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The Rise of the Straight Ticket Voter

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The United States' electorate demonstrated a rather significant increase in straight ticket voting from 1980 to 1984, the first increase since the one from 1968 to 1972. Perhaps it is not accidental that the last time a measurable increase in straight ticket voting occurred, 1972, a highly polarizing election and a landslide also took place. Political observers and journalists have exhibited a fascination with ticket-splitters over the past two decades. Perhaps more attention should now be paid to the *straight ticket voter in the future* as a similar force in American politics.

The states of North Carolina and Texas led the nation in the 1984 elections with spectacular realignment-type voting, and those two states will be examined in depth based upon a large-scale post-election survey of voters in each of those two states. What is interesting in these studies of straight ticket vote behavior is the changing character of straight ticket voters and the possible effect upon political partisan realignment.

Even though North Carolina and Texas received the most journalistic exposure from the 1984 elections, straight ticket voting was evident all across the United States. The Republican party was helped more nationally than the Democratic party since President Reagan carried forty-nine of the fifty states in his reelection. The failure to win more congressional seats in the U.S. House—even with the resurgent straight ticket trend—is most likely attributable to partisan districting at the state level.

What is largely forgotten today is that most voters have been straight ticket voters throughout American voting history. Until World War II, more than 80 percent of the voters were so classified. During the 1950s, the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan found in its national surveys of voting behavior in presidential elections (1952-1956) that the level of straight ticket voting had dropped approximately twenty points. The 1968 election evidenced the next significant decrease in straight ticket voting, no doubt assisted by the three-way presidential choice between Richard Nixon, Hubert Humphrey, and George Wallace (i.e., three candidates allowed for more split ticket voting pressure down the ballot). The 1968 Gallup post-election survey found that less than 40 percent had voted a straight ticket, another twenty point decrease. (Conversely, this meant that about two out of three voters

were “ticket-splitting” in 1968.) In the 1972 presidential election between Richard Nixon and George McGovern, however, straight ticket voting *jumped* approximately seven percentage points. The increase in straight ticket voting in 1984 parallels the 1972 occurrence in three interesting ways: (1) it followed a three-way presidential race in the preceding election (i.e., 1968 with Nixon, Humphrey, and Wallace, and the 1980 presidential election with Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter, and John Anderson); (2) there were severe issue differences between the two national party platforms; and, (3) the Democrats experienced a divisive struggle for the party's presidential nomination.

TABLE 1

Levels of Straight Ticket Voting
Over the Last Three Decades

	1956	1968*	1972	1976	1980	1984
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Straight Ticket Voting	61	37	44	41	37	43
Change Over Previous Results	—	-24	+7	-3	-4	+6

*Gallup questionnaire wording: “Did you vote for candidates all from one party, or did you vote for candidates of different parties?”

The increase in straight ticket voting in the elections of 1972 and 1984, both highly polarized elections between candidates, positions and national platforms, seems to benefit the Republican party somewhat like a “glacial surge,” with retreating-like elections in the interim. Democrats have traditionally preached a “straight ticket vote” to many of their lower socioeconomic status constituencies. For example, in the 1982 elections in Texas, Democratic campaign officials developed a somewhat musical theme for black voters to “punch 11 and go to heaven” which reflected the lever position or punch card hole for voting a

straight Democratic ticket. During that same election, Republicans were not only *not* teaching their base constituents to vote a straight ticket, but the incumbent Republican governor, who was also running for reelection, went on record saying that most of the Republican candidates for statewide constitutional offices below the office of governor were going to lose. The Texas Republican party has since changed its tune and borrowed the Democratic strategy of "vote a straight ticket" with the 1984 election (which included a popular presidential candidate leading the ticket) as their first experience with the concept.

What causes an election suddenly to become polarized between candidate positions and party platforms? Walter Dean Burnham, one of the foremost political scientists on realignment politics, argues that during periods of "pre-realignment" the party elites separate along antithetical issues, and this will eventually cause a "detonation" for shifting realignment from one mass party to the next. In the 1984 elections the two political parties separated along the "national tax increase issue." Walter Mondale said he would raise taxes, while Ronald Reagan, after much thought and some administration stumbling, announced that he would not raise taxes.

