].

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[1]However, some contemporary scholars do see a prominent role for group identity; see, for example, Conover 1984.

Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes (1960) built on the work of Berelson et al., while advancing a somewhat different model of vote choice—the "Michigan" or socio-psychological model. Their model posited that social and group factors were indirect, rather than direct, determinants of the vote; voters used their group and social interests, along with information from the political environment, to conceive affective orientations toward political parties and candidates, with these orientations (chief among them, party identification) being the primary determinant of vote choice. Most empirical work since the publication of *The American Voter* has at least implicitly incorporated their model. While efforts to demonstrate the validity of the entire Michigan model have generally been seen as intractable (e.g. Markus and Converse 1979, Page and Jones 1979), its underlying linkages have been viewed as generally valid.

Despite the Michigan model's emphasis on the indirect effects of group and social identity, both the Michigan and Columbia approaches have examined the role of societal groups in the vote. Converse (1966) outlines this approach in the context of the Michigan model, arguing that the vote choice is the product of both long-term and short-term forces that affect voter behavior. Since we cannot directly tap the long-term effects at any given point in time, he proposes the concept of a "normal vote" as an indirect measure of these long-term forces. Presumably, if we measure someone's vote choice at enough points in time, the short-term effects should drop out if we average these points together. Converse applies this concept at the aggregate level to show deviations from the normal vote in particular elections, arguing that if the intra-group deviations from the normal vote are consistent between groups (meaning, two groups have similar shifts in vote choice, even if

from different baselines), we obviously cannot conclude that this is the result of any effect on one of those groups.

Nevertheless, Converse leaves open the question how we might determine a shift in the normal vote by a particular group: that is, the permanent defection of a significant percentage of group identifiers to another party. These defections underlie another issue of interest in the literature on voting and political parties: the phenomenon of realignment. Most definitions of realignment require a permanent shift in the aggregate loyalties of important social groups from one party to another, yet there has been little consensus on how to identify these phenomena, particularly in light of the "missing" realignments of the 1960s and 1980s[2]. Simply put, we have no scientific survey evidence from any time that political scientists agree a realignment occurred, so we have no agreed measures of this sort of change. It seems reasonable to use a shift in the components of the normal vote to operationalize this effect.

Determining the source of these shifts, however, is also problematic. Some scholars argue that shifts in the normal vote are the result of generational replacement (Beck 1974), while others see shifts in attitudes by existing voters (Carmines and Stimson 1986). One obvious area where this question comes into play is in the South: are southern Democrats dying off, or are they being converted into Republicans? Conversion of existing partisans is generally considered to be much more difficult (and thus more implausible) than replacement with new voters with different socialization experiences; Carmines and Stim-

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[2]However, note that Carmines and Stimson's "issue evolution" approach (1986) argues that something similar to realignment occurred in the 1960s, based on the issue of race, although they avoid using the term. Abramowitz (1994) offers a contrary view, namely that the central issues of the post-1964 period remained within the "New Deal" cleavage structure.

son (1980) argue that these sorts of changes are only likely as the result of the advent of new, "easy" issues in the public discourse.

This paper's research hypothesis is that a shift in the normal vote occurred, and that this shift resulted in a polarization of the electorate. There are two other hypotheses that might also be suggested by this research: that continued dealignment has occurred, evidenced by a shift in the normal vote indicating a depolarization of the electorate; or that no change in the normal vote actually occurred, indicating underlying stability of the partisan preferences of major societal groups. This latter hypothesis supports the notion that the 1994 election results were an aberration caused by a repudiation of the presidential party in a midterm that has persisted due to the incumbency benefits the Republicans received in subsequent elections (see, for example, Erikson 1988; Campbell 1997).

Operationalization. This paper uses a somewhat different operationalization of the normal vote concept than that advanced by Converse. Converse's approach relies on zero-order relationships between vote choice and group identity aggregated across individuals; by contrast, this paper argues that the normal vote can be described by a multivariate model incorporating pooled data from several elections[3]. Furthermore, changes in the normal vote should be seen as deviations from the predictions made by a vote model estimated in a previous election year's context; while a large number of slope dummy variables could be introduced instead, this approach results in a more manageable model.

