

**The Blair Education Bill:  
A Lost Opportunity in American Public Education**

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Following the presidential election of 1876, the Republican Party's political prospects in the South dwindled as federal troops withdrew and state governments were "redeemed" by resurgent Democrats. Republicans now faced a choice: work to cobble together a coalition of Freedmen and disaffected Democrats, or focus on building support in states outside of the ex-Confederacy. Through the 1880s, Senator Henry Blair (R-NH) pushed the GOP to continue its efforts in the South. To that end, he introduced an ambitious plan to provide millions of dollars in federal aid to southern primary and secondary schools. Blair's bill never became law despite passing in the Senate on three separate occasions. Unlike all other civil rights proposals in the post-war era, however, Blair's bill won support from a biracial, bipartisan, intersectional coalition of northerners and southerners. And in yet another departure from post-war patterns, its defeat was attributable to a group of Northern Republicans. In this paper we explore the decade-long battle surrounding Blair's proposal. Our analysis focuses on this "lost opportunity" because the goals of Blair's bill, its supporters, and the explanation for its defeat offer important insights into the course of American Political Development.

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## Introduction

When Robert E. Lee conceded defeat at Appomattox in 1865, he brought to a close the first phase of America's second revolution. The true nature and extent of the changes wrought by the American Civil War would not, however, be determined until phase two: the Reconstruction era. Over a dozen pivotal years, 1865-1877, Republicans in Congress successfully enacted the 14th and 15th Amendments, landmark legislation guaranteeing all citizens equal protection of the laws and prohibiting government officials from denying a citizen the right to vote based on his color, creed, or previous condition of servitude. They also oversaw passage of supplemental laws providing Freedmen with the resources of the federal government as a defense against the reemergence of the "slave power."

But as Reconstruction gave way to "Redemption" – when white Democrats regained political control throughout the former-Confederacy – the civil rights agenda waned. The contest over legislation appropriating federal funds to state primary and secondary schools represents one of the last civil rights battles of the post-Civil War, pre-Jim Crow era. It therefore implicates many of the central concerns addressed by legislators as they groped their way through the post-war years: the best way to promote social and political equality in the long term, the reach and power of the state and federal government in a post-war world, and the collective responsibility (or absence thereof) to care for the millions of Freedmen. Social and political conflicts over these issues did not end with the withdrawal of federal troops from the South, and the debate over the future of America's nascent school system went on as well.

During the Redemption years, the Republican Party's approach to two questions – whether to provide federal funds to public schools?, and if so, how best to do so? – demonstrates how its members judged the party's political future in the former-Confederate states. Some did

not believe the party had a future in the South, and they were unreliable allies of federal aid. Others believed that the GOP could be a truly “national” party, and supported public schools as a way to appeal to Freedmen and economically disadvantaged whites. With those two groups incorporated into the GOP, these Republicans argued, the party could be viable in the South over the long term.

Education provided an opportunity for the Republican Party because it occupied the minds of Freedmen and reformers even before the war ended. W.E.B. Dubois’s account of Reconstruction finds that Freedmen established the first southern public school in September 1861. Located in Hampton, Virginia, it was run by a female volunteer working with the American Missionary Society.<sup>1</sup> Schools cropped up throughout the Confederacy as the war raged, supported in part by money appropriated through the First Freedman’s Bureau bill. When the war ended, “reconstructed” state governments began, for the first time, to tax residents for the purpose of funding state school systems. For example, Mississippi’s new state constitution, enacted in 1868, obligated the legislature to “establish a uniform system of free public schools, by taxation or otherwise, for all children between the ages of 5 and 21 years.”<sup>2</sup> Reformers soon discovered that the proceeds raised from state taxes could not, on their own, support their education plans. In response they turned to the federal government.

As one key aspect of the broader Reconstruction project, the nascent system of state-funded primary and secondary schools came under immediate attack as Democrats regained power in the South. Despite overt attempts at conciliation from Republicans advocating federal aid to state schools, many Democrats withheld support. Northern Democrats argued against providing tax money to provide for public education (and the high tariffs that provided the

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<sup>1</sup> W.E.B. Dubois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Atheneum, 1992): 642.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Dubois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 652.

“surplus” to fund such GOP initiatives). In the southern states themselves, Democratic opposition came from an economic elite – the Bourbons – who sought to keep the lower classes from advancing and threatening the economic hierarchy. At the same time, many disaffected and economically disadvantaged southern whites, those “Redeemer Democrats” pursued by the Republican Party during the Redemption years, were receptive to the idea of federal aid being funneled south to provide educational opportunities.

Democrats who opposed federal aid for state schools found unlikely allies in some Republican members. The GOP’s historic commitment to black Americans led some to posit education reform as the next step toward civil and political equality. Senator Henry W. Blair (R-NH), the primary advocate for education aid during these years, frequently invoked his party’s legacy when defending the bill from detractors.<sup>3</sup> Yet Blair was often opposed by co-partisans who argued that their constituents should not be coerced into contributing to the education of children living outside of their respective states. Some western Republicans also believed that Blair’s bill was too conciliatory and generous toward southerners. For them, the party’s future success was in the West. They tired of Blair’s insistent push for federal aid, especially when his efforts drew attention from issues more pressing to citizens living on the frontier.

In short, Blair’s proposal created some interesting cross-cleavages. Democrats were split, with many Southern Democrats supporting federal funding of “common schools.” As a result, Southern Democrats and Southern Republicans could envision a cross-partisan – and cross-racial – alliance on the issue of education, something that never occurred during Reconstruction. At the

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<sup>3</sup> The Blair bill has been covered to a small degree in various academic studies, many of which we draw upon in subsequent sections. See, e.g., Allen J. Going, “The South and the Blair Education Bill,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 44 (1957): 267-90; Daniel W. Crofts, “The Blair Bill and the Elections Bill: The Congressional Aftermath to Reconstruction,” (Unpublished Dissertation, Yale University, 1968); Daniel W. Crofts, “The Black Response to the Blair Education Bill,” *The Journal of Southern History* 37 (1971): 41-65; Gordon B. McKinney, *Henry W. Blair’s Campaign to Reform America: From the Civil War to the U.S. Senate*. (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2013).

same time, Blair's bill gave rise to an early "conservative coalition:" Northern Democrats and a pivotal group of Republicans would eventually join, oppose, and ultimately defeat cross-party reformers who sought to meaningfully expand the reach of the federal government.

Members of Congress voted on Blair's proposal for the final time in 1890, thereby ending nearly a decade of debate over federal aid to education. The federal government would not provide funds to "common" state schools until President Lyndon Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965. In this way, the Blair bill episode highlights a pivotal "non-event." Blair's bill represented an ambitious (for the time) effort to turn the federal government into a vehicle for ensuring all children an equal opportunity to receive an education. Its failure offers insights into topics of concern for those interested in American political development: factors influencing the expansion/retraction of national administrative capacity, how ideological commitments drive policy debates, and how the political parties transform public preferences into policy outcomes.

### **Henry Blair and His Bill**

With slavery abolished, black citizens in the South found themselves confronting a problem they had never before faced: how to provide their children with the educational opportunities necessary for upward mobility. According to Dubois, "the very feeling of inferiority which slavery forced upon them fathered an intense desire to rise out of their condition by means of education." "The first great mass movement for public education at the expense of the state in the south," he goes on, "came from Negroes."<sup>4</sup> These efforts showed real results. Between 1865-1870, the Freedman's Bureau spent more than \$5 million on schools throughout the South. By

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<sup>4</sup> Dubois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 638.

July 1870, there existed 4,239 schools, employing 9,307 teachers, educating 247,333 students.<sup>5</sup>

In order to protect and build upon these gains, Senator Henry Blair (R-NH) worked to supplement state efforts with federal funds.

First elected by to the House in 1875, Henry Blair almost immediately demonstrated interest in the American education system. Even before he was the official Republican nominee, Blair wrote William E. Chandler – a powerful Republican party newspaperman in New Hampshire – to request “some data showing the present condition of the cause of education in the south and the means of showing the work accomplished there by the Republican Party among both whites and blacks.”<sup>6</sup> Blair won his first election by 209 votes and took his interest in education policy to Congress.

As a new House member, Blair quickly voiced his support for three pending education bills. The first, introduced by George F. Hoar (R-MA), would have established a federally funded national system of education. The second and third, introduced by Legrand Perce (R-MS) and Gilbert Walker (R-VA), sought to fund public education using money from the sale of public lands.<sup>7</sup> Speaking on behalf of Walker’s bill in 1876, Blair proclaimed his view that “we are rapidly nearing the time when the American people will vote directly upon the question, ‘Shall the common-school system, which is under God the source and defense of American liberty, continue to exist?’”<sup>8</sup>

The House passed Perce’s bill in 1872 – prior to Blair’s election – but the Senate never took up the measure. Not put off by congressional inertia on the issue, Republican legislators had introduced a total of 12 bills designed to provide federal aid to America’s “common schools by

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<sup>5</sup> Dubois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 648.

<sup>6</sup> Blair quoted in McKinney, *Henry W. Blair’s Campaign to Reform America*, 54.

<sup>7</sup> Going, “The South and the Blair Education Bill,” 271-72.

<sup>8</sup> Blair quoted in Crofts, “The Black Response to the Blair Education Bill,” 47.

1880. None of them sparked meaningful debate or stood much chance of being enacted into law.<sup>9</sup> It took Blair's election to the Senate in 1878, and his decision to push a federal aid package that instigated the protracted battle over federal education funding.