Other factors may have contributed to straight ticket voting in the 1984 elections. Some journalists have speculated that the highly polarizing U.S. Senate races in North Carolina and Texas created an "accelerator" factor for straight ticket voting down the ballot in those states. Others have speculated that Jesse Jackson was a factor, and his appeals to black voters to turn out en masse to vote against the president prompted many whites, particularly in the South, to vote a straight Republican line. Irrespective of the issues or factors that may have caused the 1984 elections to be particularly polarized at the top of the ticket, it is clear that straight ticket voting increased significantly across the nation in 1984. Evidence from the 1982 elections suggests that straight ticket voting can also be Democratic party-oriented, and only time will tell whether this volatility in straight ticket voting will become a factor again in the subsequent 1986 and 1988 elections.

Results in Texas local elections add substantial weight to the argument that Republicans benefited from a straight ticket trend. Actual vote returns for the 1982 and 1984 elections were examined in the counties of Harris (Houston) and Dallas where, for the first time, "hard counts" could be administratively verified based upon an official computer tabulation of the straight party "levers." These two counties, the two largest in Texas, have also been the two largest Republican-trending counties in the state of Texas. In 1984, straight ticket voting increased in Harris County and maintained a fairly high level in Dallas County. In both counties, the Republican party received more straight ticket votes than the Democratic party. The proportion going to the Republicans in Dallas County was even greater.

By comparison, in 1982 there were substantially more straight ticket *Democratic* voters in Harris County than straight ticket *Republican* voters. This was perhaps a reflection of the economic downturn in Texas preceding that

TABLE 2
Straight Ticket Voting in
Harris County and Dallas County
1984

	Harris County %	Dallas County %
Total Straight Ticket Voters	52	100
Proportion of Republican Party Straight Ticket Voters	53	47
Proportion of Democratic Party Straight Ticket Voters	47	(100)

*Tarrance Survey

election, as well as minority hostility toward Reagan's economic policies (Harris County 20 percent black voter population). Approximately 20 percent of all straight ticket votes cast in Harris County in 1982 were Democratic! Even in "Republican" Dallas County, a slight majority of straight ticket voters were Democratic (51 percent). Thus, in the space of a few months, in the two largest urban counties in Texas, a complete swing took place in straight ticket voting from the Democrats in 1982 to the Republicans in 1984.

TABLE 3
Straight Ticket Voting Trend in
Harris County and Dallas County

	Harris County		Dallas County
	1982	1984	1984
Number of <i>Republican</i> Straight Ticket Voters (Percent of Total Straight Ticket Voters)	90,000 (38%)	250,000 (53%)	100,000 (44%)
Number of <i>Democratic</i> Straight Ticket Voters (Percent of Total Straight Ticket Voters)	150,000 (62%)	220,000 (47%)	100,000 (55%)
Number of <i>Total Straight Ticket</i> Voters (Percent of Total Voters)	240,000 (48%)	470,000 (52%)	200,000 (50%)
Number of <i>Total Voters on Election Day</i>	500,000	900,000	350,000

Note: Numbers rounded for emphasis. Official statistics from Harris and Dallas County Clerks.

It is evident from Table 3 that we are beginning to see substantial amounts of straight ticket voting in Texas. Not only are we observing a straight ticket total approaching one million voters in those two counties alone, but we have also observed, through post-election surveys in Texas, that almost half of all votes cast statewide in 1984 were also straight ticket votes (self-reported). More straight ticket Republican voters were found in the urban counties (as expected), but overall in the state more straight ticket voters were Democratic. Twenty-two percent of all votes cast in the 1984 elections were cast for a straight Republican ticket and 25 percent for a straight Democratic ticket.

