The Party or the People? Examining the Causes of Rising Republican Support Among Southern Whites

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Abstract

Recent changes in the voting patterns of Southern whites have raised questions about the causes of this drastic change. Using a variety of ideological and issue questions from the longitudinal versions of the American National Election Studies, it is possible to examine several potential explanations. The data show that while many Southern whites do not differ significantly in their perceptions of the Democratic and Republican parties, their positions on moral and social issues first raised during the 1980s continues to drive many Southern whites into the arms of the Republican Party.
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Introduction.

"The Solid South" is a term that still holds significant meaning to many political scientists. For most of the 20th century, Democratic candidates could count on the support of Southern voters. In many states of the Old Confederacy, the nominee of the Democratic Party was virtually guaranteed to win the general election, making the only races of any consequence those for the Democratic Party nominations. Until the last three decades of the 20th century, the South was the single-most consistent voting bloc in the United States.

Starting in the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, the Republican Party began to make inroads into the solidly Democratic South. By 1980, Republican candidates for Southern office were no longer rare. For the first time, several states in the old Confederacy abandoned a Southern Democrat (Jimmy Carter) in favor of a western Republican. Over the next twenty years, the Republican Party would emerge as a legitimate force in most of the South. Some Southern states elected their first Republican governors since Reconstruction, state legislatures were no longer overwhelmingly Democratic, and Southern Republicans began to win races for the US House and Senate. The percentage of Southern voters who defined themselves as Democrats declined by 22% between 1952 and 1984, while those who defined themselves as Republicans increased by 18% (Stanley, 1988). By 2002, 72 of the 124 U.S. House seats were in Republican hands, compared to only two out of 105 in 1950.

In the first decade of the 21st century, it is clear the Solid South is no more. While African-American voters in the South continue to support Democrats in large numbers, white Southerners have increasingly moved towards the Republican Party (Nadeau and Stanley, 1993; Wattenberg, 1991). This has, in turn, forced many candidates to change the way they campaign in the South to fit this new competitive situation. As Southern whites have become significantly more likely to vote Republican, Democratic candidates must adjust their tactics to fit this new set of circumstances.

Literature Review.

Although much has been made in the literature about the Southern white switch to the Republican Party and the impact the changes have on Southern politics and Southern elections, the causes remain unclear. The realignment literature is awash with studies that conclusively show the trend towards increasing Republicanism
among Southern whites (Black & Black, 2002). While the change itself is a matter of record, the causes of this mass exodus from the Democratic Party remain murky. In the past decade, scholars have focused on two primary causal agents: race and the Religious Right.

The issue of race has certainly been a center of focus for white Southern politics. As the primary opponents of the civil rights movement, white Southerners may have well felt betrayed by the Democratic Party’s new emphasis on civil rights and racial equality (Black & Black, 1987; Carmines & Stimson, 1989; Edsall & Edsall, 1991). This explanation contends that white Southerners, realizing the Democratic Party was no longer representing their interests, defected to the party they saw as more sympathetic to their views, the Republicans. Abramowitz (1994), on the other hand, argues that racial attitudes have little influence on partisan identification among white voters. He claims racial politics are a non-factor, both in terms of partisan identification and vote choice.

The difficulty in evaluating the race factor is further complicated by questions regarding the level of racial animosity among Southern whites. Several authors (including Reed, 1993; Schuman & Bobo, 1988; Tuch, 1987) argue that white Southerners have become less intolerant on racial issues due to generational replacement and changes in society. If true, this “New South” would no longer consider race an important component of the political debate.

It should be noted that the “New South” argument is not without it’s critics. Several authors, including Carmines & Stimson (1989), Kulklinski & Cobb (1997) and Sears et al. (1997) contend that the apparent weakening of Southern white animosity on the race is simply a function of poorly worded survey instruments. They believe the survey questions used to measure racism are tainted by social desirability effects, indicating that white Southerners indicate they are less racist because it has become socially unacceptable to admit to being racially biased.