Blair introduced S. 151 – “to aid in the establishment and temporary support of common schools” – in December 1881.<sup>10</sup> His proposal called for \$105 million in federal appropriations distributed over ten years to each state. Congress would allocate money to each state in proportion to the number of “illiterates” living within its borders. In its first year, the bill would allot \$15 million; for each subsequent year the total amount appropriated would decrease by \$1 million. Blair structured the bill in this way to preempt arguments that he was proposing a federal take-over of the nation's schools. He claimed that the allocation formula would allow each state to develop a self-sustaining public education system. Permanent federal intervention would not therefore be necessary, Blair claimed.<sup>11</sup>

Between 1881 and 1891 the Senate would pass amended versions of Blair's proposal on three separate occasions. Yet the bill never came up for a vote in the Democratic-controlled House. Blair's advocates in the lower chamber could not convince Speaker John Carlisle (D-KY) to begin consideration of the proposal. Blair was also doomed, however, by political infighting among his fellow Republicans. In fact, Blair's co-partisans emerged as pivotal opponents of the bill. The reasons for their opposition ranged from perceived unfairness in the geographic distribution of funds, to claims that the bill was unconstitutional, to beliefs that the GOP should simply give up its effort to retain a foothold in the South. To the extent that federal aid to education stands as one of the last civil rights bills of the “first civil rights era,” its failure attests to a political decision by the GOP to abandon its historical commitment to black citizens.

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<sup>9</sup> Going, “The South and the Blair Education Bill,” 272.

<sup>10</sup> *Congressional Record*, 47th Congress, 1st session (December 6, 1881), 21.

<sup>11</sup> *Congressional Record*, 47th Congress, 1st session (December 20, 1881), 226-28.

## The Blair Bill in Context

When Reconstruction ended in 1877, the internal dynamics of both parties were particularly unsettled. The GOP's plan to oversee the withdrawal of federal troops from the occupied southern states resulted in an immediate weakening of its political position throughout the southeast. Through violence, intimidation, and voter fraud, Democrats moved quickly to reestablish their political supremacy. As a consequence, Republicans found themselves confronting two questions: did it make sense to commit time and resources to southern states in which the GOP was increasingly unpopular?; and, if so, what was the best strategy for winning support in southern states? Republican Presidents Hayes, Garfield, Arthur, and Harrison put varying amounts of effort into increasing the party's fortunes in the South, and they implemented different strategies for doing so.<sup>12</sup> The decisions made by these presidents exacerbated the internal party tensions that would eventually bring down Blair's proposal.

Democrats also faced internal tensions. As a consequence of the Panic of 1873, and the economic austerity supported by some Democratic governors, a number of splinter groups emerged to challenge party solidarity.<sup>13</sup> Self-styled "Greenbackers," "Independents," and "Readjusters" represented internal dissatisfaction with the Democratic Party's positions on monetary policy, taxation, federal aid for internal improvements, and payment of state debts incurred during the Civil War. Held together by the war and then Reconstruction, "the disaffected partners could scarcely wait until Redemption was achieved to air their grievances

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<sup>12</sup> For a general discussion of the Republican Party's strategy vis-à-vis the South during these years, see Vincent De Santis, *Republicans Face the Southern Question: The New Departure Years, 1877-1897* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1959); Stanley Hirshson, *Farewell to the Bloody Shirt: Northern Republicans and the Southern Negro, 1877-1893* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962); Xi Wang, *The Trial of Democracy: Black Suffrage and Northern Republicans, 1860-1910* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1997); Charles W. Calhoun, *Conceiving a New Republic: The Republican Party and the Southern Question, 1869-1900* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Nicolas Barreyre, "The Politics of Economic Crises: The Panic of 1873, the End of Reconstruction, and the Realignment of American Politics," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 10 (2011): 403-23.

and fall upon the leaders of the dominant element of Redeemers.”<sup>14</sup> Federal aid to public education – and the Blair bill specifically – emerged as one of the wedge issues dividing Democrats. Recognizing the fault lines within the Democratic Party, Republican presidents used federal education funding as a mechanism for trying to split the Democrats and then win the support of the dissenters.

Taking office in 1877, President Rutherford B. Hayes was the first Republican to confront the dilemma generated by the newly redeemed southern states. Unwilling to give up on the South, Hayes believed that continued Republican success there hinged on a dual program of internal improvements and patronage. Hayes immediately began filling patronage positions with “ex-Confederates, old-line Whigs, Douglas Democrats, and plain Democrats.”<sup>15</sup> One-third of Hayes’s southern patronage appointments during the first months of his administration went to Democrats.<sup>16</sup> Discussing this approach to patronage in his diary, Hayes noted that it alone would “secure North Carolina, with a fair chance in Maryland, Virginia, Tennessee, and Arkansas,” and maybe even “Louisiana, South Carolina and Florida.”<sup>17</sup>

In tandem with his patronage policy, Hayes was also promising a program of federal aid to southern states. In his inaugural address, the newly elected president acknowledged that the war had “arrested [the] material development,” of the region. The former Confederacy needed “the considerate care of the national government within the just limits prescribed by the Constitution and wise public economy.”<sup>18</sup> To the press he “expressed himself in very decided terms in favor of a system of internal improvements calculated to benefit and develop the

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<sup>14</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 76.

<sup>15</sup> Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 45-46.

<sup>16</sup> Hirshson, *Farewell to the Bloody Shirt*, 36.

<sup>17</sup> Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 45-46. Also see: Vincent P. De Santis, “President Hayes’s Southern Policy,” *The Journal of Southern History* 21 (1955): 476-94.

<sup>18</sup> Rutherford B. Hayes, “Inaugural Address,” <http://millercenter.org/president/hayes/speeches/speech-3558>

South.”<sup>19</sup> Notably, Hayes explicitly referenced the nation’s education system during his broader discussion of internal improvements. “Liberal and permanent provision should be made for the support of free schools by the state governments,” he argued, “and, if need be, supplemented by legitimate aid from national authority.”<sup>20</sup>

Hayes’s decision to link federal aid for internal improvements turned Blair’s proposal into a vehicle for Republicans to pursue policy reform and political advantage. First, as we detail below, Blair’s education bill won southern support from those who recognized that state funds were insufficient relative to what the region needed. Southern states simply did not have the money to pay for common schools. In addition, education advocates in the ex-Confederacy were limited by “traditions of local autonomy and low taxation valued by native whites, Republicans as well as Democrats.”<sup>21</sup> The relative poverty of the South, and skepticism toward state “intervention,” handicapped state education systems. Yet, 4.7 million out of a total of 6.2 million “illiterates” documented by the U.S. Census lived in the South; worse, southern states collectively spent less than five times what non-southern states spent on education in 1880.<sup>22</sup> Blair acknowledged these trends when he argued that the “nation as such abolished slavery as a legal institution; but ignorance is slavery, and no matter what is written in your constitutions and your laws slavery will continue until intelligence, the handmaid of liberty, shall have illuminated the whole land.”<sup>23</sup>

The unwillingness of Democratic governors to spend money on education reflects what Woodward describes as a commitment to “retrenchment.” Many Democratic governors portrayed themselves as enabling the “rule of the taxpayer” by “constituting themselves as

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<sup>19</sup> Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 45.

<sup>20</sup> Hayes, “Inaugural Address”

<sup>21</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 366.

<sup>22</sup> Going, “The South and the Blair Education Bill,” 268; Crofts, “The Blair Bill and the Elections Bill,” 28.

<sup>23</sup> *Congressional Record*, 47th Congress, 1st session (June 13, 1882), 4831.

champions of the property owner against the propertyless [*sic*].”<sup>24</sup> From their perspective, public education was an extravagance foisted on the states by Northern carpetbaggers. Book learning was not needed in an agricultural society, they claimed.

Education reform did, in fact, play a central role in the plans offered by those who moved south at war’s end. One Vermont native who traveled to Mississippi and became active in the public school movement there declared education to be the “energizing agent of modern civilization.” It was an “answer to the race problem in southern society” because only schooling could “enlighten the white masses” and thereby erode their anti-black prejudices.<sup>25</sup> Education reformers saw in schools an opportunity to promote civil and political equality.

The plans hatched by liberal reformers proved expensive, however, and as the troops withdrew so did the momentum for their implementation. Democratic-controlled state houses abolished boards of education, cut state and local property taxes, and “all but dismantled the education systems established during Reconstruction.”<sup>26</sup> State funds appropriated for public education were frequently used to pay interest on state debt and teachers frequently went without pay.<sup>27</sup> So dire was the threat to southern schools, argued one reformer, that the “little that has been done [already] [...] far surpasses anything that the friends of education can or will do in the South for the next twenty years if they are compelled to rely upon their own resources.”<sup>28</sup>

Despite opposition from many Democrats, federal aid for public schools did have some important advocates among black southerners and dissident Democrats. Black citizens in

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<sup>24</sup> Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 59.

<sup>25</sup> William C. Harris, “The Creed of the Carpetbaggers: The Case of Mississippi,” *The Journal of Southern History* 40 (1974): 209.

<sup>26</sup> According to Foner (1988, 58), “Texas began charging statewide fees in its schools, while Mississippi and Alabama abolished statewide school taxes, placing the entire burden of funding on local communities. Louisiana spent so little on education that it became the only state in the Union in which the percentage of native whites unable to read or write actually rose between 1880 and 1900. School enrollment in Arkansas did not regain Reconstruction levels until the 1890s.”

<sup>27</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, 366.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Harris, “The Creed of the Carpetbaggers,” 211.

particular viewed a commitment to education as central to their political and material advancement. According to Eric Foner, they were even willing to overcome their skepticism of segregated facilities based on their belief that separate schools were an improvement over no schools.<sup>29</sup> Going further, Daniel Crofts argues that the Blair bill represented “the one politically promising piece of national legislation which offered something blacks wanted.”<sup>30</sup> Black newspapers editorialized in favor of the bill, black historian George W. Williams called it “the grandest measure of our times,” and in September 1883 the Colored National Convention endorsed Blair’s proposal.<sup>31</sup>

Among whites, support came from the agrarian wing of the Democratic Party. Populism steadily gained steam throughout the South during in the 1880s. For example, Readjusters in Virginia – one splinter faction comprised of agrarian Democrats – fought to reopen public schools for black and whites alike after the legislature defunded the state’s young school system.<sup>32</sup> These one-time Democrats also broke with the party in their effort to “readjust” state financial liabilities so that more money could be spent on the economically distressed. Readjuster economic policy departed from the views of most Republicans. As “fiscal hawks,” most in the GOP supported hard money and balanced budgets. Henry Blair counted himself among this group, but he campaigned for Readjuster candidates prior to the 1882 election because of their support for public education.