While articles written in the early 1970s pointed to the large number of split ticket votes that were being cast during the 1960s and 1970s, it is apparent that now millions are *not* "picking and choosing carefully from among the various party candidates" (Biossat, 1970) and are simply pulling a straight party lever or punching a straight party column on a computer card.¹ It is noteworthy that in 1984 Texas Republicans voted a straight ticket in nearly equal proportion with Democrats, which most likely is a historical first. We can only speculate whether this will effectuate more "down the ticket" party loyalty for the Republicans in the years to come.

If polarization in a particular campaign can cause greater straight ticket voting, there is some indication that it could cause a *permanent* shift in party identification. Reviewing the NBC exit polls that were conducted during the 1984 elections, that data strongly suggest that there is some partisan realignment going on in certain parts of the country. As NBC reported in their national post-election analysis, "Clearly, much can happen to redirect partisan loyalties in the next few years. But the changes in party identification evinced in 1984 indicate that a realignment is no longer incipient, but upon us (Epstein, 1984-85; 1985). Table 4 supports the hypothesis that the polarization in the 1984 presidential and U.S. Senate campaigns not only enhanced straight ticket voting "down the ticket" in 1984, but perhaps pushed future party realignment, at least among southern whites.

Among Texas voters, NBC News exit polls also indicate self-identification of Republicans and Independents increased between 1980 and 1984 even more significantly. This movement is important to the electoral college system since Texas is the third largest state and has twenty-nine electoral college votes. According to some U.S. Census projections, Texas will surpass the state of New York in terms of electoral college votes in the 1992 presidential