Data. This study relies on the 1948–98 Cumulative Data File produced by the National

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[3]While this approach may introduce some problems with autocorrelation, the introduction of dummy variables to represent differing election year contexts did not significantly affect the overall significance of the models, nor did it affect the reported coefficients and standard errors in any meaningful way. Since election year context cannot be used as a predictor for future elections anyway, these dummies are omitted from the models.

Election Studies project housed at the University of Michigan; years prior to 1988 are excluded from the analysis, leaving a total of 9,351 observations in six NES studies; once missing values of our independent variables are excluded from the data set, 6,323 observations remain for analysis. The respondents were grouped into 1988–92 and 1994–98 pools, and estimated coefficients for each independent variable, as well as an intercept, were determined for each pool. If a significant change in voting behavior did take place in 1994, we would expect significantly different coefficients for the independent variables in each pool.

The dependent variable in this study is the respondent's reported vote choice in their election for the House of Representatives (from variable VCF0707). Respondents who voted for Democrats were coded 1 on this variable, while respondents who supported Republicans were coded as 0. Respondents who did not face a contested House race, or who voted for minor-party candidates, are excluded from this analysis (VCF0902). However, many respondents did not report a House vote; therefore, a selection equation (Heckman 1979) was also determined to find which observations were censored because respondents did not vote in down-ticket races. The respondent's income level, strength of ideological orientation (derived from VCF0803, with missing values imputed based on respondent characteristics), level of education (whether the respondent had completed at least some college), place of residence (a dummy for urban/non-urban residence), race (black and hispanic identification) and age group were used as explanatory variables in the selection equation, as well as a dummy variable indicating whether or not the election was a midterm election (based on year of interview); these factors are generally considered to

be predictive of whether or not an individual will vote.

The independent variables in the model are primarily derived from responses to survey questions on socioeconomic status, objective group membership, respondent age, and local context. Measures of socioeconomic status included income category (from VCF0114, with higher numbers indicating greater income) and a dummy representing whether the respondent had ever enrolled in post-secondary education (derived from VCF0110). Group memberships were dummy variables derived from objective membership indicators of whether the respondent was female (VCF0104), Hispanic (VCF0108), African-American (VCF0106), living in a union household (VCF0127), Jewish (VCF0128) and/or Catholic (also VCF0128); the respondent's age group was entered using the NES' standard seven categories (VCF0102). Measures of local context were also included: specifically, being interviewed in the old Confederacy (VCF0113) and residing in a central city (VCF0111). As controls for political factors, two dummy variables representing Republican and Democratic incumbency were also included (derived from VCF0902); these were both scored 0 for open-seat races.

Most of these independent variables are expected to be signed positively in the model, with the exceptions of income category, education level, conservatism, and the Republican incumbency dummy; all other things being equal, we would probably expect the South dummy variable to be positive due to the region's longstanding affinity toward the Democratic Party.

The model was structured with each independent variable appearing twice, in two interactions. The first interaction was with a dummy indicating the years 1988–92; the

other interaction was with a dummy indicating the years 1994–98. Thus, each independent variable only appears once per case, and only affects the coefficient for the pool to which the case belongs. The pool dummies were also entered as independent variables alone, with the constant term of the model suppressed.

Methods. As the dependent variable in the model is dichotomous, the probit estimator (Aldrich and Nelson 1984) is appropriate. However, the addition of a selection equation requires additional procedures for proper estimation (Heckman 1979; Greene 2000); accordingly, the `heckprob` procedure in Stata 7 was used to estimate the model.

