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Different Regions, Similar Views

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U.S. regions have had radically different political histories. The South long has been seen as the nation's most conservative region, while New England has been perceived as the most liberal.

An examination of 40 years of survey data generated by the American National Election Study, however, suggests that differences between the South and New England on social issues tend to be small, are getting smaller, and in some instances have disappeared.

Attitudes on Race

Racial attitudes were ascertained through questions pertaining to personal feelings toward African Americans, the pace of civil rights progress and the degree to which the government should do more to help African Americans.

The feeling thermometer shows that New Englanders liked African Americans more than Southerners did in 1960. Over the next 40 years, the attitudes of New Englanders grew colder, while Southern attitudes became warmer. By the late 1990s, Southerners exhibited warmer feelings towards African Americans than New Englanders did.

Other race-related questions show differences disappearing. Responses to the question "Are civil rights leaders moving too fast?" show New Englanders consistently more supportive of the pace of civil rights than Southerners. New England's strongest support relative to that of the South occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and then the difference decreased.

Another measure of regional attitudes on civil rights comes from the following question: "Should the government do more to help blacks or should blacks help themselves?" In the 1970s New Englanders were consistently more supportive of the government's efforts to help blacks than Southerners, but this difference steadily has decreased.

Attitudes on Feminism

The differences in regional attitudes regarding feminism are virtually indistinguishable and move in lockstep over time. Feminists go from being disliked, to being evaluated neutrally in the early 1970s, to being positively evaluated by the mid-1980s.

There is one glaring exception — in 1980 New Englanders liked feminists much more than Southerners did. This highly anomalous result may be a result of measurement or

sampling error. The conclusion, then, is despite the fact one might expect that Southerners would have more negative feelings toward feminists than New Englanders, this is not the case.

Attitudes on Conservatism

Looking at responses to the question "Is the federal government too strong?" shows that, until the mid-1970s, Southerners were consistently more conservative than New Englanders. In 1964, for example, 57 percent of Southerners held conservative attitudes, compared to 40 percent of New Englanders.

Between 1968 and 1976, attitudes in both regions grew more conservative, with Southern conservatism peaking at 77 percent in 1976. In subsequent years, the degree of conservatism in the South steadily declined, though a clear majority of Southerners still express conservative attitudes. Meanwhile, New England generally grew more conservative over time, and by 2000, more New Englanders than Southerners — 72 percent versus 61 percent — said that the federal government was too strong.

Converging Public Opinion

These findings generally fit with other survey data. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, for instance, has documented a steady narrowing in the public opinion dif-

Methodology and Limitations

Data from the American National Election Survey (ANES) were used to analyze the responses of Southerners and New Englanders to questions pertaining to race, gender and conservatism.

Differences in the area of race and gender were gauged by using a feeling thermometer. Feeling thermometer scores result from questions asking respondents to rate how they feel about an individual or a group. A score of zero represents the most negative or cold feeling, while a score of 50 indicates a neutral feeling. A score of 100 indicates the most positive or warm feeling.

Differences pertaining to conservatism, meanwhile, were judged by the number of respondents who agreed or disagreed with certain survey questions regarding the scope and purpose of government.

The data used in this analysis are limited by various methodological changes by ANES. In 2000, for instance, the scale used to measure some responses switched from a seven-point one to a five-point one. Also, 2002 marked the first time that the ANES was conducted entirely over the telephone, so caution is in order when comparing results over time.

ferences between the South and the rest of the nation. The differences that remain tend to cluster around issues of race, sexuality and religion. Similarly, the preceding analysis of ANES data suggests that, with respect to race, feminism and conservatism, regional differences regarding certain divisive political issues have abated. ■

Regional Differences between the South and New England

| Year | Race ¹ | | Feminism ² | | Conservatism ³ | |
|-------------------|--------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|------|---------------------------|-----|
| | South ⁴ | NE ⁵ | South | NE | South | NE |
| 1964 | 65.2 | 65.2 | — | — | 57% | 40% |
| 1968 | 65.2 | 65.2 | — | — | 64% | 49% |
| 1972 | 65.0 | 64.5 | 46.8 | 47.6 | 62% | 53% |
| 1976 | 63.3 | 61.4 | 54.7 | 55.0 | 77% | 63% |
| 1980 | 65.8 | 63.1 | 50.3 | 59.1 | 74% | 81% |
| 1984 | 64.0 | 65.9 | 56.7 | 55.1 | 60% | 56% |
| 1988 | 64.2 | 61.9 | — | — | 64% | 64% |
| 1992 | 67.1 | 64.5 | 63.3 | 62.1 | 69% | 69% |
| 1996 | 67.9 | 65.1 | 65.0 | 63.4 | — | — |
| 2000 | 68.0 | 69.0 | 55.0 | 57.0 | 61% | 72% |
| 2002 ⁶ | 66.0 | 70.0 | 53.0 | 58.0 | — | — |

SOURCE: Author's analysis of American National Election Study data

¹ Average feeling thermometer score based on a question asking respondents how they feel about African Americans. A score of zero is a cold rating; 50 is a neutral rating; 100 is a warm rating.

² Average feeling thermometer score based on a question asking respondents how they feel about feminists. A score of zero is a cold rating; 50 is a neutral rating; 100 is a warm rating.

³ Proportion of respondents who agreed that "the government is getting too powerful."

⁴ Southern states are Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas and Virginia.

⁵ New England States are Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont.

⁶ The 2002 ANES was conducted entirely over the phone, leading to the possibility of methodological error.