A second perspective on this change looks at religion and moral issues as the primary divisive force. This argument contends that the changes in the South are a reaction against the liberal social attitudes of the 1960s and the secular humanism of the 1970s. According to this explanation, Southerners, who are more socially traditional and more religiously grounded, took offense at the counter-culture during that time and pointed the finger at the Democratic Party as the primary agent of these events (Miller, 2003). As a result of their frustration with the moral relativism of liberal Democrats, Southern whites defected to the Republican Party that professed to restore solid moral values in the United States.
Determining whether either of these explanations has any merit is the purpose of this analysis. Through careful examination of longitudinal data, it is possible to compare the impact of race with the impact of religion and morality on voting and partisan trends among Southern white voters.

Methodology.

The data for this analysis are drawn from the American National Election Studies Cumulative data file (1952-2000) and several of the individual yearly data sets. All of the data represent individuals surveyed specifically for the American National Election Studies. Since the issues surrounding white Southern defection are many, the most logical method to test the accuracy of these explanations is to compare Southern whites to non-Southern whites. For all of the following analyses, only those survey respondents that identified themselves as Caucasians were included in the data pool.

Time Trends.

Since the ANES constantly reviews and frequently changes the composition of its survey, it is often difficult to look at long-term trends. That said, there are several questions that have been asked over an extended period of time that may yield some insight into the apparent changes in white Southern voter ideology.

Perhaps the most basic question is whether or not a core partisan difference exists between Southern whites and non-Southern whites and if this difference has changed over time.\(^1\) The ANES surveys have been asking respondents to place themselves on a 7-point party identification scale since 1952. Table 1 shows the mean score for non-Southern and Southern whites from 1952 through 2000, as well as the difference in means and the change from the previous year.

[Insert Table 1 Here]

Two things stand out in this table. First, white non-Southern cumulative party identification remarkably consistent compared to that of white Southerners. It appears that the perceived increase in Republican Party identification among Southerners is not a result of non-Southerners moving more towards the Democratic Party. The second thing that stands out is the near-monotonic movement of Southern whites towards the Republican end of the spectrum. With the exception of the slight change from 1984 to 1988, white Southerners have been consistent in their shift towards a more Republican self-identification.

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\(^1\) For this and all further analyzes, I adopt the widely accepted definition of Southern states as the eleven states of the Old Confederacy: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.
This difference may simply be an indication of traditional party loyalty rather than a true difference in political ideology. A more adequate comparison would be to examine where non-Southern whites and Southern whites place themselves ideologically relative to the two major parties. Table 2 shows the mean of the absolute differences between the respondents' self-placement on a seven-point ideology scale and where they placed the Democratic and Republican parties on the same scale. The greater the absolute difference between the self-placement and the party placement, the farther the average respondent sees themselves from the party on the seven-point scale. Thus, the larger the number, the greater the ideological distance the average respondent feels from the party in question.

{Insert Table 2 here}

The results in Table 2 shows that both Southern and non-Southern white respondents tend to see themselves as closer to the Republican Party than to the Democratic Party. In addition, white Southerners consistently see themselves as closer to the Republican Party than their non-Southern cousins. While there are several years in which non-Southern whites place themselves nearly equidistant from both parties (1984, 1990, 1992, and 1998), at no point do Southern whites come close. The results indicate that Southern whites think of themselves as being ideologically closer to the Republican Party rather than the Democratic Party as well as being substantially closer to the Republican Party compared to non-Southern whites.

As a final test of a broad-based change as an explanation for the change in party support, consider the following figures. Figure 1 shows the mean affect score for the Democrats and Figure 2 shows the Republicans. Affect is the number of negative comments about a party subtracted from the number of positive comments about the same party. For both figures, a score above zero indicates an overall positive view of the party, and score below zero indicates an overall negative view.

The results show that Southern whites and non-Southern whites have changed places over the past 50 years. While the overall results of the affect scores show the average as being relatively neutral, there are differences worthy of note. From 1952 to 1960, non-Southern whites showed higher affect scores for the Republican Party while Southern whites preferred the Democrats. By 2000, non-Southern whites were more favorable towards Democrats and Southern whites were more favorable towards Republicans. With the exception of 1996, non-Southern whites have had a more positive affect towards the Democratic Party than have Southern whites. Only when the Democratic Party has nominated a Southern presidential candidate have Southern whites come close to matching the
positive affect of non-Southern whites. The Democratic Party may have lost Southern white support over the issue of race, but this does not explain the southern White movement towards the Republican Party, as shown in Table 2.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

[Insert Figure 2 here]

The evidence shows that Southern whites have moved towards the Republican Party in terms of partisan self-identification, partisan ideology, and overall affect. One possible explanation for this shift is that Southern whites perceive the Democratic Party as moving towards the left. Figure 3 shows the average rating given for both parties by non-Southern and Southern whites on the seven-point ideology scale from very liberal (-3) to very conservative (3).