Findings. The estimated coefficients for the main model are presented in Table 1; coefficients for the selection equation appear in Table 2. The coefficients reported in Table 1 should, for the most part, come as no surprise to anyone who has studied vote choice in America in the past fifty years. The effects of some group identities, such as African-American identity and living in a union household, have significant, positive impacts on the respondent's probability of voting Democratic during both periods. However, the patterns for Hispanic and female voters are different: voters of Hispanic origin appear move from leaning Democratic to solidly Democratic ($p < .001$) between the two periods (perhaps due to the declining allegiance of Florida's Cuban-American community to the Republicans), while women voters move in the opposite direction. One possibility is that the "gender gap" has evolved toward a wider "marriage gap" (see Weisburg 1987); for example, in the 2000 presidential election, a majority of married women voted for George W. Bush, but a majority of unmarried women voted for Al Gore. It is also possible that female group consciousness has been diluted somewhat, but this would fly in the face of evidence that

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the 1990s saw in increase in the prominence of "womens' issues." For whatever reason, gender alone seems to have lost its predictive power in the contemporary period.

Religious group membership appears to have had mixed effects. Jewish voters remained loyal to the Democratic party, with members of that faith being approximately 1.8 times as likely to vote Democratic as comparable non-Jewish voters in the 1988–92 period; the magintude of this effect was even larger in 1994–98, at 2.8 times. Catholics, on the other hand, appear to have become more ambiguous; while they still lean Democratic, in the 1994–98 period the effect is no longer statistically significant at the .05 level. It is possible that many Catholic voters are being attracted to Republicans for their conservative social stances, thus attenuating the relationship between faith and partisanship.

As we might expect, voters with higher incomes were more likely to vote Republican in both periods. The effect was more pronounced in the 1994–98 period, which suggests a greater income gap in voting behavior; however, the confidence intervals for the coefficients overlap, so this result may be simply the result of random error. Older voters continued to be more likely to vote for Democrats during both periods.

The effects of the local context variables were mixed. Residents of central cities, as expected, tended to vote more Democratic than residents of the suburbs or rural areas, although this effect was much less significant in the 1994–98 period than the 1988–92 period. Southern voters continued to lean toward the Democratic Party as well, but the effects did not approach statistical significance during either period.

As we probably would expect, the results of the political variables were highly significant in the expected direction. The dummy variables indicating the incumbency

Independent Variable	Coefficient (Std. Err.)	
	1988–92	1994–98
Income Level	–0.083*	–0.090**
	(0.033)	(0.032)
South	–0.077	–0.095
	(0.070)	(0.068)
Urban Area	0.301***	0.158*
	(0.070)	(0.069)
Union Household	0.252***	0.373***
	(0.070)	(0.074)
Republican Incumbent	–0.494***	–0.501***
	(0.085)	(0.087)
Democratic Incumbent	0.764***	0.343***
	(0.079)	(0.086)
Catholic	0.136*	0.114†
	(0.063)	(0.066)
Jewish	0.592**	1.041***
	(0.207)	(0.198)
Black	0.943***	0.900***
	(0.140)	(0.137)
Hispanic	0.207	0.529***
	(0.133)	(0.127)
Female	0.122*	0.078
	(0.055)	(0.057)
Age Group	0.050**	0.076***
	(0.019)	(0.019)
Constant	–0.551**	–0.521*
	(0.199)	(0.204)

- Coefficients are maximum-likelihood (probit with selection) estimates.

- *** indicates $p(z) < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; † $p < .10$

Table 1: Vote choice model: Coefficients for vote choice equation

Selection Equation	Coefficient (Std. Err.)
Income Level	0.198***
	(0.014)
Post-Secondary Education	0.492***
	(0.031)
Urban Area	0.058
	(0.035)
Strength of ideology	0.167***
	(0.017)
Midterm Election	–0.302***
	(0.029)
Black	–0.137**
	(0.048)
Hispanic	–0.211***
	(0.055)
Age Group	0.213***
	(0.009)
Constant	–1.460***
	(0.062)
atanh(ρ)	0.458***
	(0.114)
ρ	0.428
	(0.093)
Log likelihood	–7529.178
Number of observations	8356
Wald test: $\chi^2(26)$	1067.75***
LR test ($\rho = 0$): $\chi^2(1)$	16.04***

- Coefficients are maximum-likelihood (probit with selection) estimates.

- *** indicates $p(z) < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; † $p < .10$

- 3800 observations were censored (the respondent did not report voting in House election).