Support for public education funding among Democratic Party dissidents proved particularly important once President James Garfield embraced a “divide the Democrats” political strategy. Under the advice of New Hampshire’s William E. Chandler, Garfield

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<sup>29</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, 367.

<sup>30</sup> Crofts, “The Black Response,” 44-45.

<sup>31</sup> Crofts, “The Black Response,” 45; McKinney, *Henry W. Blair’s Campaign to Reform America*, 91.

<sup>32</sup> McKinney, *Henry Blair’s Campaign to Reform America*, 86.

promoted southern candidates affiliated with various Democratic Party splinter groups. Following Garfield's assassination, President Chester Arthur followed suit by working to "unite Republicans, Readjusters, Greenbackers, Independents, and 'Liberals'" in order to displace the Democratic state governments.<sup>33</sup> Chandler gave voice to this strategy in a letter to Republican stalwart James G. Blaine. "Our straight Republican, carpet-bag, Negro governments [...] have been destroyed and cannot be revived," he writes, "without these coalitions or support from Independents we cannot carry enough southern votes to save the House from Bourbon Democratic control, and carry the next presidential fight."<sup>34</sup>

Arthur's plan to ally the Republican party with Democratic Party dissidents is important for two reasons. First, it alienated traditional Republicans. In seeking the support of free silver advocates and anti-debt campaigners, Arthur and his supporters pulled Republicans away from the party's "hard money," pro-business agenda. Chandler's letter to Blaine was a response to opposition mounted by the northeastern wing of the party to Arthur's strategy. Next, and most importantly, Arthur's approach was a total failure. When Arthur took office, Republicans controlled the White House and both chambers of Congress.<sup>35</sup> In the 1882 midterms, however, they suffered a crushing defeat. When the 48th Congress (1883-85) opened, the Republicans faced a 79-seat disadvantage in the House, while retaining a small majority in the Senate. In 1884, Democrat Grover Cleveland would be elected president, and the Democrats would continue to control the House during his first administration. During these years, Republican and Independent electoral efforts in the South faltered considerably.

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<sup>33</sup> Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 81.

<sup>34</sup> Chandler quoted in De Santis, "President Arthur and the Independent Movement," 350.

<sup>35</sup> In the House, they held an advantage of twenty-three seats. In the Senate they retained majority status thanks to the support of William Mahone – a Readjuster from Virginia – and the vice-president's tie-breaking vote.

By the 51st Congress (1889-91), therefore, many GOP leaders in Congress were skeptical that either a coalition with disaffected Democrats, or support for black voters, would allow them to reclaim lost ground in the South. This skepticism would play an important role in deciding the fate of the Blair bill. In the early 1880s, however, Blair remained confident that he could put together a coalition of Republicans and southern Democrats to get his bill passed. The story of Blair's bill, therefore, begins here.

### **The Blair Bill: Early Action**

Senator Blair introduced the first version of his education bill on December 6, 1881, yet he did not speak on behalf of the proposal until June 13, 1882. In the interim, he put together a three-hour long demonstration of the “actual condition of popular education in this country,” which he combined with an argument about the “nature and extent of the powers and obligations of the national government to assist in the education of the people.”<sup>36</sup> From Blair's perspective, republican government would only survive if the public could read and write. Accordingly, he argued, the opportunity for learning to do both must “be provided at the public charge.”<sup>37</sup> Commenting on the South, Blair posted universal education as “part of the [Civil] War” insofar as north and south were now combating the “forces of ignorance” which put the survival of the nation in jeopardy.”<sup>38</sup>

Blair's bill – S. 151 – proposed committing \$105 million over ten years in federal money to the cause of universal education. For the first year after enactment, \$15 million would be dispersed to the states, and for each year thereafter the total allotment would decline by \$1 million. The amount of money received by a given state would be based on its illiteracy rate

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<sup>36</sup> *Congressional Record*, 47th Congress, 1st session (June 13, 1882), 4820-33.

<sup>37</sup> *Congressional Record*, 47th Congress, 1st session (June 13, 1882), 4824.

<sup>38</sup> *Congressional Record*, 47th Congress, 1st session (June 13, 1882), 4831.

among those over 10 years old. This provision guaranteed that most of the federal money distributed would go to the South. In order to ensure that the funds would be spent wisely, the bill created a federal supervisor for each state who was empowered to recommend a rescission of funds as punishment for fraud or misuse. Importantly, the bill also stipulated that “nothing herein shall deprive children of different races, living in the same community but attending separate schools, from receiving the benefits of this act, the same as though the attendance therein were without distinction of race.”<sup>39</sup>

Congress took no action on Blair’s proposal prior to adjournment in August. In between August and December 1882 – when Congress reconvened in a lame-duck session – President Arthur, the American Social Science Association and the National Education Assembly endorsed the proposal.<sup>40</sup> The Interstate Education Alliance – a coalition of white, southern educators – also called on Congress to enact the proposal. In addition, “swarms” of petitions in support of the bill, mostly from black southerners, awaited members’ return to Washington, D.C.<sup>41</sup>

Responding to these demonstrations of support, Blair moved quickly to procure a special order that would bring his bill up for debate. Here he ran into the first instance of Republican opposition. John Logan (R-IL) had authored his own education proposal, which he did not want to see set aside. Whereas the Blair bill aimed to fund education through general revenue, Logan’s aimed to raise education funds through a new tax on whiskey.<sup>42</sup> Logan also opposed the Blair bill’s “appropriation by illiteracy” approach. Speaking on the floor, Logan argued “that the proposition to distribute this money according to illiteracy is a proposition to ask a certain number of states to pay taxes to educate others. I do not think the country is in favor of any such

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<sup>39</sup> *Congressional Record*, 47th Congress, 1st session (June 13, 1882), 4833.

<sup>40</sup> McKinney, *Henry Blair’s Campaign to Reform America*, 91.

<sup>41</sup> McKinney, *Henry Blair’s Campaign to Reform America*, 91.

<sup>42</sup> Crofts, “The Blair Bill and the Elections Bill,” 55.

proposition.”<sup>43</sup> The sectional rivalry motivating Logan’s opposition would consistently handicap Blair’s efforts. In 1883, however, Republican infighting simply led the Senate to table both education bills until the meeting of the next Congress.<sup>44</sup>

When the 48th Congress (1883-85) convened in December 1883, Blair immediately reintroduced his bill.<sup>45</sup> By this time, of course, the political environment had shifted considerably as the Democrats were now in control of the House. With a Republican president and a two-vote Republican majority in the Senate the GOP retained significant political influence. Yet the new political context further convinced Blair that for his bill to pass, Southern Democrats must be on board. This fact largely explains the substantive differences between S. 151 and the newly introduced bill, S. 398. Highly suspicious of federal intervention into state functions, southern Democrats opposed the supervisor position written into S. 151. In an August 1883 speech before the National Education Assembly, Blair made known his willingness to drop that section of the proposal and instead allow for state administration of funds.<sup>46</sup> Federal supervision would not be the only area in which Blair would concede in order to manage a fragile, bipartisan coalition.

Debate on Blair’s new proposal began in March 1884. Once again, he began the discussion with a long floor speech built upon a foundation of education statistics culled from the 1880 census. In order to meet the nation’s educational need, S. 398 once again proposed to distribute \$105 million over ten years. In addition, the bill called for funds to be allocated to states based on the illiteracy rate, required states to match one-third of federal funds appropriated

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<sup>43</sup> *Congressional Record*, 47th Congress, 2nd session (January 9, 1883), 1015.

<sup>44</sup> Crofts, “The Blair Bill and the Elections Bill,” 55.

<sup>45</sup> *Congressional Record*, 48th Congress, 1st Session (December 5, 1883), 36.

<sup>46</sup> McKinney, *Henry Blair’s Campaign to Reform America*, 92.

over the first five years after enactment and dollar-for-dollar during the last five years, and it allowed states – rather than a federal authority – to oversee the expenditures.<sup>47</sup>

In yet another important concession to southern Democrats, S. 398 explicitly allowed for – some would argue it validated – segregated schooling. The bill called for an equal distribution of money between white and black schools, thus constructing a “separate but equal” regime. Recognizing this dilemma, Blair spent a significant amount of time defending the provision. His defense boiled down to the following argument: “the distribution shall be made in such a way as to equalize the money that goes to each child per capita throughout the state [...] to produce an equalization of school privileges throughout the state. I do not think that anything could be more just.”<sup>48</sup>

Senate consideration of Blair’s proposal ran through March and into April 1884. Over the course of these four weeks, Blair was “surprised” by the objections raised by fellow Republicans. For example, John Ingalls (R-KS) doubted that “we are under any obligation to educate the blacks of the south.”<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Joseph Dolph (R-OR) argued that the states outside the South had no obligation to provide funds to ex-Confederate states to educate their poor white citizens or poor black citizens.<sup>50</sup> Further testifying to the strength of Republican opposition, a March 1884 article in the *Washington Post* argued that should the bill fail, only Republican “sectional conspirators” would be to blame.<sup>51</sup> Democrats, on the other hand, tended to object for “constitutional” reasons. From their perspective, the federal government lacked the constitutional authority to guarantee all citizens a public education.

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<sup>47</sup> McKinney, *Henry Blair’s Campaign to Reform America*, 93.

<sup>48</sup> *Congressional Record*, 48th Congress, 1st Session (April 7, 1884), 2715.

<sup>49</sup> Ingalls quoted in Crofts, “The Blair Bill and the Elections Bill,” 64.

<sup>50</sup> *Congressional Record*, 48th Congress, 1st Session (March 26, 1884), 2285.

<sup>51</sup> “Why the Blair Bill is Opposed,” *Washington Post*, March 26, 1884.

