

## Turning the Natural State Red: The Rise of the GOP in Arkansas

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Since V.O. Key's seminal work on Southern Politics (1949), in which he wrote, "Perhaps in Arkansas we have the one-party in its most undefiled and undiluted form," (p.183) the state has been a fascination to state politics scholars and for those who study Southern politics, in particular. Until very recently, the peculiar situation of Arkansas' politics had been that it remained a solid one-party Democratic state even as other Southern states had begun the transition to reliably Republican. Until recently, the GOP in Arkansas—when the party could claim victory—would be frustrated by a failure for those wins to result in a lasting momentum capable of large-scale partisan change in a state where the landscape was still heavily Democratic. However, following the 2010 election cycle, when the political landscape of Arkansas began this shift to Republican Party dominance, the balance of political power in the Natural State changed in a big way. In just three election cycles (2010, 2012, and 2014), Arkansas went from one of the most Democratic states in the country to one of its most Republican. A study of the partisan changes in Arkansas can cast light on other states that have undergone similar, albeit less complete, political shifts in recent years.

Arkansas has transitioned from one of the most Democratic states to perhaps the most ardently Republican in a matter of a few years. While the dramatic shift in the partisan makeup of Arkansas officeholders may appear to have happened almost overnight, the rise of the Republicans in Arkansas was years, if not, decades, in the making. Over time, changes in voter preference at the top of the ticket in the 1960s, generational replacement in Arkansas' political power structure and systemic changes in the 1990s, party organizational strategies coming to fruition in the 2000s, and a more nationalized and

polarized electorate were the culmination of factors that resulted not only in sudden and historical electoral success for the GOP, but sustained dominance in a state that was arguably the most Democratic in the nation as recently as 2008 (Davis, Dowdle, and Giammo 2017; Davis, Dowdle, and Giammo 2021). The following is a study on partisan change in Arkansas. However, I contend the findings could also be applied to explain the dynamics of partisan changes in other states, more generally.

### **Three generations of the Modern GOP in Arkansas**

#### **First Generation, 1966-1992**

The first generation of the modern Republican Party in Arkansas began in 1966 with the statewide elections of Winthrop Rockefeller, the first Republican governor in Arkansas since Reconstruction, and then-Chairman of the Arkansas Republican Party, John Paul Hammerschmidt to the U.S. House of Representatives. Governor Rockefeller, who first ran and lost in 1964, would be re-elected to another two-year term in 1968, only to lose a bid for a third term in 1970. At the time of Rockefeller's historical victory in 1966, and subsequent re-election two years later, the Republican Party's national brand was undergoing a dramatic change following the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the party's nomination of Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater for President of the United States. Rockefeller, a reform-minded progressive, represented a wing within a party that was losing influence. Rockefeller built a party organization in Arkansas in his likeness, with his own personal fortune that would not be sustained after his departure from the political scene (Urwin 1991).

Nationally, during and immediately following Rockefeller's two terms as Governor of Arkansas, the Republican Party began to shift to a more consistently conservative position on issues from civil rights, to state's rights, feminism, and abortion. It seems, as Rockefeller was investing his fortune in a progressive movement in Arkansas, his party's brand was moving away from him. In short, Rockefeller's historical electoral success was purely his own, and failed to translate into coattails for others running under his party banner. Meanwhile, the more conservative national positions might well have been in line

with many Arkansans at the time, and their approval is reflected in their Presidential vote choices beginning in 1972—when Arkansans begin a pattern of favoring the Republican Presidential candidate in all cycles with exception to Carter and Clinton that continues today. However, the Republican Party of Arkansas largely failed to connect the GOP successes at the top of the ticket to statewide and local races in a state that remained overwhelmingly Democratic.

The 1970s and 1980s, for Republicans in Arkansas, were for the most part electorally bleak. Despite the occasional upset victory, such as the defeat of Bill Clinton in his re-election bid for Governor in 1980 to Republican businessman Frank White, the only consistent electoral success enjoyed by Republicans in the state was for the party's Presidential nominees. When Republicans were victorious, it was usually in an open seat race. For example, in 1978, Ed Bethune, a Republican attorney and former FBI agent who had previously lost a contest for state's Attorney General, sought and won election for an open U.S. House seat that encompassed Little Rock—the state's largest city—and surrounding areas, only to then challenge a Democratic U.S. Senator, David Pryor, and lose in 1984.

The Post-Rockefeller years were a time of transformation for the GOP in Arkansas, and nationally. The party was wrestled away from Rockefeller loyalists for a more conservative, Goldwater/Reagan-inspired brand, as reflected by changes in party leadership and platform (Blair 1988). Despite Arkansas' voting population being largely white and moderate to conservative, with an already established reputation for favoring Republicans for President, Democrats remained effective at beating back national brand at the state-level and maintaining personal connections with voters in a state accustomed to a more parochial, personality-based politics.