[Insert Figure 3 here]

The results indicate that there is no real difference between Southern and non-Southern whites in their ideological perceptions of the two parties. While both groups tend to see the Democrats as being liberal and Republicans as being conservative, the differences between non-Southern whites and Southern whites are minimal. The lines for the non-Southern and Southern whites mimic each other on all three figures so closely that the overall trend does not even approach statistical significance.

The evidence to this point allows for two general conclusions. The first is that Southern and non-Southern whites do not exhibit any significant differences in how they perceive the major parties. While there is variation in the placement of the parties, these variations clearly move in concert. This indicates these fluctuations are likely a result of party policy positions or candidate ideological statements, rather than a shift in how one group or the other perceives the party. The second conclusion is that Southern whites have developed more favorable attitudes towards the Republican Party over the past fifty years. Southern whites see themselves as more conservative and show a more positive affect towards the Republican Party in 2000 compared to 1952.

Overall, the data suggest that the change in Southern white partisanship is not a result of a change in perceived party ideology as much as it is a change in voter ideology. To further investigate this question, it is possible to consider a variety of issue orientations to look for possible explanations of this change. Although the

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2 This lack of significance is particularly remarkable when you consider there are over 25,000 data points considered. Given the law of large numbers, even a very small overall difference should have generated statistical significance, yet neither was even close (Democrats=0.415, Republicans=0.228).
American National Election Studies have a limited number of consistent policy questions to examine long-term trends, there are several areas worthy of examination.

One likely issue is the civil rights movement. There is little question the most vocal opponents of desegregation were Southern whites, and the anti-segregation movement continues to have a small but loyal group of followers in the Deep South. If changes in white Southern voting are primarily a reaction to the support of the Democratic Party for civil rights movement, it should be noticeable when looking at questions about various aspects of the civil rights movement. Figure 4 shows the mean feeling thermometer scores for non-Southern and Southern whites when asked how they feel about blacks.3

[Insert Figure 4 here]

There is nothing in the data that would support the contention that Southern whites are moving towards the Republican Party as a result of the civil rights movement. The data does show that race was a likely factor in the defection of Southern whites in the 1960s, but it does not account for the continued movement of Southern whites towards the Republican Party in later years. While Southern whites are less positive about African-Americans until the mid-1970s, by the late 1990s, Southern whites have slightly higher average scores than non-Southern whites. The evidence shows that Southern attitudes towards African-Americans are essentially indistinguishable from non-Southern whites towards the end of the time period.

[Insert Figure 5 here]

A similar pattern can be seen in Figure 5, which shows the average results on the question of school integration. As with the previous figure, the gap that was present during the actual civil rights movement narrows and then essentially vanishes by the 1990s. While Southern whites are more opposed to government intervention in the desegregation of schools in 1962, they draw essentially even with non-Southern whites by 1990 on the issue.

[Insert Figure 6 here]

This pattern also holds true when looking at how much whites are willing to continue to support public assistance to blacks, as seen in Figure 6. Once again, there is little evidence that Southern whites vary dramatically from non-Southern whites on this issue. While there are differences in the early 1970s and again in the late 1980s, non-Southern and Southern whites appear to share essentially the same opinion on the issue of government support for African-Americans since 1992.
After consideration of the evidence, it seems likely that the growing movement of Southern whites towards the Republican Party is not a result of backlash on the civil rights issue. The evidence appears to show that the antipathy Southern whites held towards African-Americans in the 1960s has dissipated over the past forty years.

If Southern whites have become more favorable towards African-Americans, it may indicate that race and the civil rights movement have become less salient as an issue for them. If these issues have truly faded from the Southern white political consciousness, then logic dictates that other issues must move towards the forefront in the voting decision.\(^4\)

If the backlash is not a result of the civil rights movement, the other likely area of conflict is social policy. Starting with the "Culture Wars" in the 1980s, many conservative religious leaders in Southern states have portrayed non-Southern Democrats as something akin heathens or Communists.\(^5\) The supporters of the Culture Wars argued that liberal non-Southern Democrats had hijacked the party, forcing the agenda too far to the left. The primary examples were issues such as abortion, gay rights, and the declining moral standards of the United States. The war to "take back Christian values in America," while often based on questionable history and vitriolic rhetoric, has made an impact on white Southerners.