In order to agree on a compromise measure, Senate Republicans met as a caucus and established a nine-member committee charged with developing a consensus approach to federal funding.<sup>52</sup> The revised measure called for an appropriation of \$77 million distributed over 8 years; stipulated that states would not receive more money from the federal government than they spent on education at the state/local level; required that black and white schools receive equal funding; and mandated that states submit annual reports to the federal government detailing how they spent the money they received.<sup>53</sup>

On April 7, 1884, the Senate passed Blair's bill. As the first column in Table 1 illustrates, both Republicans and Southern Democrats supported the bill by wide margins, while Northern Democrats (those outside the eleven states of the former-Confederacy) opposed it by a margin of 2-4.<sup>54</sup> Despite the lopsided Republican vote, support from the GOP was weaker than the numbers suggest. Eleven Republicans – including many of the bill's most outspoken opponents – recognized the political liabilities incurred by voting against the measure and chose to absent themselves instead of voting "no."<sup>55</sup> The support provided by Southern Democrats would also prove weaker than the vote suggests. As sectional tensions increased during the latter half of the decade, it would be harder for Blair to keep this part of the coalition in line. In short, Blair's political coalition was broad but very fragile, and this fragility would prove to be the bill's undoing.

Of course Senate passage was just the first stop for Blair and his supporters. Next, they needed to get a similar bill through the House, where Democrats were in control. And, making things ever more difficult, House Speaker John C. Carlisle (D-KY) was an outspoken opponent

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<sup>52</sup> Crofts, "The Blair Bill and the Elections Bill," 67; *New York Times*, April 1, 1884.

<sup>53</sup> Crofts, "The Blair Bill and the Elections Bill," 95

<sup>54</sup> *Congressional Record*, 48th Congress, 1st Session (April 7, 1884), 2724.

<sup>55</sup> Crofts, "The Blair Bill and the Elections Bill," 71.

of the measure.<sup>56</sup> Leveraging the power of his position, Carlisle successfully prevented the House from taking up Blair's bill prior to adjournment in early fall 1884. This delay would prove particularly important, because in November 1884, Democrat Grover Cleveland defeated Republican James G. Blaine in the presidential election. As a consequence, "many Republicans who felt comfortable with a Republican president overseeing the Southern Democrats administration of the program were much less enthusiastic about having a Democratic administration in charge."<sup>57</sup>

### **The Blair Bill: Later Efforts and Defeat**

The 48th Congress took no additional action on Blair's proposal, so he reintroduced the bill in early January 1886, near the start of the 49st Congress (1885-87). Prior to congressional debate on the measure, Blair wrote President Cleveland in an attempt to win support for the measure. "Should the bill become law," he argued, "that administration which should carry its provisions into execution would become illustrious in the annals of America and of mankind."<sup>58</sup> Blair also worked hard to convince skeptical Republicans that the Democratic president could be trusted to administer the program. While Cleveland chose not to take a stand on the bill, Senate Republicans did once again vote overwhelmingly to support a version of the bill (S. 194) identical to the one passed in 1884 (see column two of Table 1).<sup>59</sup>

Here again, however, the vote tally obscures Republican opposition to Blair's proposal. Echoing many of the objections heard in 1884, Senator Ingalls (R-KS) inveighed against the bill because of its lopsided distribution of funds to southern states. Ingalls then introduced an amendment mandating that the federal government distribute aid based on the number of school

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<sup>56</sup> James Barnes, *John G. Carlisle: Financial Statesman* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1931), 110-12; 152-53.

<sup>57</sup> McKinney, *Henry Blair's Campaign to Reform America*, 97.

<sup>58</sup> Blair quoted in Crofts, "The Blair Bill and the Elections Bill," 106.

<sup>59</sup> *Congressional Record*, 49th Congress, 2nd Session (March 5, 1886), 2105.

age children living in a given state instead of on the number of illiterates. If adopted, this amendment would have significantly reduced the money committed to the South and, thereby, put at risk the support of southern Democrats.<sup>60</sup> The amendment lost 24-19, but it won support from 13 Republicans.

The next Republican challenge came from William B. Allison (R-IA). Allison's amendment sought to change the bill's distribution provision by stipulating that funding would be based on the "proportion that the illiteracy of white and colored persons [...] had to each other."<sup>61</sup> If passed, this amendment would have required southern states to devote significantly more money to black schools than to white schools. Consequently, it also put at risk support from Southern Democrats. Allison's amendment also lost, but it split the Republican Party – 17 Republicans voted for the measure and 17 against.<sup>62</sup> Despite the failure of both amendments, the Republican support that they received suggests that a significant number of GOP senators were looking for a politically palatable way to undermine Blair's proposal.

Having passed the Senate, the bill moved to the House where it died. Democrats who saw federal expenditures for education as a strategy for drawing down federal surpluses and, thereby, staving off tariff reform simply refused to allow the bill to move forward. In order to kill the bill, the Democratic leadership packed the House Education Committee with members who opposed it. According to a March 1886 report in the *Washington Post*, "the committee intended to kill the bill."<sup>63</sup> Recognizing the strength of the Education Committee's opposition, House Republicans successfully had the bill moved to House Labor Committee. The change in venues, however, did not generate a change in outcomes. Instead, the Labor Committee replaced the provisions

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<sup>60</sup> Crofts, "The Blair Bill and the Elections Bill," 113.

<sup>61</sup> Crofts, "The Blair Bill and the Elections Bill," 113.

<sup>62</sup> Crofts, "The Blair Bill and the Elections Bill," 119.

<sup>63</sup> *Washington Post*, March 13, 1886; McKinney, *Henry Blair's Campaign to Reform America*, 123.

allocating funding based on the number of illiterate citizens living in a state with language guaranteeing all states an equal amount of federal aid.<sup>64</sup> This change was unpalatable to Blair's supporters, but House leadership would not allow a vote on any legislation with language identical to the Blair bill. In the end, the House did not consider any federal aid proposals, so Blair was once again stymied.

At the beginning of the 50th Congress (1887-89), Blair once again introduced his bill (now S. 371) and had reason to be optimistic about its fate. The Senate opened debate in January 1888 and Blair immediately worked to turn support for the measure into an electoral issue. The impending presidential election allowed Blair an "opportunity to go directly to the people to secure backing for the bill."<sup>65</sup> Further, the Republican Party Platform provided explicit backing for the bill. "The State or Nation, or both combined," Republicans argued, "should support free institutions of learning sufficient to afford every child growing up in the land the opportunity of a good common school education."<sup>66</sup> In addition, Benjamin Harrison – the GOP nominee in 1888 – had supported Blair's bill while serving as a senator.<sup>67</sup>

When the bill came up for debate in the Senate, Blair's opponents took their usual positions. Some Democrats opposed the measure because they did not believe in education for black citizens. Senator John Morgan (D-AL), for example, claimed that state-sponsored schooling for black children would keep them "out of the cotton fields, where their labor was needed."<sup>68</sup> More important than these explicitly racist arguments however, was the growing amount of cross-party opposition from those who believed that federal aid would do more harm

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<sup>64</sup> Crofts, "The Blair Bill and the Elections Bill," 126.

<sup>65</sup> McKinney, *Henry Blair's Campaign to Reform America*, 124.

<sup>66</sup> The Republican Party's 1888 Platform can be read here:  
<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29627>

<sup>67</sup> Harrison voted "yea" on the final-passage vote in the 48th Congress, but only offered a "paired yea" in the 49th Congress.

<sup>68</sup> Crofts, "The Blair Bill and the Elections Bill," 159.

than good. Summing up the position of these members, a *New York Times* editorial published in February 1888 claims that “one of the most precious rights of a State is that character for stability and self-control which comes of the necessity of taking care of its own interests.”<sup>69</sup>

As he had in the past, Blair overcame all of the bill’s opponents in the Senate. As column three of Table 1 illustrates, however, the number of Republicans opposing the bill grew significantly (from 5 to 12) in just two years. In an editorial published immediately following Senate enactment, the *New York Times* offers one explanation for the growing Republican opposition. “The fact is that it [Blair’s proposal] has little support in public opinion of the country,” argued the editors.<sup>70</sup> Absent reliable polling data, any assessments of public opinion remain guesswork. Yet what we can see from the Senate vote is an increasing amount of skepticism among Blair’s ostensible allies.

In the House, Republicans would never have an opportunity to vote on the measure. Speaker Carlisle once again effectively killed the bill by sending it to the Education Committee. In 1888, William Crain (D-TX) chaired the committee. He won that post as a reward for his effort to defeat Blair’s proposal two years earlier. As a member of the Labor Committee, Crain conceived of plan to substitute Blair’s appropriation plan with a provision stipulating that the amount of money received by a state would be based on its population rather than its illiteracy rate.<sup>71</sup> This change would undermine southern support from the bill, thereby ensuring its defeat. When a last-ditch effort by some House Republicans to force Blair’s original proposal out of committee and onto the floor failed, Blair’s bill once again died.

Despite their inability to enact Blair’s proposal, the election of 1888 proved to be a landslide victory for the GOP. Republicans won unified control of government – House, Senate,

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<sup>69</sup> “Education and State Rights,” *New York Times*, February 15, 1888: 4.

<sup>70</sup> *New York Times*, February 19, 1888: 4.

<sup>71</sup> Crofts, “The Blair Bill and the Elections Bill,” 167.

and presidency – for the first time since 1880. Blair took this victory as a sign that the time had finally come for his bill to be enacted. According to Gordon McKinney, Blair attributed Republican electoral successes to support for his bill.<sup>72</sup> Yet because Blair’s bill relied so much on the support of Southern Democrats, the Republican landslide generated a new political problem. Sectional tensions were on the rise and Democrats in the South “awaited the Republican rule with growing suspicion.” By 1889-90, racial violence had increased and, according to Albion Tourgee – a long-time advocate for black rights in the South – the year 1890 represented “the most dangerous epoch [for blacks] since 1860.”<sup>73</sup> As a consequence, Southern Democrats proved more skeptical of all Republican-initiated federal programs.<sup>74</sup>

Republicans, too, did not interpret their victory as a mandate to implement Blair’s education proposal. Instead, the GOP now believed conciliation to be unnecessary and unjustifiable. Moreover, according to Stanley Hirshson, the election of 1888 had caused a rift between those who wanted to “play down the Negro question and emphasize the tariff issue,” and those who were unwilling to sacrifice the party’s long-standing commitment to black southerners.<sup>75</sup> President Harrison himself sent an ominous signal at the outset of the 51st Congress (1889-91) when he failed to immediately announce his support for the Blair bill’s enactment.<sup>76</sup>

Debate on Blair’s proposal (now S. 185) began for the final time on February 5, 1890. By this point, the arguments for and against the bill were so well known that few members lingered in the chamber to hear Blair once again recount the justifications for passing his bill. According to one contemporaneous account, “when Mr. Blair began his speech there was a general exodus

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<sup>72</sup> McKinney, *Henry Blair’s Campaign to Reform America*, 124, 125.