### **The “Big Three”**

The practice of voting for the Republican Presidential nominee while still largely favoring Democratic candidates down the ticket, or ticket-splitting, provided a window of opportunity for state Republicans, as Democrats in Arkansas were faced with the challenge of distancing themselves from their

national party's stances—a practice “The Big Three” (Democrats Bumpers, Pryor, and Clinton) developed into something of a political art form in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. In her study of these three iconic Democrats who are credited, in part, with stemming the tide of Republican gains in the state until their political ambitions or political retirements pulled them from state politics, Diane Blair (1995) wrote that these three men, of whom at least one appeared on the ballot every cycle between 1970 and 1994, helped maintain Democratic political power in the state as its neighbors began the process of historical partisan change in the 1980s and 1990s. Blair further elaborated on this idea when she wrote, “What is being suggested here is that the cumulative draw of the Big Three at the top of the ticket sustained and strengthened the popularity of the Democratic label in Arkansas, thereby withstanding the general Southern trend toward Republican realignment” (pp 65-66). The presence of Bumpers, Pryor, and Clinton would be felt well into the early 21st Century as their collective brands extended beyond their own names and their approach of personal politics transcended party for many in the state who otherwise would have likely favored Republicans in state and local races (a growing number of Arkansans were already supporting Republicans as presidential candidates).

While the party had witnessed electoral successes not previously seen in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the first generation of the modern Republican Party in Arkansas fell short of building upon these successes in a way that created a consistent electoral momentum. Rather, this period is filled with a series of triumphs and defeats, victories in fits and starts. Certainly, the party was stronger in 1990 than it was in 1966 but compared to its neighbors in the Southern United States, Arkansas remained, and stubbornly so, a strong Democratic state. The “Regan Revolution” did not transform Arkansas politics (Wekkin 1998) in the same obvious ways seen in other Southern states. However, the 1990s would be a decade of opportunities for party building and growth.

### **Second Generation, 1992-2010**

The Second Generation begins with the election cycle of 1992. That general election was a pivotal moment in the state's political history. No observer of Arkansas politics would have been

surprised when Bill Clinton announced his intention to seek his party's nomination for President of the United States in October of 1991. Clinton would then go on to secure his party's nomination for President and unseat George H.W. Bush, the Republican incumbent. A native son of the state who, after earning degrees Georgetown and Yale, and being selected as a Rhodes Scholar, returned to his home state to serve as its Attorney General and Governor, the story of Clinton's ascendance to the most powerful political position in the world is, in and of itself, well-documented. However, his campaign and eventual victory in 1992, while setting up much of what followed in the state's politics, is not the primary interest for the scope of this book. In short, Clinton's victory is significant to the eventual overtaking of the state's politics by the GOP in the way it created a political power vacuum the likes of which had never been seen in the state known for its political stability and—to that point in time—one-party dominance.

### **Open Seats and Opportunities**

In addition to favoring their own governor, Bill Clinton, in the 1992 Presidential election, Arkansas voters made other impactful decisions for the state's political future. In 1992, Arkansas voters supported a ballot initiative that imposed some of the strictest legislative term limits in the U.S. at the time. Once enacted, a few years later, legislative term limits took away the advantages of incumbency for Democrats in the General Assembly, thus creating opportunities for the GOP. As expected, over time, term limits did result in more Republican legislators in the General Assembly as long-time Democratic incumbents were forced out of their positions, resulting in open seat contests (English 2003).

Another contest in 1992 held significant, if not immediately obvious, ramifications for the partisan balance of the state. One U.S. Senate seat, occupied by former Democratic Governor Dale Bumpers since 1975, was up for re-election in 1992. Bumpers' Republican opponent was a relatively unknown pastor and media broadcaster from South Arkansas, Mike Huckabee. Despite losing to Bumpers in 1992, Huckabee's campaign garnered nearly 39% of the vote against a popular incumbent (Secretary of State). Immediately following his Senate bid defeat, Huckabee was recruited by then-GOP Chairman Asa Hutchinson to run for Lieutenant Governor in a 1993 special election to fill the vacancy created when,

pursuant to the state constitution, Democratic Lieutenant Governor, Jim Guy Tucker, succeeded Clinton. Recalling this period, Asa Hutchinson, former Chairman of the Republican Party of Arkansas and current Governor of Arkansas said,