Although these issues are the focal points for the Culture War, the American National Election Studies have not gathered sufficient time-series data to reach any long-term trend conclusions. There are, however, enough cross-sectional questions to draw some interesting comparisons. Figure 7 shows the results of several feeling thermometers from the 2000 ANES study.

[Insert Figure 7 here]

Three areas stand out in this data. Clearly non-Southern and Southern whites disagree on the issues surrounding gays and lesbians, feminism, and Bill Clinton. None of these come as a surprise, as these were three of the most common targets for conservative Southern religious leaders such as Jerry Fallwell and Pat Robertson during the 1980s and 1990s.

All three of these issues fall under the overall platform of the Moral Majority and/or Christian Right (Simpson, 1983). For conservative Southern whites, the “homosexual agenda” was a major focus of concern. Many

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\(^3\) The feeling thermometer question asks the respondents how they feel about blacks on a scale of 0 to 100 with 0 being the most negative and 100 being the most positive.

\(^4\) It should be noted that his conclusion is not without controversy. Previous studies of ideological changes in the South that have reached similar conclusions have been challenged by some scholars (Kuklinski & Cobb, 1997; Abramowitz, 1994).
supporters of the movement argued that the push for equal rights for homosexuals was, in fact, a push for special rights. Leaders in the Moral Majority argued that providing civil rights protections for homosexuals was a tacit endorsement of their sexual orientation, and orientation their membership saw as an affront to their religious beliefs.

Much the same argument applies to the differences in the “feminist” category between non-Southern and Southern whites. Within the Moral Majority, the feminist movement was often equated with the gay rights movement. Leaders believed that feminism was a threat to the two-parent family structure, and even went so far as to campaign against various versions of the Equal Rights Amendment both at the national and state level. The opposition to feminism among conservative Southern Christians is perhaps no more obvious than in the following quote from a 1992 fundraising letter from Pat Robertson. In part, the letter says,

The feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians.

The clear animosity contained in this quote is consistent with the statements made by many leaders of the Culture War regarding feminism. Given the vitriol in the statement, it is not surprising to find Southern whites are less supportive of the feminist movement.

A similar pattern emerges when looking at responses to a variety of moral issues raised during, as seen in Figure 8. For each question, the percentages are for those who answered “yes” to the question.

[Insert Figure 8 Here]

The primary issues of the 1980s for many Southern whites can be thought of as the Three “Gs”: gays, guns, and the gospel. These issues mark apparent differences between non-Southern and Southern whites. While non-Southern and Southern whites may appear to agree when looking at traditional ideological frameworks, it is apparent that moral/social issues have become an important cleavage set between the two. With the decline of the salience of racial issues, Southern whites have increasingly gravitated towards issues regarding homosexual rights, in the inclusion of religion in government, and other issues considered to fall into the category of traditional family values.

Since the Culture War rhetoric clearly favors Republicans over Democrats in the South, the impact of such rhetoric may well explain why Southern whites are abandoning their traditional party affiliations.

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5 Although the origin of the phrase “Culture War” to describe the emergence of the Christian Right as a political force is unclear, it is important to note that the phrase was first used by the leaders of the movement, not critics of it.

6 Despite the protests to the contrary from the Christian Coalition and other groups associated with the Culture War, it does not take a keen observer of politics to see that the Culture War ideology has become firmly entrenched in the conservative wing of the Republican Party.
Perhaps just as noteworthy in all of this information is the large numbers of non-Southern whites who have switched their voting patterns from the Republican to the Democratic Party. According to the ANES cumulative data series, the last year a greater percentage of Southern whites than non-Southern whites voted for a Democratic presidential candidate was 1980. While Republicans have experienced significant gains among Southern whites, it appears these gains are being offset by losses among non-Southern whites.

[Insert Figure 9 Here]
Conclusions.

Southern whites have moved away from the Democratic Party both on the major issues and in a broader ideological sense. While 40% Southern whites still consider themselves to be Democrats in 2000, 48% identify more closely with the Republican Party.