<sup>73</sup> Tourgee quoted in “The Blair Bill and the Elections Bill,” 235.

<sup>74</sup> Crofts, “The Blair Bill and the Elections Bill,” 181.

<sup>75</sup> Hirshson, *Farewell to the Bloody Shirt*, 143-67.

<sup>76</sup> Crofts, “The Blair Bill and the Elections Bill,” 197.

of senators on both sides of the chamber, and of the eighty-two senators, only five remained while Blair was talking. The press gallery also vacated.”<sup>77</sup> Giving voice to the opinion of many Senators, an editorial in the *New York Times* characterized Blair as a “bore” and argued that continued advocacy on behalf of the bill simply allowed Blair to “relieve his own mind.”<sup>78</sup>

What distinguishes this iteration of the debate from those preceding it was, according to Blair, the fact that “several leading Republicans who had always supported the bill [...] would do so no longer.” This pattern started with President Harrison who, in his first annual message as president, chose not to provide an endorsement. Only three years earlier, Harrison had implored the Senate to pass the Blair bill so that “an increasing body of Southern men” would be taught to show a more “kindly disposition toward the elevation of the colored man.” In early 1889, however, Harrison expressed dissatisfaction with the bill’s plan to appropriate money over eight years. “One Congress cannot bind a succeeding one,” Harrison now argued.<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, when Republicans called for a final vote on the measure in March 1890, President Harrison did not explicitly call on Senate Republicans to vote “yea.”<sup>80</sup>

In an interview published in the *New York Mail and Press*, Blair recounted his dawning awareness that a significant number of Republicans had turned against the measure. “If an early vote was taken,” Blair recalled, “the bill would be defeated by about a ten or twelve [vote] majority.” In response, he “adopted the tactics of getting time.” Between February 17-20, Blair mounted a one-man “reverse filibuster” on behalf of his bill. Over these three days he begged

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<sup>77</sup> McKinney, *Henry Blair’s Campaign to Reform America*, 127.

<sup>78</sup> “Senator Blair’s Speech,” *New York Times*, February 21, 1890: 4.

<sup>79</sup> Crofts, “The Blair Bill and the Elections Bill,” 198.

<sup>80</sup> McKinney, *Henry Blair’s Campaign to Reform America*, 129.

Republicans to honor their obligations to the Freedmen. “You can reconstruct the South,” Blair argued, “in no other way than by beginning with the children.”<sup>81</sup>

Despite Blair’s pleas, and his delay tactics, the bill could not overcome the sectional animosities plaguing the 51st Congress. Outraged by the murder of a Deputy U.S. Marshal in Florida, Republicans condemned southerners for failing to protect those responsible for enforcing federal law. Acting on their anger, some prior supporters of the bill now took the floor to argue that it conceded too much to south. Southerners meanwhile threatened once again to withhold their support if the bill placed any conditions on how the money would be spent, or if it included any mechanism for federal oversight. Blair’s bill, argued Senator Wilkinson Call (D-FL), provided black citizens with “no claim to social or political equality.”<sup>82</sup>

After nearly two months of debate on the measure, Blair agreed to bring his bill to a vote. Newspaper accounts published on March 20, 1890 predicted a close result but, according to Daniel Crofts and Gordon McKinney, Blair was confident that he had the necessary support to ensure its enactment.<sup>83</sup> Blair miscalculated. “Sometime during the night,” Blair recalled in an interview, Senators Henry Payne (D-OH) and John Sherman (R-OH) both decided to reverse positions and oppose the measure. Sherman’s reversal in particular surprised Blair and his supporters.<sup>84</sup> Yet Sherman was not alone. The final vote tally shows a significant number of Republican Party defections, as slightly more than 40 percent of Republicans now opposed federal education aid (see column four of Table 1). In addition, a majority of Southern Democrats – eight of 15 – now also voted against the bill.

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<sup>81</sup> Blair interview quoted in Crofts, “The Blair Bill and the Elections Bill,” 199-201.

<sup>82</sup> Quoted in Crofts, “The Blair Bill and the Elections Bill,” 203.

<sup>83</sup> Crofts, “The Blair Bill and the Elections Bill,” 203; McKinney, *Henry Blair’s Campaign to Reform America*, 128-29.

<sup>84</sup> Crofts, “The Blair Bill and the Elections Bill,” 208-10.

Historians have not come to a consensus on why Republicans turned against the Blair's bill. McKinney suggests that midwestern Republicans believed economic issues to be more of a priority than the education bill, while Crofts suggests that sectional tensions generated a belief among Republicans that Blair's bill was too conciliatory.<sup>85</sup> Whatever the reasons for GOP opposition, it proved enough to bring the bill down. If the same number of Republicans who had voted for the bill in 1888 had done so again in 1890, Blair's bill would have made it through the Senate. Of course, the bill had passed the Senate on three prior occasions so there was no guarantee that Senate passage portended enactment. Yet with a Republican majority in the House and President Harrison in the White House, this appeared to be Blair's best opportunity for success. By 1890, however, the GOP looked askance at Blair's bill. The party instead set its sights on economic reforms and, for a brief time, a new federal elections bill.<sup>86</sup>

### **A Closer Look at Voting on the Blair Bill**

Before concluding, we take a closer look at voting on the Blair bill – within both the Republican and Democratic Parties. We also examine vote choice in a multivariate context, to see how much a variety of factors – such as ideology, party, region, and distributive politics – may have influenced senators' voting decisions.

In Tables 2 and 3, we lay out the individual vote choices of Republicans and Democrats in the Senate on the four final-passage votes on the Blair bill. Our goal is to identify (a) if and when particular senators switched their votes and (b) if vote switches were due instead to senator

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<sup>85</sup> McKinney, *Henry Blair's Campaign to Reform America*, 126; Crofts, "The Blair Bill and the Elections Bill," 209.

<sup>86</sup> Despite balking on the Blair bill in the 51st Congress, the Republicans did enact education legislation in the form of the second Morrill Act, which applied specifically to the former-Confederate states. (The first Morrill Act was adopted in 1862.) The Morrill Act of 1890 was aimed at higher (university) education, however, rather than the common schools. To receive federal aid, a state would need to show that race (color) was not a criterion for college admission, else a separate land-grant institution for persons of color would need to be established. The Morrill Act of 1890 Act eventually led to the creation of a number of "historically black colleges" – the so-called "1890 Institutions" – throughout the South.

replacement. On the Republican side (Table 2), support remained strong between the 48th and 49th Congresses – only one senator (William Frye, RI) switched from “yea” to “nay.” And only one GOP senator – John Spooner (WI) – switched between the 49th and 50th Congresses; however, two new GOP senators – Charles Farwell (IL) and Frank Hiscock (NY) – voted “nay” in the 50th Congress, after replacing Republicans – John Logan (IL) and Warner Miller (NY) – who had voted “yea” in the 49th Congress. Three of the other four GOP “nay” votes in the 50th came from senators who were present but did not vote in the 49th Congress (John Hawley, WI; Dwight Sabin, MN; and Nelson Aldrich, RI).<sup>87</sup> Finally, between the 50th and 51st Congresses, two Republican senators switched their votes from “yea” to “nay” – Philetus Sawyer (WI) and, surprisingly, Henry Blair (RI). Blair switched from “yea” to “nay” because he saw that his proposal was about to lose, and by switching before the final tabulation was announced he put himself in a position to call for reconsideration. Edward Wolcott (CO) also voted “nay,” after replacing Thomas Bowen (CO), who had voted “yea” in the previous Congress. Finally, John Sherman (OH) finally cast a vote, after sitting out the previous three; he had voiced support for the bill, but ultimately chose to reverse himself and voted “nay.”<sup>88</sup>

On the Democratic side (Table 3), some significant switches occurred between the 49th and 50th Congresses: Daniel Voorhees (IN), Joseph Blackburn (KY), and John Kenna (WV) all switched from “yea” to “nay,” while William Bate (TN) voted “nay” after replacing Howell Jackson (TN), who voted “yea” in the previous Congress. Between the 50th and 51st Congresses, three Southern Democrats – perhaps fearing Republicans, now in control of all federal offices,

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<sup>87</sup> The remaining GOP “nay” vote in the 50th Congress came from Cushman Davis (MN), a first-term senator; in the previous Congress, his predecessor – Samuel McMillan – offered a “paired yea.”

<sup>88</sup> Blair lost on the roll call in the 51st Congress despite benefitting from the significant support (four “yea” votes against only one “nay” vote) of Republicans from three new states: North Dakota, South Dakota, and Washington. These states were brought into the Union by an ambitious Republican Party, which saw the unified party control of government as a unique (and strategic) opportunity. See Charles Stewart III and Barry R. Weingast, “Stacking the Senate, Changing the Nation: Republican Rotten Boroughs, Statehood Politics, and American Political Development,” *Studies in American Political Development* 6 (1992): 223-71.

might go back on some of their states' rights promises regarding administration of the new education program – switched from “yea” to “nay”: James Berry (AS), James Jones (AS), and Edward Walthall (MS). And four other Southern Democrats who voted “yea” in the 50th Congress chose to pair off or not vote at all: Wilkinson Call (FL), James Eustis (LA), Matt Ransom (NC), and Zeb Vance (NC). Henry Payne (OH) also switched from “yea” to “nay.”