The talent pool of the Democratic Party was deep in the early 90s. And a lot of people were waiting for Clinton to leave so that they could have an opportunity to be governor or and have a shuffling of the offices so their talent pool could run. And so with Clinton finally going to the White House, that freed up a number of positions, of course, Jim Guy Tucker, became governor. He was elected in that race. That turned sour and gave an opportunity for the Lieutenant Governor Mike Huckabee, to succeed to that office. And so yes, it created openings. And that's what we had to have. We had to have open seats, that you could compete on an even keel with the other side. We didn't fare well in the 90s running against incumbents. It was still tough power of incumbency, but an open seat in a fair playing field. We could compete now. Mike Huckabee had just lost the race against Dale Bumpers for the United States Senate. He came out as a former Baptist minister from south Arkansas. He runs for the United States Senate. I was state party chairman he set my office and said he was interested in running ran a great race and it was grassroots. It was it was folksy. It was he raised money for it any loss because he's running against an incumbent, but he gained name recognition. And so shortly after that loss, he actually went in the hospital to recover from that emotional drain and physical drain of the campaign. And that's when Jim Guy Tucker succeeded to be governor when Clinton went to the White House. So we had to have a special election for lieutenant governor. And I immediately called him in the hospital and said, You've got name ID statewide. You just finished a campaign. You've got organization it's a special election (Hutchinson 2021).

Mike Huckabee, narrowly defeated the Democrat in the race, Nate Coulter, by a narrow margin to fill the position of Lieutenant Governor in the off year special election.

Huckabee would assume the role of Governor in the summer of 1996 following Jim Guy Tucker's resignation (Wekkin 1998), becoming only the third Republican governor in the state since Reconstruction. Despite the unconventional way in which he assumed the position, the positive impact of Huckabee's tenure as governor on the Republican Party of Arkansas was significant in many ways. Beyond the expected positive effects, a popular gubernatorial incumbent like Huckabee might have upon his political party —particularly in terms of fundraising and candidate recruitment—Arkansas governor's enjoy significant appointment power to state boards and commissions. The Governor of Arkansas is responsible for the appointment of approximately 350 boards and commissions—ranging from the obscure to some of the most powerful unelected political posts in the state. According to Governor Huckabee, his biggest contribution to the future of the GOP,

... was being there long enough to appoint every single person to every board agency and commission. You have to serve just over 10 years to do that, because the longest boards are the University of Arkansas board, the highway commission, those are both 10 year, the Fish and Game Commission, Highway Commission, and the state police are seven years. And then most of them are anywhere from four to six. But unless you can stay in office, and most governors will only be there eight years, so they'll never have the entire Highway Commission, the entire UA board all of it by being able to stay long enough. I think, number one, there were people who, some of whom weren't rabid Republicans, but they at least were willing to be seen with one. But being a part of a Republican administration over an extended period of time gave people this comfort that Republicans aren't crazy (Huckabee 2021).

Huckabee's ability to serve more than ten years in office and thus fill every board or commission assignment, creating a GOP political bench. Before Huckabee, Republicans had only had three terms (at the time in which Rockefeller and White held office, six years) in over one hundred years to exercise appointment powers in ways that rewarded party loyalists, and—most importantly—cultivated hundreds of potential political talents who might one day run as a Republican in the state. Mike Huckabee's more

than ten years as Governor meant, among other things, he would use appointments to boards and commissions to reward party faithful and, most importantly, cultivate and grant experience to a new generation of Arkansans who were less inclined to be blinded by the state's dominant Democratic history.

Another significant event occurred during this time that addressed the issue of primary ballot access in Arkansas—a legal challenge would aid in the Republican Party's efforts to recruit candidates to run for local elections and make it possible for more voters to participate in the GOP primaries.

According to Governor Hutchinson, who served as Chair of the Republican Party of Arkansas during the time of the legal challenge to the state's primary voting laws,

...we had to make structural changes. So in the primary, the primary elections, and the polling boxes were funded by the parties, and they were funded by filing fees of candidates. So obviously, if you don't have very many candidates paying filing fees, you don't have very much money to put on a primary in the county. The Democrats had gargantuan amount of money. And so they were able to have like in Arkansas County, they would have 30 polling places that you could go vote as a Democrat, the Republican Party had one. And they would make jokes that, you know, you'd have to travel 30 miles. And you'd have to be lucky to find it if you're trying to vote in a Republican primary. And of course, they steered people away from voting Republican primary as well. And so, so we naturally had very low turnout, and then that fed on the difficulty of recruiting candidates, because look, why would I want to vote as Republicans, nobody votes in the primary. And nobody identifies with that. And so I filed a constitutional case, saying under the equal protection clause of our United States Constitution, that we have an unfair election system in Arkansas, that does not give equal opportunity for the voters of both parties. And we lost that at the district court level. And we appealed to the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals. And the Eighth Short Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in our favor. And while I thought was right, I was still a little bit surprised but thrilled with that result. And it was actually then-Senator Beebe that said, We've got to fix that. And they immediately introduced legislation that said, let's don't have



the parties pay for it. The state should pay for it. And we'll have joint primaries everywhere. And so that changed dramatically. So in Arkansas County and to Desha County, you had equal opportunity for Republican to vote as a Democrat, winning that case and having joint primaries publicly funded, change the landscape of our party in Arkansas (Hutchinson 2021).