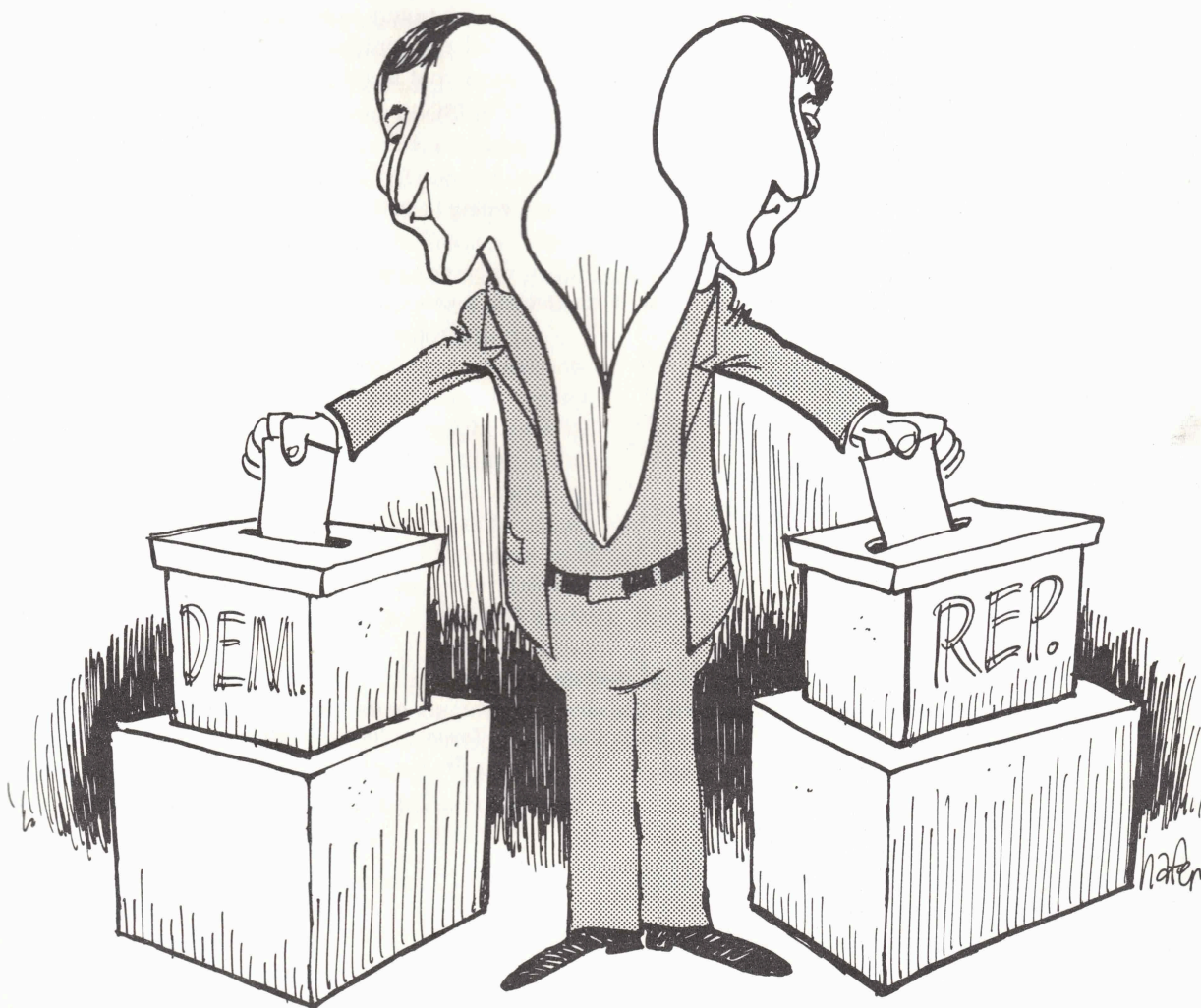


TABLE 4

Party Identification Changes Among White Southerners

Party Identification	1980 %	1984 %	Net Change %
Republican	28	35	+ 11
Non-Democratic	54	65	
Independent	26	30	
Democrat	36	27	- 9
Other	10	8	

Source: NBC News Exit Polls

election. Until the 1980-1984 era, Texas had been very volatile in its presidential voting behavior, apparently not knowing whether to follow the path of the pro-Republican West or the South, which has vacillated between Democrats and Republicans. (At the presidential level, Texas voted Democratic in 1968 and 1976; in 1972, 1980 and 1984 Texas voted Republican.) During the last two presidential elections, however, a very discernible shift in party identification has occurred.

TABLE 5

Party Identification Changes in Tex

Party Identification	1980 %	1984 %
Republican	22	31
Non-Democratic	48	61
Independent	26	30
Democrat	42	33

If the cause of changing party realignment back to straight ticket voting resulting from party positions and candidates, then we need further the types of people that seem to be more straight ticket behavior. Statewide polls conducted in Texas and North Carolina Lance Tarrance & Associates allow us to characterize the straight ticket voter in these two statewide electorates. There is evidence in both the younger and more educated voters as well as conservative voters were, at the same time straight ticket Republican than history would indicate. Table 6 indicates that trend even though the data is controlled for race:

TABLE 6

Straight Ticket and Split Ticket Voting in 1984

	Age							
	18-24 Years of Age		25-34 Years of Age		55-64 Years of Age		65 Years of Age	
	Texas %	North Carolina %	Texas %	North Carolina %	Texas %	North Carolina %	Texas %	North Carolina %
1984 Post-Election								
Voted Straight Republican Ticket	31	16	20	18	22	25	31	
Voted Straight Democratic Ticket	23	23	20	18	30	27	28	
Voted a Split Ticket	46	61	60	64	48	48	42	
	(100)	(100)	(100)	(100)	(100)	(100)	(100)	(100)
	Ideology (Self-Reported)							
	Very Conservative		Somewhat Conservative		Moderate		Somewhat Liberal	
	Texas %	North Carolina %	Texas %	North Carolina %	Texas %	North Carolina %	Texas %	North Carolina %
Voted Straight Republican Ticket	31	25	25	25	13	16	13	
Voted Straight Democratic Ticket	18	12	18	15	33	30	39	
Voted a Split Ticket	52	63	57	60	54	54	48	
	(100)	(100)	(100)	(100)	(100)	(100)	(100)	(100)

Among voters under thirty-five years of age, the Republican party is more than holding its own in terms of being competitive among the straight ticket votes being cast. Moreover, among the conservative voters who dominate in these two states, the Republican party is again more than holding its own among straight ticket voters. The older voters, however, as well as the more center-left and liberal voters, tend to be more Democratic in terms of straight ticket voting propensities. This is not unexpected.