We next consider senators' vote choices in terms of (a) ideology and (b) party and region in a multivariate analysis. We then explore how accounting for distributive politics, on top of the aforementioned factors, may increase the model's explanatory power. We measure ideology using the (now ubiquitous) first two D-NOMINATE dimensions, stemming from the work of Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal.<sup>89</sup> D-NOMINATE scores measure “revealed ideology,” and are based on a multidimensional (psychometric) unfolding technique applied to the universe of roll-call votes in a given Congress. We consider party and region in terms of the Democratic Party specifically; the Republicans had so few senators in the South during this period that breaking the party into regional components adds little value.<sup>90</sup> We tap distributive politics using the percent of individuals in a state at least 10 years old who could not write (and thus were considered “illiterate”).<sup>91</sup> The expectation is that senators from states with a greater (lesser) proportion of illiterates would benefit more (less) from the provisions of the Blair bill, and thus all else equal would have a greater (lesser) likelihood of supporting the legislation.

Regression results appear in the Appendix (Tables A1-A4). We present results using both logistic and linear probability models. In the first set of regressions (based on ideology), we find that the first D-NOMINATE dimension is statistically significant, but not the second. This is not

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<sup>89</sup> See Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, *Congress: A Political-Economic History of Roll-Call Voting* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>90</sup> There was one Southern Republican in the 48th and 50th Congresses, respectively, two in the 49th Congress, and none in the 51st Congress.

<sup>91</sup> Data on illiteracy were drawn from the 1880 U.S. Census.

surprising, given that the second dimension during these Senates was so weak as to not even have a substantive interpretation.<sup>92</sup> In the second set of regressions, we find a significant difference between Northern Democrats and Republicans across the set of votes, with the former group considerably more likely to vote against the Blair bill, with smaller (and mostly insignificant) differences between Southern Democrats and Republicans.

In Figures 1 and 2, we illustrate the degree to which accounting for state-level illiteracy rates (our proxy for distributive politics) increases a model's overall explanatory power.<sup>93</sup> Figure 1 considers the addition of the illiteracy rate on top of ideology, while Figure 2 considers the addition of the illiteracy rate on top of party and region. As Figure 1 indicates, accounting for the illiteracy rate always adds a considerable amount in terms of explaining variation in senator vote choice. Indeed, on all four Blair bill votes, the percentage of variation explained more than doubles relative to a basic ideological (NOMINATE) model. These effects are more muted when we move to Figure 2, which considers the illiteracy rate in terms of a base model of party + region. Here, illiteracy always explains additional variation in senator vote choice, but the results vote-to-vote are very uneven; the effect is sizeable on the first two votes (with a tripling on the vote in the 49th Congress), but is considerably more modest on the last two votes. The latter result suggests that the partisan sorting into "yea" and "nay" camps on the third and fourth votes (in the 50th and 51st Congresses) correlated significantly with the underlying illiteracy rates in those states.

### **Conclusion**

For much of American history, the states retained sole responsibility for providing children with adequate primary and secondary schools. This commitment to local control allowed citizens to

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<sup>92</sup> See Poole and Rosenthal, *Congress*, 50.

<sup>93</sup> These results are based on the linear probability models (columns 5-8, in Tables A1-A4).

decide for themselves how much money to put toward the construction and maintenance of “common schools.” Localism also allowed the dominant white majority to reassert itself in the Redemption era by intentionally neglecting the educational needs of poor black (and white) citizens of southern states. The decade-long battle over Henry Blair’s federal education bill, therefore, reflects not simply an attempt to supplement state funds with federal money. Blair and his supporters worked to expand federal authority over education policy at the expense of local preferences. In so doing, they would have created a mechanism by which the federal government could guarantee a modicum of civil rights to the descendants of the slaves. Expansion of national administrative capacity, as has so often been true, stood as the only way to guarantee equal rights to all American citizens.

The Blair bill episode presents those analyzing American Political Development with an opportunity to consider how national administrative expansion may have proceeded if, in the 19th century, the federal government played a meaningful role in the development of state public school systems. Indeed, when President Lyndon Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 – legislation pursuing very similar aims – supporters hailed the bill as a signature achievement for civil rights advocates. The Blair bills also stands as a unique example of 19th century civil rights legislation supported by a bipartisan, biracial, intersectional coalition. Whereas much of the civil rights agenda developed by Republicans in the post-war years was almost universally opposed by Southern Democrats, Blair’s bill won significant support from these legislators. In a novel turn of events – one that presages civil rights battles to come – Northern Republicans played a pivotal role in defeating this reform effort.

Unfortunately for advocates of reform, Blair’s proposal emerged during a period of heightened sectional conflict, and at a time when the Republicans were moving away from a

political strategy that hinged on winning the support of southern Freedmen. At no point during post-war era did “Radical Republicans” – those who sought to move away from the “traditional” division between federal and state power – direct the party’s policy agenda. As we have argued elsewhere, internal divisions played a formative role in determining the contours of post-war policy change. By the late 1880s, however, the radical wing of the GOP was in decline. Much of the energy driving the radical policy changes had dissipated, the public had grown tired of debates over civil rights policy, and the party’s turn westward dampened the political power of Freedmen in the South. The failure of Blair’s education bill, therefore, provides a clear indication of the political forces that brought the “first civil rights era” to a close.

Reconstruction as a “political process,” argue David Herbert Donald, Jean Harvey Baker, and Michael F. Holt, “was already finished” by the 1876 presidential election.<sup>94</sup> We see some evidence for their claim in the weakened civil rights legislation enacted during the 1870s. Despite the relative weakness of reforms pushed by Republicans in the 1870s, however, these bills passed. In the 1880s, politics for the descendants of the slaves took a more ominous turn. As Republican support for meaningful civil rights protections collapsed, Democrats in ex-Confederate states began a committed effort to roll back what protections did exist. The Supreme Court came to their aid in a series of important decisions reached between 1873 and 1883. Lacking the political support required to oppose these developments, the Republican Party made a meaningful departure from its historic commitment to the rights of freedmen. The effects of this choice would be felt until the middle of the 20th century when Democrats would replace the GOP as the party of civil rights.

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<sup>94</sup> David Herbert Donald, Jean Harvey Baker, and Michael F. Holt, *The Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Norton, 2000), 633.

**Table 1. Final-Passage Votes in the Senate on the Blair Bill, 48th-51st Congresses**

Party	48th Congress (S. 398)		49th Congress (S. 194)		50th Congress (S. 371)		51st Congress (S. 185)	
	Yea	Nay	Yea	Nay	Yea	Nay	Yea	Nay
Northern Democrat	2	4	4	3	2	11	1	12
Southern Democrat	11	5	12	3	14	6	7	8
Northern Republican	19	2	18	5	22	12	23	17
Southern Republican	1	0	2	0	1	0	-	-
Total	33	11	36	11	39	29	31	37

Note: “South” here refers to the eleven former-Confederate states. This differs slightly from the ICPSR’s definition for this time period, which also categorizes Kentucky as a southern state.

Source: *Congressional Record*, 48th Congress, 1st Session, (April 7, 1884): 2724; 49th Congress, 1st Session, (March 5, 1886): 2105; 50th Congress, 1st Session, (February 15, 1888): 1223; 51st Congress, 1st Session, (March 20, 1890): 2436.

**Table 2: Republican Votes on the Blair Bill, 48th-51st Congresses**

STATE	NAME	48	49	50	51	STATE	NAME	48	49	50	51
CALIFORNIA	MILLER, J.F.	N	NV	.	.	NEVADA	JONES, J.P.	NV	N	N	N
CALIFORNIA	STANFORD, L.	.	pY	Y	Y	NEVADA	STEWART,	.	.	Y	Y
COLORADO	BOWEN, T.M.	NV	Y	Y	.	NEW HAMPSHIRE	BLAIR, H.W.	Y	Y	Y	N
COLORADO	HILL, N.P.	NV	.	.	.	NEW HAMPSHIRE	PIKE, A.F.	Y	pY	.	.
COLORADO	TELLER, H.	.	Y	Y	Y	NEW HAMPSHIRE	CHANDLER,	.	.	Y	Y
COLORADO	WOLCOTT, E.	.	.	.	N	NEW JERSEY	SEWELL, W.J.	NV	pN	.	.
CONNECTICUT	HAWLEY, J.R.	N	pN	N	N	NEW YORK	LAPHAM,	pY	.	.	.
CONNECTICUT	PLATT, O.H.	Y	NV	Y	Y	NEW YORK	MILLER, W.	Y	Y	.	.
DELAWARE	HIGGINS, A.	.	.	.	Y	NEW YORK	EVARTS, W.	.	Y	Y	Y
ILLINOIS	CULLOM, S.M.	Y	Y	Y	Y	NEW YORK	HISCOCK, F.	.	.	N	N
ILLINOIS	LOGAN, J.A.	Y	Y	.	.	NORTH DAKOTA	CASEY, L.R.	.	.	.	NV
ILLINOIS	FARWELL, C.	.	.	N	N	NORTH DAKOTA	PIERCE, G.A.	.	.	.	N
INDIANA	HARRISON, B.	Y	pY	.	.	OHIO	SHERMAN, J.	NV	NV	NV	N
IOWA	ALLISON, W.B.	pY	NV	Y	Y	OREGON	DOLPH, J.N.	Y	Y	Y	Y
IOWA	WILSON, J.F.	Y	Y	Y	Y	OREGON	MITCHELL,	.	Y	Y	Y
KANSAS	INGALLS, J.J.	pN	N	N	N	PENNSYLVANIA	CAMERON,	NV	NV	Y	NV
KANSAS	PLUMB, P.B.	pN	N	N	N	PENNSYLVANIA	MITCHELL, J.	pY	pY	.	.
MAINE	FRYE, W.P.	Y	N	N	N	PENNSYLVANIA	QUAY, M.S.	.	.	Y	NV
MAINE	HALE, E.	pN	N	N	N	RHODE ISLAND	ALDRICH,	NV	NV	N	N
MASSACHUSETTS	DAWES, H.L.	Y	pY	Y	Y	RHODE ISLAND	ANTHONY,	NV	.	.	.
MASSACHUSETTS	HOAR, G.F.	Y	Y	Y	Y	RHODE ISLAND	CHACE, J.	.	pN	pN	.
MICHIGAN	CONGER, O.D.	Y	Y	.	.	RHODE ISLAND	DIXON, N.F.	.	.	.	N
MICHIGAN	PALMER, T.W.	pY	Y	Y	.	SOUTH DAKOTA	MOODY,	.	.	.	Y
MICHIGAN	STOCKBRIDGE	.	.	Y	Y	SOUTH DAKOTA	PETTIGREW	.	.	.	Y
MICHIGAN	MCMILLAN, J.	.	.	.	Y	VERMONT	EDMUNDS,	Y	pY	pY	Y
MINNESOTA	MCMILLAN, S.	Y	pY	.	.	VERMONT	MORRILL, J.S.	Y	Y	Y	Y
MINNESOTA	SABIN, D.M.	pN	NV	N	.	VIRGINIA	MAHONE, W.	NV	Y	.	.
MINNESOTA	DAVIS, C.K.	.	.	N	N	VIRGINIA	RIDDLEBERG	Y	Y	Y	.
MINNESOTA	WASHBURN,	.	.	.	pN	WASHINGTON	ALLEN, J.B.	.	.	.	Y
NEBRASKA	MANDERSON,	Y	Y	Y	Y	WASHINGTON	SQUIRE, W.C.	.	.	.	Y
NEBRASKA	VAN WYCK, C.	NV	Y	.	.	WISCONSIN	CAMERON,	Y	.	.	.
NEBRASKA	PADDOCK, A.	.	.	pY	pY	WISCONSIN	SAWYER, P.	Y	Y	Y	N
						WISCONSIN	SPOONER, J.	.	Y	N	N