In *Republican Party of Arkansas v. Faulkner County Arkansas* (1995), the 8th Circuit of Appeals ruled the practice of partisan-funded primaries were a violation of the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and resulted in state-funded primaries and polling sites—a significant leveling of the playing field for the party.<sup>1</sup> In a state with open primaries, this was the beginning of the end of an era when virtually all races were settled in the Democratic primaries as a means of practical necessity.

Meanwhile, despite Huckabee's re-election in 2002, occasional open seat victories in the congressional races, and the state's continued support for Republican candidates for President, the 2000s highlighted the continued ability of Arkansas Democrats to separate themselves from their national party's more liberal brand. Dating back to at least the early 1990s, Republicans had made attempts to convince Arkansans that their party, at all levels, aligned with the average voter's views and to draw contrasts between the GOP and the Democratic Party (Hutchinson 2021). By 2001, with the conclusion of Clinton's second presidential term, the "Big Three" were no longer serving in elected office. While this could have allowed for the popularity of George W. Bush (who won in Arkansas in 2000 and 2004) or Huckabee to create coattails to lower offices, this did not occur in any significant way. By this time, Arkansas politics was unique in how it remained Democratic as its Southern neighbors shifted Republican (Blair and Barth 2005). While there are likely alternative explanations, it seems that—strangely enough—the fact that there was no Democratic President at this time and the Democrats serving Arkansans in Congress were talented at walking a more moderate line than their co-partisans from most other states, that Arkansans were still somewhat insulated from the more liberal national brand of Democratic politics.

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<sup>1</sup> 2014 would mark the first time more voters in Arkansas participated in the Republican primary than the Democratic primary.

Arkansas voters could somehow still disengage from the nationalization of partisan politics in a way that continued to advantage Democrats in the state. Meanwhile, Republicans had their own struggles. For example, as recently as 2008, Republicans failed to field a candidate in a U.S. Senate contest.

Despite mixed results by the GOP at the close of the first decade of the 21st Century, fundamental changes were occurring that would allow the party to capitalize on a strong election cycle when the odds were in their favor. Following the 2008 election cycle, when the party failed to nominate someone to run in the cycle's biggest in-state contest and even lost ground in the state's General Assembly, the party sought to professionalize their state party and enhance the organization's outreach efforts. In 2009, for the first time in the state party's history, the Chair position became a salaried, full-time job. Recalling the state of the GOP in Arkansas when he took over, Chairman Webb had said, "2009 was a difficult year for us. We had trouble fundraising and recruiting candidates, but we could see things happening" (Carter 2019).

The Second Generation concluded with new opportunities for the party through open seats, legal reforms to primaries, and a vacated governorship, resulting in a GOP Governor for over a decade, hundreds of recent political appointees now in a Republican network within the state, and—later—a state party organization attempting to make strides to capture electoral opportunities. While these components did not yield immediate results (Dowlde and Giammo 2010) on their own, these variables later combined to create an opportunity to seize on a political moment and yield sustained success.

### **Third Generation—2011 to today**

In many ways, the close of the first generation looked very similar to the close of the second for the GOP in Arkansas. Following the 1992 election cycle, Arkansas Democrats could claim the White House, along with an overwhelming number of positions in the state. However, 1992 also provided opportunities for the GOP. Examples include: a special election in 1993 placed Republican Mike Huckabee in the Lieutenant Governor's seat, many young Democrats moved on to Washington to serve in or around the

Clinton Administration—leaving a political vacuum of sorts for the future, and voter-supported term limits which created open seats and more competitive contests for the GOP. The close of the 2008 cycle, similarly, favored Democrats in the state who, in hindsight, were enjoying as much—if not more—complete dominance as a state than anywhere else. The GOP, as noted earlier, failed to recruit a candidate for the highest in-state race on the ballot that cycle, the party organization was struggling, and despite the signs that the party was poised for success from events which occurred the decade before (reforms to primaries, a GOP governor, continued support for Republican presidential candidates, etc.), the future must have looked murky, at best. The election cycle in 2008 may have been a low point—a floor—for the modern GOP, but events quickly put into motion a dramatic and historical shift in voters' preferences in the state, and the party would become poised to not only take advantage of the favorable climate in the short-term, but harness sustained success—something that the GOP had never done in the state. The power of Democrats' personal politics in the state would abruptly end at the close of the first decade of the 21st Century, when the first African American (and non-Southern Democrat since 1960) is elected President and the national brands of both parties could no longer be divorced from their state and local levels in Arkansas. Exceptions and the last Arkansas Democrat to successfully relate to voters in a way that transcended partisan loyalties. Despite recent success that, up to that point, was unprecedented, the end of the second generation of the GOP in Arkansas saw a party struggling to compete. Following the 2010 election cycle, Republicans picked up one Senate seat (defeating an incumbent Democrat), two open U.S. House seats (one of which had been held by a Democrat since Reconstruction), some state constitutional offices, and several seats in the General Assembly.