What makes this shift more interesting is the contrast between Southern and non-Southern whites. Figure 3 shows that both non-Southern and Southern whites perceive the party positions as being nearly identical. If the general party ideological position is the driving force behind voter support, non-Southern whites should have abandoned the Democratic Party in the same manner as Southern whites. Not only did non-Southern whites not leave the Democratic Party, they actually became stronger supporters of the party over time. The evidence indicates that the shift in the South is NOT a result of a movement in the Democratic Party, rather it is a result of a shift of Southern whites combined with an increased effort on the part of the Republican Party to embrace issues that appeal to Southern whites.

There are probably many causes for the shift in Southern support for the Democratic Party, although it appears that the civil rights movement was, at best, a temporary explanation. It appears as if the “Culture Wars” of the conservative religious movements in the South have had a far-reaching and long-term impact on Southern ideology. One could argue that the Culture Wars simply exposed the Democratic Party for what it stood for, and the end result was many Southern Democrats re-evaluating long-term party loyalties. It is also possible that the rhetoric of the time moved Southern white thinking further to the right of the spectrum. This is a question clearly deserving of further study.

If the shifts shown in the data become a permanent fixture of American political culture, it will present significant problems for both parties. The Republican Party will need to avoid becoming the party exclusively of the South (a problem it already faces when one looks at the leadership on the national level), while the Democratic Party will need to figure out how to draw more of the non-Southern white vote. Both parties are facing a substantial realignment in one of the largest voting blocs, both in size and in turnout, in the last 50 years. It is imperative that the parties examine these trends and that scholars continue to look for explanations.
References


Table 1. Mean Party Identification Scores for Non-Southern and Southern Whites.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Non-Southern Whites</th>
<th>Southern Whites</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>Rate of Change from Previous Survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>+1.54</td>
<td>---</td>
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<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>+1.28</td>
<td>-0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>+1.05</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>+0.87</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3.12</td>
<td>+0.69</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>3.84</td>
<td>+0.21</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>+0.27</td>
<td>+0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>3.95</td>
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<td>-0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
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<td>4.01</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>-0.35</td>
<td>-0.28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Party Identification scales range from Strong Democrat (1) to Strong Republican (7)
Table 2. Average Absolute Differences Between Self-Placement and Party Placement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Non-Southern Whites</th>
<th>Southern Whites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Democratic Party</td>
<td>Republican Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>1.09</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.80</td>
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<tr>
<td>1982</td>
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<td>1.05</td>
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<td>1.12</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scaled from 0 (No Difference) to 7 (Polar Opposite)
Figure 1. Mean Democratic Party Affect Among Whites

Scaled from +1 (Most Positive) to −1 (Most Negative)
Figure 2. Mean Republican Party Affect Among Whites

Scaled from +1 (Most Positive) to –1 (Most Negative)
Figure 3. White Northern and White Southern Ratings of Party Ideology

Scaled from +3 (Very Conservative) to −1 (Very Liberal)
Figure 4. Mean “Black” Thermometer Scores for Northern and Southern Whites.

Scaled from 0 (Least Favorable) to 100 (Most Favorable)
Figure 5. Mean White Opinion on School Integration.

0=The government should be involved in school integration
1=The government should stay out of school integration
Figure 6. White Support for Public Assistance to Blacks.

Scaled from Full Assistance (1) to No Assistance (7)
Figure 7. Mean 2000 Feeling Thermometer Scores.

Scaled from 0 (Least Favorable) to 100 (Most Favorable)
Figure 8. Moral Issues Among Whites, 1996-2000.

- **Opposed to Prayer in School**
  - Non-Southern Whites: 40%
  - Southern Whites: 5%

- **Religion Has A Place In Politics**
  - Non-Southern Whites: 60%
  - Southern Whites: 40%

- **Abortion Should Always Be Legal**
  - Non-Southern Whites: 30%
  - Southern Whites: 20%

- **Tolerate Differing Moral Standards**
  - Non-Southern Whites: 50%
  - Southern Whites: 30%

- **Opposed To Gay Couples Adopting**
  - Non-Southern Whites: 40%
  - Southern Whites: 30%

- **Favor Increased Gun Control**
  - Non-Southern Whites: 50%
  - Southern Whites: 40%
Figure 9. White Vote Percentage For Democratic Presidential Candidates.

Source: American National Election Studies Cumulative Data File.