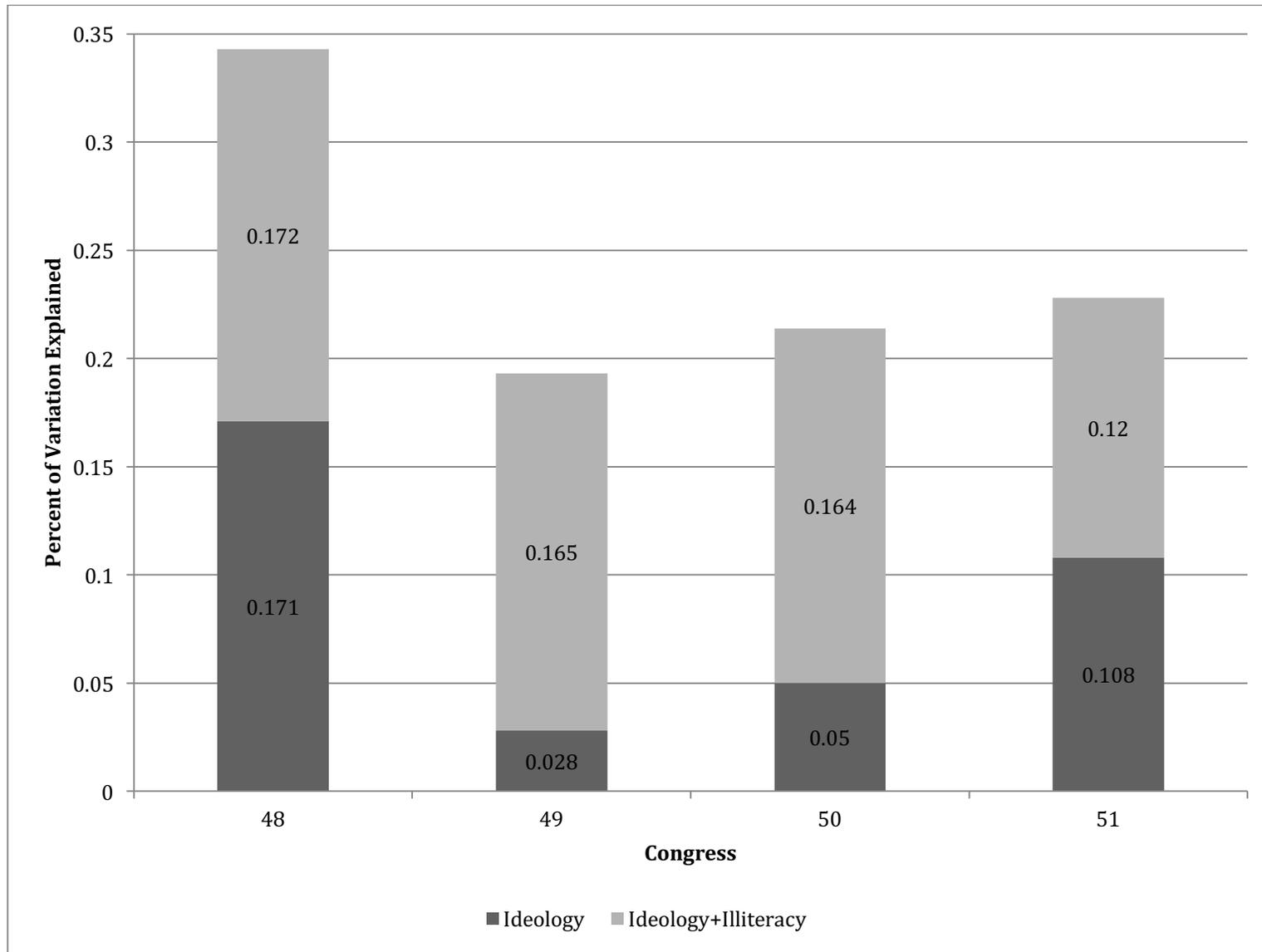
Note: Codes for votes are as follows: Y=yea; N=nay; pY=paired yea; pN=paired nay; NV=not voting; and .=not a member.

**Table 3: Democratic Votes on the Blair Bill, 48th-51st Congresses**

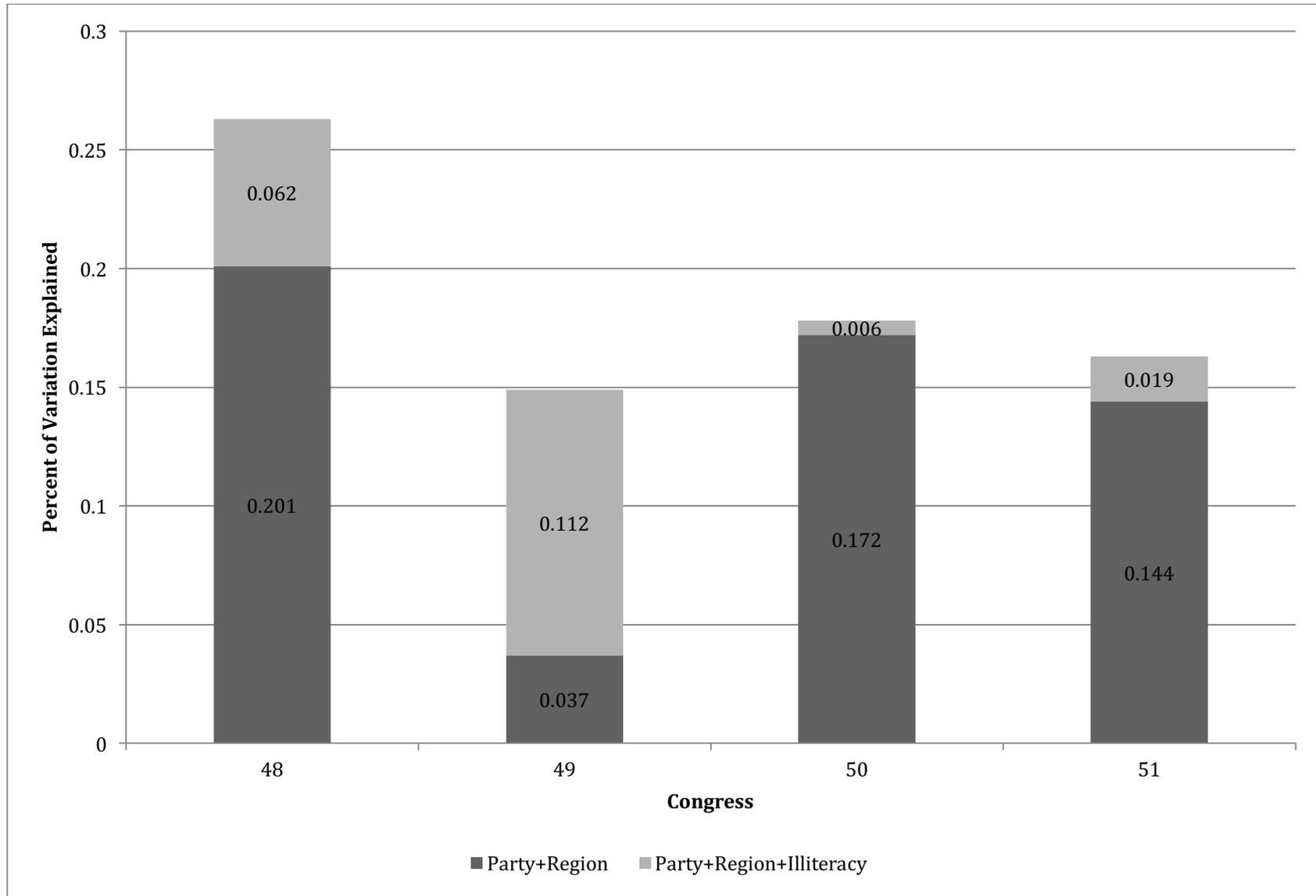
STATE	NAME	48	49	50	51	STATE	NAME	48	49	50	51
ALABAMA	MORGAN, J.T.	N	pN	N	N	MISSISSIPPI	GEORGE, J.Z.	Y	Y	Y	Y
ALABAMA	PUGH, J.L.	Y	Y	Y	Y	MISSISSIPPI	LAMAR, L.Q.C	pY	.	.	.
ARKANSAS	GARLAND, A.H	Y	.	.	.	MISSISSIPPI	WALTHALL,	.	Y	Y	N
ARKANSAS	WALKER, J.D.	pY	.	.	.	MISSOURI	COCKRELL, F.	NV	N	pN	N
ARKANSAS	BERRY, J.H.	.	Y	Y	N	MISSOURI	VEST, G.G.	pN	pN	N	N
ARKANSAS	JONES, J.K.	.	Y	Y	N	NEVADA	FAIR, J.G.	NV	NV	.	.
CALIFORNIA	FARLEY, J.T.	pN	.	.	.	NEW JERSEY	MCPHERSON, J	pN	NV	pN	pN
CALIFORNIA	HEARST, G.	.	.	Y	Y	NEW JERSEY	BLODGETT,	.	.	N	N
DELAWARE	BAYARD, T.F.	N	.	.	.	NORTH CAROLINA	RANSOM, M.W.	Y	Y	Y	NV
DELAWARE	SAULSBURY, E	N	pN	N	.	NORTH CAROLINA	VANCE, Z.B.	pY	Y	Y	pY
DELAWARE	GRAY, G.	.	N	N	N	OHIO	PENDLETON, G	N	.	.	.
FLORIDA	CALL, W.	Y	Y	Y	pY	OHIO	PAYNE, H.B.	.	Y	Y	N
FLORIDA	JONES, C.W.	Y	NV	.	.	OREGON	SLATER, J.H.	pN	.	.	.
FLORIDA	PASCO, S.	.	.	Y	Y	SOUTH CAROLINA	BUTLER, M.C.	N	pN	N	NV
GEORGIA	BROWN, J.E.	Y	pY	Y	NV	SOUTH CAROLINA	HAMPTON, W.	Y	pY	Y	Y
GEORGIA	COLQUITT, A.	Y	Y	Y	Y	TENNESSEE	HARRIS, I.G.	N	N	N	N
INDIANA	VOORHEES, D.	pY	Y	N	N	TENNESSEE	JACKSON, H.E	Y	Y	.	.
INDIANA	TURPIE, D.	.	.	N	N	TENNESSEE	BATE, W.B.	.	.	N	N
KENTUCKY	BECK, J.B.	pN	NV	N	pN	TEXAS	COKE, R.	N	N	N	N
KENTUCKY	WILLIAMS, J.	Y	.	.	.	TEXAS	MAXEY, S.B.	N	N	.	.
KENTUCKY	BLACKBURN,	.	Y	N	N	TEXAS	REAGAN, J.	.	.	N	N
LOUISIANA	GIBSON, R.L.	pY	Y	pY	pY	VIRGINIA	DANIEL, J.	.	.	Y	Y
LOUISIANA	JONAS, B.F.	Y	.	.	.	VIRGINIA	BARBOUR, J.	.	.	.	Y
LOUISIANA	EUSTIS, J.	.	Y	Y	pN	WEST VIRGINIA	CAMDEN, J.N.	pY	NV	.	.
MARYLAND	GORMAN, A.P.	NV	pN	pN	N	WEST VIRGINIA	KENNA, J.E.	Y	Y	N	N
MARYLAND	GROOME, J.B.	N	.	.	.	WEST VIRGINIA	FAULKNER,	.	.	N	N
MARYLAND	WILSON, E.	.	N	N	N						