The 2010 cycle was a very successful one for the GOP. However, Republicans in the state had seen success before, over time, in the first and second generations previously discussed. The difference post-2010 was the ability of the party to enjoy sustained success. Over the next two election cycles, the GOP gained all state constitutional offices (including Governor), another U.S. Senate seat (again, beating an incumbent Democrat), all four U.S. House seats, majorities in both chambers of the General Assembly,

and even made extraordinary gains in county and local offices. In four years, Arkansas had gone from one of the most Democratic states to one of the most Republican—trading the one-party dominance of one party for that of the other.

While it might be tempting to see Arkansas politics today and say, “well, it is no surprise that the state’s politics are dominated by Republicans. After all, Arkansas is predominately white, rural, conservative, and in a geographic region that, up until recently, has been largely dominated by Republicans for decades,” such a cursory glance at the state minimizes the historical significance of the quick and dominating series of political events and conceals the multiple elements that led to the party’s growth.

### **GOP Party Organization**

For decades, as Arkansas Democrats enjoyed unparalleled and uncontested dominance in the state, its political structure was loosely built around individuals instead of any organized entity (Key 1949; Blair 1988; Blair and Barth 2005; Dowdle and Wekkin 2007). In 1999, as Democrats continued to be the dominant party in the state, Aldrich, Gomez, and Griffin conducted the “State Party Organizations Study.” This survey assessed the self-reported roles and responsibilities of state party organizations. In 2013, Davis and Kurlowski (Davis 2014; Davis and Kurlowski 2017) sought to update and build upon this previous work to evaluate the changes that have taken place with regard to the operations and organizational strength of state parties. Both major party organizations in Arkansas participated in each study. Taken together, these studies cover a period of significant change in Arkansas politics that allows for comparisons between the GOP organization in Arkansas in the late 1990s and early 2010s.

On the whole, the data from these studies suggests the Democratic Party of Arkansas and the Arkansas Republican Party each enhanced the organizational structure of their respective state parties. However, the Arkansas Republican Party’s state organization gains proved to be more impactful as it improved its ability to recruit, coordinate, brand, fundraise, and assist its candidates for office. The state

GOP made considerable gains between the years 1999 and 2013 (a period that bridges the second and third generations of the party in Arkansas) that helped the party reach its goals of winning elections and maintaining electoral successes from one cycle to the next—something it had struggled to do in the past (Dowdle and Wekkin 2007). Meanwhile, the Democratic state operation enhanced its capabilities, but has also suffered from financial instability (Moritz 2019) and recruitment struggles—having their candidate for the U.S. Senate drop out shortly after the close of the filing period in 2020—while the Republican Party in Arkansas seems to flourish to previously unknown heights and national prominence as one of the most stridently Republican states in the country (Hebda 2019). Since the 2013 survey (conducted at a pivotal time in the party’s electoral success), the GOP in Arkansas has enjoyed historical success and Democrats find themselves in much the same situation Republicans found themselves decades ago—the other party in a one party-dominated state.

Some things not adequately articulated in the comparison of the 1999 and 2013 surveys, but nonetheless noteworthy, are the squandered opportunities for the GOP in the 2000s due to a lack of candidates filing to compete for offices, despite the popularity of Mike Huckabee (who had been re-elected in 2002), George W. Bush in 2004, and John McCain in 2008 (Wekkin 2007; Dowdle and Giammo 2011). During these cycles, Republicans failed to run in several state legislative races—perhaps prolonging the era of Democratic dominance.

### **President Obama and the Nationalization of Arkansas Politics**

While it might have been difficult to see immediately following the 2008 elections, the GOP was poised to gain significant ground in Arkansas, but needed the catalyst to spark the partisan change in the state that many neighboring states had undergone. The election of President Obama that year, and the passage of the Affordable Care Act, led to enormous backlash in Arkansas. While it was well established by this point that a majority of Arkansas voters often preferred GOP Presidential candidates, the visceral dislike for Obama and his policies from large portions of Arkansans, for the first time ever, spilled over into the down-ticket races in 2010 and onward. In a PBS story in 2014, Roby Brock, host of a popular