Table 2: Vote choice model: selection equation and test statistics.

advantage worked as expected, with Democratic incumbents receiving a greater incumbency advantage than their Republican counterparts during the 1988–92 period; however, this advantage collapsed in magnitude during the later priod, with the Republican incumbancy advantage remaining stable while the Democratic advantage plummeted. During the 1988–92 period, the median voter was over 2.1 times as likely to vote for a Democratic incumbent than a Democrat in an open seat; from 1994 on, he would only be 1.4 times as likely to vote Democratic when a Democratic incumbent was available. Furthermore, we can be confident (at the 95% level) that this shift is statistically meaningful.

The selection equation in Table 2 was chosen to provide a reasonable control for the effects of selection bias in the pool of NES respondents. While it is likely that many voters who reported voting did not, in fact, do so, the model treats the reported votes as valid. We would expect that respondents who did not actually vote nonetheless decide who they would have voted for in a similar way, even if they do not actually vote; non-voters may be more likely to profess non-attitudes (Converse 1964), but these non-attitudes are probably distributed randomly and therefore are only likely to attenuate relationships in the true population. Nonetheless non-voters are more likely than voters to have reported not voting, so the selection equation includes predictors that are expected to impact turnout. As we might expect, the respondent's level of education and income, ideological commitment, and age were positively associated with voting; membership in a minority group and the absence of a presidential election are negatively associated with turnout. Whether or not the respondent lived in an urban area did not have a significant effect in either direction[4].

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[4]The model was also estimated including a dummy variable for whether or not the respondent reported being registered to vote. However, the variable was a perfect predictor for selection due to how it was coded,

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Discussion and Conclusions. In this paper, the voting behavior of groups of voters in six House elections from 1988 to 1998 was examined for evidence of a shift in the components of the normal vote. The evidence for a shift was minimal, at best; various groups appear to have changed the intensity of their voting behavior, but no group was converted from one party to another.

Nevertheless, there were a few noteworthy findings. The so-called "gender gap" was not in evidence during the 1994–98 period. While women appear more likely to vote Democratic in a bivariate sense, the statistical significance of this effect is attenuated by other factors, primarily socioeconomic status. In many ways, this is a similar result to Weisberg's finding of a marriage gap in the 1980s; he too identified a gap in voting behavior based on a bivariate relationship that disappeared when socioeconomic status was controlled for in a multivariate model. The apparent decline in salience of Catholicism is also of interest; while we might expect secularization of Catholics to lead to greater voting for Democrats—as that party represents both social liberalism (much of which is anathema to Catholic beliefs) and economic leftism—the opposite effect appears to have manifested itself.

The shift in the incumbency advantage is particularly noteworthy, and is robust to the exclusion of the 1994 election. This shift indicates that many voters do know which party controls Congress and thus change their behavior to favor the dominant party, despite the candidate-centered nature of House elections. Whether this is simply the result of a desire to "back a winner" or part of a more complicated calculus based on expected

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and thus had to be omitted from the model. An alternative course of action would have been to use the vote validation data, but NES only collected that data during the 1988 and 1990 studies.

utility[5] is worthy of some further analysis.

In a broader sense, we should ask what value the normal vote concept has in modern political research. While the use of group turnout and voting behavior is a staple of media coverage of elections, political scientists since *The American Voter* have generally focused on the individual, with group membership merely a set of "residual" categories for latent variables—most often, different socialization experiences—we cannot easily operationalize. Yet group behavior is at the heart of many current political debates, such as those over the value of descriptive representation and affirmative action. As a discipline our normative desire for individuals to behave as individuals, as required by traditional democratic theory, must be reconciled with the continuing salience of groups in American politics. Even though voting is an individual act, the social networks in which voting and participation take place are usually the result of social groups; therefore, we should not be remiss in examining groups' behavior.

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[5]For example, we might expect voters to think voting for the majority party is more likely to secure particularistic benefits for their district; while pork barrel spending is somewhat independent of partisan control, it is significant that the Republicans have diverted pork resources from traditionally Democratic areas to areas supporting the party while in control.

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