Note: Codes for votes are as follows: Y=yea; N=nay; pY=paired yea; pN=paired nay; NV=not voting; and .=not a member.

**Figure 1: Percent of Vote-Choice Variation Explained on the Blair Bill (Ideological Baseline), 48th-51st Congresses**



**Figure 2: Percent of Vote-Choice Variation Explained on the Blair Bill (Party+Region Baseline), 48th-51st Congresses**



**Table A1: Blair Bill Vote #1 (48th Senate)**

	Logit Estimates				Linear Probability Estimates			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
D-Nominate 1	1.89** (0.77)	3.97*** (1.26)			0.29*** (0.10)	0.69*** (0.15)		
D-Nominate 2	0.56 (2.35)	-0.17 (2.50)			0.08 (0.38)	-0.02 (0.35)		
Southern Democrat			-1.51* (0.92)	-6.23** (2.80)			-0.22* (0.13)	-0.76* (0.32)
Northern Democrat			-3.00*** (1.14)	-4.63*** (1.55)			-0.58*** (0.18)	-0.73*** (0.20)
Percent Illiterate		0.086** (0.039)		0.125* (0.070)		0.016*** (0.005)		0.014* (0.008)
Constant	1.59*** (0.58)	-0.31 (1.00)	2.30*** (0.74)	1.54* (0.84)	0.77*** (0.08)	0.42*** (0.13)	0.91*** (0.09)	0.80*** (0.10)
N	44	44	44	44	44	44	44	44
LR $\chi^2$ / F test	8.24**	14.85***	8.57**	12.54***	4.44**	6.96***	5.17***	4.75***
% Correctly Predicted	79.6	86.4	79.6	86.4	--	--	--	--
PRE (naïve model)	0.182	0.455	0.182	0.455	--	--	--	--
R <sup>2</sup>	--	--	--	--	0.171	0.343	0.201	0.263
MSE	--	--	--	--	0.409	0.368	0.401	0.390

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Baseline model for PRE calculation is a naïve (minority-vote) model. “Republican” is the excluded partisan category.

\* $p < .10$ , \*\* $p < .05$ , \*\*\* $p < .01$

**Table A2: Blair Bill Vote #2 (49th Senate)**

	Logit Estimates				Linear Probability Estimates			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
D-Nominate 1	0.65 (0.59)	2.80*** (1.04)			0.11 (0.10)	0.43*** (0.14)		
D-Nominate 2	-0.72 (1.78)	-0.25 (1.83)			-0.12 (0.31)	-0.03 (0.29)		
Southern Democrat			-0.00 (0.82)	-5.93** (2.96)			0.00 (0.14)	-0.49* (0.28)
Northern Democrat			-1.10 (0.93)	-2.71** (1.30)			-0.23 (0.18)	-0.34* (0.19)
Percent Illiterate		0.102** (0.042)		0.169** (0.083)		0.014*** (0.005)		0.014* (0.007)
Constant	1.26*** (0.37)	-0.40 (0.72)	1.39*** (0.50)	0.40* (0.67)	0.77*** (0.06)	0.50*** (0.11)	0.80*** (0.09)	0.69*** (0.10)
N	47	47	47	47	47	47	47	47
LR $\chi^2$ / F test	1.35	9.91***	1.55	7.76*	0.59	3.23**	0.84	1.87
% Correctly Predicted	76.6	74.5	76.6	78.7	--	--	--	--
PRE (naïve model)	0	-0.091	0	0.091	--	--	--	--
R <sup>2</sup>	--	--	--	--	0.028	0.193	0.037	0.149
MSE	--	--	--	--	0.431	0.398	0.429	0.416

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Baseline model for PRE calculation is a naïve (minority-vote) model. “Republican” is the excluded partisan category.

\* $p < .10$ , \*\* $p < .05$ , \*\*\* $p < .01$

**Table A3: Blair Bill Vote #3 (50th Senate)**

	Logit Estimates				Linear Probability Estimates			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
D-Nominate 1	0.70* (0.41)	2.71*** (0.83)			0.17* (0.10)	0.54*** (0.14)		
D-Nominate 2	1.17 (1.39)	1.90 (1.56)			0.27 (0.32)	0.34 (0.29)		
Southern Democrat			0.20 (0.60)	-1.06 (1.78)			0.04 (0.13)	-0.18 (0.34)
Northern Democrat			-2.36*** (0.85)	-2.68*** (0.98)			-0.50*** (0.15)	-0.56*** (0.17)
Percent Illiterate		0.088*** (0.029)		0.033 (0.044)		0.017*** (0.005)		0.006 (0.008)
Constant	0.41 (0.27)	-1.18** (0.60)	0.65* (0.36)	0.44 (0.45)	0.60*** (0.06)	0.29*** (0.10)	0.66*** (0.08)	0.62*** (0.10)
N	68	68	68	68	68	68	68	68
LR $\chi^2$ / F test	3.41	15.92***	12.19***	12.79***	1.70	5.80***	6.73***	4.63***
% Correctly Predicted	63.2	73.5	70.6	70.6	--	--	--	--
PRE (naïve model)	0.138	0.379	0.310	0.310	--	--	--	--
R <sup>2</sup>	--	--	--	--	0.050	0.214	0.172	0.178
MSE	--	--	--	--	0.493	0.452	0.460	0.462

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Baseline model for PRE calculation is a naïve (minority-vote) model. “Republican” is the excluded partisan category.

\* $p < .10$ , \*\* $p < .05$ , \*\*\* $p < .01$

**Table A4: Blair Bill Vote #4 (51st Senate)**

	Logit Estimates				Linear Probability Estimates			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
D-Nominate 1	1.08** (0.43)	3.30*** (1.01)			0.25*** (0.09)	0.58*** (0.14)		
D-Nominate 2	1.30 (1.16)	2.30* (1.33)			0.30 (0.26)	0.40 (0.24)		
Southern Democrat			-0.44 (0.61)	-3.31 (2.32)			-0.11 (0.14)	-0.61 (0.44)
Northern Democrat			-2.79*** (1.09)	-3.57*** (1.31)			-0.50*** (0.15)	-0.61*** (0.18)
Percent Illiterate		0.100*** (0.036)		0.077 (0.060)		0.017*** (0.005)		0.014 (0.011)
Constant	-0.18 (0.27)	-1.95** (0.74)	0.30 (0.32)	-0.16 (0.48)	0.46*** (0.06)	0.18* (0.11)	0.58*** (0.07)	0.49*** (0.10)
N	68	68	68	68	68	68	68	68
LR $\chi^2$ / F test	7.64**	18.09***	11.41***	13.20***	3.95**	6.22***	5.49***	4.17***
% Correctly Predicted	58.8	69.1	63.2	66.2	--	--	--	--
PRE (naïve model)	0.097	0.323	0.194	0.258	--	--	--	--
R <sup>2</sup>	--	--	--	--	0.108	0.228	0.144	0.163
MSE	--	--	--	--	0.481	0.452	0.471	0.470

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Baseline model for PRE calculation is a naïve (minority-vote) model. “Republican” is the excluded partisan category.

\* $p < .10$ , \*\* $p < .05$ , \*\*\* $p < .01$