business and politics television show who also conducts regular political polls in Arkansas, was quoted as saying, “Obama ‘has been toxic for Arkansas Democrats,’ that ‘there is a cultural disconnect,’ and that the unpopularity of Obama and his policies ‘have been exploited expertly by Arkansas Republicans’ (PBS 2014). Brock’s comments capture the visceral dislike of President Obama—particularly among those voters who had previously voted for Republicans for President, but broke for Democrats further down the ballot. While the extent to which President Obama’s race played a factor in the negative reactions among portions of white Americans, including many of those in Arkansas, can be debated, it is well-documented that there was a strong relationship between voters’ race, attitudes toward people of other races, and their support (or lack thereof) of Obama—particularly in the South (Maxwell and Shields 2019). Among Southern states, Arkansas is unique in that it has a larger portion of whites among its population than its neighbors (U.S. Census). In Arkansas alone, some of the most dramatic shifts in voting behavior to occur during Obama’s Presidency took place in the state’s whitest counties (Barth and Parry 2018).

The parochial, personality-based, retail politics that, in many ways, seemed to benefit popular, personable Democratic incumbents were coming to an end as the distinctions between national and state politics began to blur in the state. On the effects of the nationalization of the state’s politics longtime GOP political consultant Bill Vickery said,

“I think since 2010, especially three things have impacted Arkansas politics. And I think that's fairly universal one. I think that the rise of the influence of cable television, in specifically cable news television, and now I'm talking to MSNBC, CNN, Fox News, specifically Fox News and what Roger Ailes set out to do there and what he did, and how that began to dominate the conversation of what was going on in American politics, and specifically in Arkansas politics and what was happening. I also think the rise of interconnectivity through social media, and through the internet in general, but specifically through social media, that that had an enormous amount to do with it, because for the first time, big blocks of people would could communicate in a decentralized fashion with one another and understand what was going on. You think about this.

Most Arkansans didn't pay attention to cloture votes in the United States Senate, but they shared it in 2010. Because that was a big issue, and Blanche Lincoln and losing her US Senate seat because they pay attention not to the actual vote on the floor, but to the cloture vote that allowed it to be brought to the floor to begin with. How do you know anything about that if you're not an if you're not a political insider, but framed by cable news, distributed by social media and the interconnectivity through the web with a lot of folks. And then lastly, I think the presidency of Barack Obama really brought to bear the schism that had occurred between the conservative Arkansas voter and what their members were being forced to vote on a national level. You had an administration and a president that sort of favored sort of big city urban politics, and they felt like they were being disenfranchised from that and they didn't understand why that Blanche Lincoln would support this or Mark Pryor would support something. He forced the hand of a lot of folks to have to vote on legislation that they vote for cloture for legislation that they normally wouldn't do on the Senate side” (Vickery 2021).

The extent to which race was a factor in the success of the GOP in Arkansas during the Obama administration is an important consideration. However, the GOP’s rise in the state outlived the two terms of the Obama Presidency. President Obama was not only the first African American elected to the office, he was the first non-Southern Democrat to win a presidential election since Kennedy in 1960. To Arkansans, particularly white conservatives in the state, the perception was that Obama was not relatable to many in ways that transcended or complicated their previously held personal views on race in America. He was Ivy league educated, liberal, urbane, and forced many who to consider the issue of race in ways that they had not previously (Barth 2021). Previous to the election of Barrack Obama, Democrats in Arkansas were largely able to remind voters of their moderation and “common sense” appeals when Clinton was in the White House and were even more successful in perpetuating that narrative when George W. Bush—a Republican—was the most visible partisan in the country. Whether a native son was in the White House or a Republican, Arkansas Democrats had been able to expertly navigate the political

landscape and operate around distinctions from their own party's national brand and the candidate-centered narratives they utilized when seeking re-election. This worked for Democrats until 2010. Obama, in many ways, the embodiment of a more diverse and liberal Democratic Party simply overwhelmed the state and local politics of Arkansas. The state GOP had long been positioning and aligning themselves with their party's national brand, a consistency that has served them well in the last decade with rising conservative populism in the state and many other parts of the nation.

Arkansas Democrats could not effectively navigate more nationalized politics in an environment where a majority of voters were not only rejecting the national Democratic politics, but also disavowing themselves of any Democratic attachment down-ticket; the GOP was poised to take advantage. The dam had broken. Even after the 2010 election cycle, however, there was a belief among many political elites in the state that success might not last for the GOP—a reasonable assumption at the time, given the party's unstable electoral history in the state. Arkansas political reporter and columnist for the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, John Brummett, explained the feeling of observing this shift:

I still thought there was there was currency in Arkansas for the Mike Ross, Beebe kind of Democrat, which is a kind of Democrat that is not much Democrat on a national scale. But connected to Arkansas and able to finesse this, "I'm old Arkansas, south Arkansas boy, and I'm with you on the gods. And I'm with you on the cultural issues. Now, I don't pay too close attention, because I want to go up here and vote for vote for some several things that Miss Pelosi would like me to vote for," but that I thought that could still work. I felt that later than I should have thought it. And I didn't understand the change in the culture, in that our politics was no longer state-based, but fully nationalized, because of the internet, and because of Fox News, and everything is about national issues. So I was still thinking as late as 12, maybe 14....and I'm thinking it ain't done yet. These are the two kinds of Democrats who can still win they have a personal connection. They can have an Arkansas cultural connection, and they can finesse the liberal politics and appear more moderate. No, sir. What I was when I was hit over the head with



is people aren't buying that anymore. Don't finesse me that you're one thing in Arkansas, something in Washington, it's all national politics, it's all guns. It's all abortion. It's all taxes. It's all health care. It's all Obama. And you're either with him and then or you're not. And I did not. I did not fully see that coming. I thought it could still, as late as 14, I thought it could still be negotiated. Couldn't be, couldn't be (Brummett 2021).

The partisan shift in the state, beginning in 2010 and becoming more pronounced over time, is perhaps best illustrated by examining the partisan balance in the Arkansas General Assembly. Table 1 reports the partisan make-up of the House in the Arkansas General Assembly from 1992 to 2020. As recently as 2008—a pivotal time in the state's politics, Democrats gained seats. However, in 2010, Republicans picked up a significant number of seats and, since then, have expanded their advantage in the chamber.

[TABLE 1 HERE]

Table 2 reports the partisan make-up of the Arkansas Senate. Similar to the House, Democrats—after holding large majorities for generations—lose several seats between the 2010 and 2012 cycles as the Republicans now mirror their 1990s majorities. Again, as in House, Republicans do very well in the 2010, 2012, and 2014 cycles, but also continue to expand their majority in the Senate in 2016, 2018, and 2020.

[TABLE 2 HERE]

### **Republicans Gain Among “Independent” Voters**

For several decades, polls noted that anywhere from a quarter to a third of Arkansans self-identified “Independent” (Ranchino 1972; Arkansas Poll 2020). While political changes had been afoot for some time, particularly in rural “swing” counties that had once been among the most staunchly Democratic (Blair 1988), but had shown a willingness to “swing” to Republican candidates at the top of the ticket over the last quarter of the 20th Century (Barth and Parry 2005), Arkansans stubbornly stuck to

their party identifications, as seen in Table 3. Table 3 reports the Arkansas Poll’s<sup>2</sup> partisanship question between 1999 and 2021. The surveys asked, “Do you think of yourself as Republican, Democrat, Independent, or other?” For this analysis, the small portion of respondents who were reported to refuse or could not answer have been excluded. From 1999 to 2020, the portion of those polled who reported being an “Independent” consistently hovers to roughly one-third of the sample while the percentage of those polled appear to decrease among Democratic identifiers and modestly increase for Republicans until more recently, when the GOP began to have a plurality of those identified.

[TABLE 3 HERE]

Compared over time, the percentage of respondents reporting to identify as Republican in 1999 nearly doubles by 2020 and Democratic identifiers drops by a margin of nearly 15%.

Table 4 reports the follow-up question from The Arkansas Poll data to “independents” only from 1999 to 2020. The following table illustrates the party with which self-reported independents lean, according to The Arkansas Poll. Since 2008, Republicans have held the advantage among those who identify as “independents,” but lean to a party. The figures in parentheses are the percentage of respondents who were “likely voters.” Here, the trend of independents favoring Republicans is more pronounced.

[TABLE 4 HERE]

As expected, in 2020, a plurality of Arkansans identifies as Republican. Furthermore, self-identified independents, long a mainstay in Arkansas politics, also heavily favor the GOP. These polling data track well with the electoral success of the Republican Party over the last decade. Clearly, the turning

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<sup>2 2</sup> For more information on the Arkansas Poll, see <https://fulbright.uark.edu/departments/political-science/partners/arkansas-poll.php>

point was in the period between 2008 and 2014 where Arkansas shifted from overwhelmingly Democratic to Republican with arguable no period of strong two-party competition.