Race has been part and parcel of southern politics for almost three centuries, and blacks in both North Carolina and Texas overwhelmingly voted a straight Democratic ticket. In Texas, 70 percent of blacks voted a straight Democratic ticket in 1984; in North Carolina, 66 percent voted a straight Democratic ticket. Among whites, we see a completely different picture: in Texas, 25 percent of whites voted a straight Republican ticket, and only 16 percent voted a straight Democratic ticket; in North Carolina, 28 percent of whites voted a straight Republican ticket and only 18 percent voted a straight Democratic ticket.

Education, as a political variable, has always been one of the more revered demographics in terms of its relationship to voting participation and political awareness. In Texas in 1984, voters with some college education or a college degree (self-reported) exhibited slightly more straight Republican ticket voting than straight Democratic ticket voting. For example, among those college graduates who voted in 1984, 17 percent voted a straight Republican ticket and slightly less, 15 percent voted a straight Democratic ticket. Among those voters who had attained some college, but not a college degree, 22 percent voted a straight Republican ticket and 19 percent voted a straight Democratic ticket. This means that in Texas, college education is producing slightly more straight ticket Republican voters, and, overall, more total straight ticket behavior from these groups than one would expect.

In North Carolina, another aspect of straight ticket voting was tested. One question in the post-election survey asked those voters who reported voting a straight ticket in 1984 whether they had ever voted a straight ticket in the past or whether this was the first time they had pulled a straight ticket lever. Among Republican straight ticket voters, about one-half had voted straight tickets before and about one-half were voting their first straight ticket! Democrats reported voting straight tickets before the 1984 elections by almost a 4:1 ratio.

In the 1984 Texas post-election study, an open-ended, or free response, question was asked of all the people who voted a straight ticket: "What one or two reasons were most important to them in voting a straight ticket?" For *Republican straight ticket voters* in Texas (22 percent), the following reasons were most important:

- Republican party best for the country
- Pro-Republican moral values
- Democrats too liberal
- Liked the Republican economic program
- Don't like Democrats
- Liked Ronald Reagan and supported the Reagan Administration

Reasons why *Democrats* voted a straight ticket (25 percent) included:

- Favor Democratic policies
- Always vote a straight ticket
- Disagree with Republican social issues
- Like Democratic party philosophy
- Democrats help the disadvantaged
- Don't like Ronald Reagan

In summary, the 1984 post-election surveys in North Carolina and Texas reveal that 47 percent voted a straight ticket in Texas and 42 percent voted a straight ticket in North Carolina. We have reason to believe that in the large urban centers in the South, at least in Houston and in Dallas, straight ticket voting is even higher. Secondly, the Democratic party no longer has a competitive advantage over the Republican party as of 1984 in casting straight party line ballots. Furthermore, there is evidence in the post-election studies in North Carolina and Texas that younger voters, better educated voters, and those with more conservative political viewpoints tend to have a propensity to vote more of a straight Republican ticket. Lastly, at least in Texas and North Carolina, there is an apparent cause and effect relationship for highly polarized elections to affect a fairly substantial amount of straight ticket voting. Texas and North Carolina evidenced the two biggest U.S. Senate elections in the country in terms of publicity and, perhaps, the unexpected number of Republican votes. This undoubtedly contributed to the surprisingly large number of Republicans replacing Democrats in both states at the congressional district level. Approximately one-half of the total national gains for the Republican party at the congressional level (in terms of net gains) occurred in the two states of Texas and North Carolina.

We can only speculate whether straight ticket voting will continue its upward movement into 1988 which began in the cycle from 1980-1984. History seems to indicate that the more an election is polarized at the top of the ticket, the more straight ticket voting occurs, helping out candidates further down the ticket. Instead of referring to this phenomenon as "coattails," a better description would be that straight ticket voting "raises the water table" for all the candidates on the ballot so that when local campaigns drill for water (i.e., votes), they don't have to drill quite as deep, and the probabilities for "party" success are greater.

Notes

- ¹ For example, see DeVries and Tarrance, 1972.

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