

Rural Republican Realignment in the Modern South

THE UNTOLD STORY

M.V. Hood III and Seth C. McKee

© 2022 University of South Carolina

Published by the University of South Carolina Press Columbia, South Carolina 29208

www.uscpres.com

Manufactured in the United States of America

31 30 29 28 27 26 25 24 23 22

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data can be found at [http://
catalog.loc.gov/](http://catalog.loc.gov/).

ISBN: 978-1-64336-301-1 (hardcover)

ISBN: 978-1-64336-302-8 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-1-64336-303-5 (ebook)

Front cover design by Adam B. Bohannon

Democrats. In this light, the rural whites aligned with the GOP appear to be the final resistance to the modernization of Dixie and, with it, a rising coalition of voters aligned with the Democratic Party who better reflect the demographic profile of the region's current residents and those to come.

In this concluding chapter, we postulate about what the rural Republican realignment of white southerners can tell us about the status of party politics in historical terms. Specifically, the conversion of rural whites to the GOP, a group that was the backbone of the southern Democracy, once again reinforces why the long history of racial differences and division, along with the importance of culturally conservative beliefs and values, continues to stymie the emergence of a colorblind class-based politics with the coalitional heft to topple today's ruling Republicans. Rather, it would appear that compositional changes to the southern electorate are doing more of the work in undermining the GOP's electoral advantage. Rural whites, as the core segment of the modern southern GOP, do not exhibit any inclinations to weaken their attachment to a party that suits their preferences increasingly well. No, it is the decline in this group's numbers (albeit an uneven pattern of decline) that accounts for the grow-

coalitions with rural southern white Republicans at the forefront of opposing the interests of most of their Black counterparts who have been firmly aligned with the Democratic Party since the mid-1960s. The latest version of contemporary southern politics reaffirms a region of white rule (Black and Black, 1987), as it has been, harkening all the way back to the end of Reconstruction and solidifying white governance under the Democratic banner in the last decade of the 1800s when Democrats put down the Populist revolt (Key, 1949; Kousser, 1974).

There is no question that Black influence is considerable in various pockets of the South where their numbers overwhelm that of their white neighbors (Bullock and Gaddie, 2009). Otherwise, the end of Jim Crow, followed by the re-enfranchisement of a substantial share of southern Blacks disproportionately affiliated with the Democratic Party, the impressive and ongoing gains in Latino populations, and the recent shift of urban whites away from the Republican Party, has generally not been enough, yet, to successfully counteract the remarkable political influence of a rural white electorate that is now the base of Dixie's GOP.

However, as we have argued in several places throughout the book, the resulting electoral dominance tied to the realignment of rural whites to the Republican Party is, in many parts of the South, on borrowed time. It is not necessarily that demography is destiny; rather, destiny lies in the marginal, incremental changes in many localities where the rural-led brand of Republican politics appears increasingly antiquated to the modern beliefs of Dixie's voters and those found throughout most of the United States. If the southern GOP retains an outsized rural influence over policy positions, core principles, and style of campaigning and governing, then expect the Republican Party to eventually recede in political strength to those redoubts where very little demographic diversity occurs to effectively alter the composition of these electorates (e.g., Arkansas, Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee). In the remainder

periods in which southern party politics came close to reflecting the views of a racially heterogeneous and ideologically diverse governing coalition: the ephemeral Populist movement in the 1890s and the post-civil rights era that lasted from roughly the 1970s to the early 1990s. Apart from these moments in southern political history, an overwhelmingly white, rural, and racially conservative Democratic Party called the shots in Dixie. This Democratic Solid South regime was toppled by the 1960s civil rights movement, but decades hence, from around the mid-1990s to current times, a lopsidedly white; increasingly rural; and racially, religiously, and socially conservative GOP has held the advantage in shaping the South's public affairs.

We find it curious that, despite the widespread and generally accurate accounts of how the growing rural-urban divide in contemporary American politics is a fundamental factor in deciding elections (e.g., Hopkins, 2017; Johnston et al., 2020; Lang and Pearson-Merkowitz, 2015; Scala and Johnson, 2017), this is the first book-length account that tackles its most politically consequential development: the rural Republican realignment (RRR) of white southerners. Instead, scholars are increasingly focusing on the changing South and how, in many parts of the region, high-growth urban areas are fostering Democratic competitiveness. We, however, focused on the reason why Republicans have become so politically formidable and why the strong GOP affiliation of rural whites makes Democratic efforts to become a more viable opposition a generally slow and painstaking process. Put differently, we have emphasized how partisan changes within the native white population in the South have proven capable of prolonging Republican electoral dominance as Republicanism has begun to wane among urban whites and is admittedly under siege with regard to Dixie's latest newcomers. It took a long time for the white rural Democratic South to morph into the contemporary white rural Republican South (McKee, 2008), and we suspect that a return to a very different Democratic South

views of their white rural base (Miller and Schofield, 2008; Prysby, 2020). In the immediate term, this development is not problematic in many southern states such as Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee. However, in the remainder of southern states, an overemphasis on the preferences, beliefs/values, and concerns of the white rural electorate is repelling urban whites, whose votes are desperately needed for the GOP to stay in control.

Not long ago, and for decades, scholars made common use of a Deep versus Rim/Peripheral South subregional dichotomy (see Black and Black, 1987, 2002, 2012; Key, 1949; Matthews and Prothro, 1966; McKee, 2010, 2017), because it proved empirically useful for explaining different electoral dynamics. For example, collectively, the five Deep South states with proportionally larger Black electorates, are significantly more Republican (Black and Black, 2012; McKee and Springer, 2015). However, as we saw in the 2020 presidential election and then in the January 2021 Senate runoffs, the Deep South state of Georgia has emerged as one of the most competitive. In contrast, two Rim South states, Arkansas and Tennessee, are now unquestionably two of the most Republican in the region (see chapter nine). In short, this subregional distinction has lost its empirical usefulness (Knuckey, 2017), because there are now too many exceptions to the rule of a more Republican Deep South. Instead, as we have alluded to on many occasions, in the most current version of southern politics, what is driving the relative political strength of the major parties is the degree to which their electorates are being demographically altered.

Therefore, in taking in the big picture, there are many places in the South where Republican dominance should persist for years to come, and this arguably entails the five aforementioned states of Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee. The common thread among these states is the minimal changes to their electorates as a consequence of modest