## **Conclusion**

This study presents the partisan change in Arkansas in three parts, or generations. From the 1960s to the early 1990s, the GOP's electoral victories were rare, short-lived, and limited to open-seat contests. The success of Winthrop Rockefeller in 1966—while historical—failed to usher in a new Republican era in the state. The first generation of the modern GOP in Arkansas closes with another bruising election cycle for Republicans in 1992. However, that election cycle also brought opportunity and ushered in the next generation of the modern party in the state. Systematic reforms to elections in the state, term limits, and happenstance provided numerous chances for the GOP to capitalize on the changing political environment in Arkansas and most other Southern states in the 1990s and early 2000s, but again, the party lagged behind in its ability to harness the sort of control the GOP in neighboring states was now enjoying. The second generation, in hindsight, was the time in which the party laid the groundwork to eventually seize political opportunity and finally realize lasting electoral success. The election of President Obama, and the subsequent fallout and negative views held particularly by many white Southerners (including those in Arkansas) was the catalyst the Arkansas GOP needed to separate a large portion of voters who had otherwise supported GOP Presidential candidates in prior contests, but—to that point—still related to Democrats at the state and local levels. This political moment could have simply resulted in one of many election cycles that—instead of resulting in sustained success—had previously led to the inevitable return of Democrats largely maintaining control of politics in the state. However, in 2010 and onward, elections in Arkansas became more nationalized and the state GOP had a strong state party organization, more capable of fundraising, assisting in the recruitment of candidates at the local level, and effectively branding the Democrats as out of touch with Arkansas values which hastened a steady, albeit modest, increase in Arkansans identifying as Republicans and a shift in partisan attachment among the large portion of self-identified independents who began to lean Republican.

The story of partisan change in Arkansas is a story of white conservatives, over a relatively short amount of time, rejecting their generations-old voting habits, and voting more consistently Republican. It may be tempting to see 2010 as the stand-alone watershed moment that set the course for where the state's politics are today, but that would fail to recognize other pivotal points in the state's political history that had previously failed to usher in this level of lasting dominance the GOP now enjoys in the state. I argue that the current state of Arkansas partisan politics is the result of a culmination of events and efforts, successes, and failures, dating back decades, that enabled the GOP in the state to finally seize the political moment in a way that it had previously not been able accomplish.

**Table 1. House Membership by Party, 1992-2020**

<b>Election Year</b>	<b>Democrats</b>	<b>Republicans</b>
1992	90	10
1994	88	12
1996	86	14
1998	75	25
2000	70	30
2002	70	30
2004	72	28
2006	75	25
2008	71	28
2010	55	45
2012	49	51
2014	36	64
2016	27	73
2018	26	74
2020	22	78

Sources: Wekkin 2003; Arkansas Secretary of State

**Table 2. Senate Membership by Party, 1992-2020**

<b>Election Year</b>	<b>Democrats</b>	<b>Republicans</b>
1992	30	5
1994	28	7
1996	28	7
1998	29	6
2000	27	8
2002	27	8
2004	27	8
2006	27	8
2008	27	8
2010	20	15
2012	14	21
2014	11	24
2016	9	26
2018	9	26
2020	7	28

Sources: Wekkin 2003; Arkansas Secretary of State

**Table 3. Partisan Identification in Arkansas**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Republican</b>	<b>Democrat</b>	<b>Independent</b>	<b>Other</b>
1999	23%	35%	31%	4%
2000	23%	36%	35%	9%
2001	27%	33%	32%	5%
2002	28%	33%	33%	3%
2003	24%	38%	31%	4%
2004	30%	35%	28%	3%
2005	23%	36%	33%	4%
2006	23%	36%	33%	3%
2007	24%	39%	30%	3%
2008	24%	35%	33%	7%
2009	24%	33%	34%	7%
2010	21%	28%	42%	7%
2011	26%	31%	34%	6%
2012	29%	31%	33%	3%
2013	24%	30%	37%	4%
2014	28%	31%	33%	3%
2015	27%	32%	32%	3%
2016	29%	25%	37%	3%
2017	29%	24%	35%	5%
2018	32%	28%	32%	6%
2019	35%	23%	31%	9%
2020	40%	21%	33%	6%

Source: 2020 Arkansas Poll

**Table 4. Independents' Leaning to a Party**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Republican</b>	<b>Democrat</b>	<b>Independent</b>
1999	33%	29%	34%
2000	35% (39%)	25% (26%)	35% (30%)
2001	29%	36%	31%
2002	30% (31%)	32% (34%)	33% (33%)
2003	33%	34%	33%
2004	39% (41%)	31% (32%)	30% (26%)
2005	30%	35%	32%
2006	33% (35%)	34% (34%)	30% (23%)
2007	34%	37%	29%
2008	35% (38%)	30% (29%)	33% (31%)
2009	39%	32%	27%
2010	44% (50%)	21% (16%)	33% (33%)
2011	42% (48%)	29% (28%)	26% (22%)
2012	41% (46%)	26% (22%)	28% (27%)
2013	43% (51%)	21% (22%)	31% (22%)
2014	38% (43%)	25% (23%)	30% (28%)
2015	42% (52%)	23% (20%)	30% (25%)
2016	37% (45%)	18% (19%)	40% (35%)
2017	37% (38%)	26% (26%)	32% (31%)
2018	39% (43%)	25% (25%)	35% (32%)
2019	40% (43%)	27% (31%)	31% (27%)
2020	45% (52%)	32% (30%)	19% (15%)

Source: 2020 Arkansas Poll



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