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A New History of the American South

Edited by W. Fitzhugh Brundage

Laura F. Edwards & Jon F. Sensbach, ASSOCIATE EDITORS

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A FERRIS AND FERRIS BOOK

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The South and the State in the Twentieth Century

Campaigning for a seat in the Alabama state legislature in August 1902, John Bankhead Jr. of Walker County enthusiastically defended the state's new constitution approved by voters a year earlier. White Democrats had conducted massive voter fraud in the majority Black counties and thus had ensured the constitution's ratification, but the new document made future fraud unnecessary. As Bankhead giddily declared, the near-elimination of African American voters, as well as a significant decline in the number of poor whites through the implementation of numerous obstacles—a poll tax, a property requirement, a literacy test, and so on—had indeed created “a new order of things.”¹

White southerners had spent the 1870s and 1880s manipulating and suppressing Black votes, and they spent the 1890s and 1900s eliminating them altogether. By rewriting their constitutions, white southerners appeared to have achieved a permanent solution to the problem of African American political participation. Certainly the numbers of registered Black voters confirmed the establishment of white Democracy. In Louisiana, for example, in 1897, before disfranchisement, over 130,000 African Americans turned out to vote. By 1910, this number was a mere 730. Alabama boasted 181,000 Black voters in 1900; by 1902, that number was about 3,000. Accompanying the decimation of the Black electorate was the elimination of any existing, viable political competition. At the same time that southern states were rewriting their constitutions, state Democratic organizations rewrote their rules to bar African American voters from their primaries. John Bankhead Jr.'s “new order” was buttressed by a one-party political system in which white Democrats reigned supreme.² At the state level, a one-party system meant a relatively issueless politics, often driven by individual personalities, in which the needs of the poor—both Black and white—were safely ignored. Despite sustained and often heroic efforts by Black southerners, the protections and benefits delivered by state governments accrued almost exclusively to white southerners for much of the twentieth century.



FIGURE 12.3. Events in the 1970s and beyond would prove this postcard to be prophetic: all of the United States was potentially “Wallace Country.” Courtesy of the Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery.

The prospects for any Democratic Party presidential candidates in the South continued to sink. In 1972, Nixon was determined to contain Wallace. Specifically, he wanted to make him the Democrats’ problem. A third-party effort by Wallace would once again draw conservative whites who might otherwise vote Republican. Nixon hoped to effect a party realignment, with Republicans capturing the votes of white southerners, which would create what he and his supporters hoped would be an enduring Republican majority nationally. To accomplish this, he had to undercut Wallace on social and cultural issues. To Nixon’s great relief, in 1972 Wallace ran as a Democrat, throwing fear into the hearts of Democratic Party stalwarts. Wallace won the Democratic primaries in Florida, Tennessee, Alabama, North Carolina, Michigan, and Maryland, and came in second in primaries in Wisconsin, Indiana, and Pennsylvania. He was well on his way to trouncing his closest competitors—Hubert Humphrey and George McGovern. Then would-be assassin Arthur Bremer, a mentally ill young man from Milwaukee, shot Wallace four times at a campaign stop in Laurel, Maryland. One of the bullets lodged in Wallace’s spine, leaving him forever paralyzed from the waist down. Wallace somehow survived the attack, but his presidential ambitions (although not his political career) were over. The eventual Democratic nominee, Senator George McGovern of South Dakota, garnered only 29 percent of the popular vote in the South. The national Democratic Party had hit an all-time

low. After 1968, the national Democratic Party underwent a transformation, becoming more liberal, with stronger representation among previously underrepresented groups. The party staked out progressive positions on women's rights, particularly support for the Equal Rights Amendment and the support for a woman's right to terminate a pregnancy, that were at odds with many culturally conservative white voters in the South.

The country's involvement in the Vietnam War had caused serious rifts in the national Democratic Party but had left southern politicians relatively unscathed. The increasingly confrontational and violent protests against the country's military involvement in Southeast Asia provided fertile ground for southern politicians such as Wallace to attack his fellow Democrats. The South itself was more supportive of the war generally and for longer than the rest of the nation. The southern economy benefited from the war, making residents of that region more likely to support its expansion. Political leaders from the region played key roles in the Vietnam drama, including President Johnson, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Senators Richard Russell and John Stennis, and Congressman L. Mendel Rivers, as well as military leaders such as General William Westmoreland and Lieutenant Colonel Hal Moore. Southern men served in Vietnam in numbers that far surpassed the region's share of the population. White southern college students remained more consistently pro-war than their peers elsewhere in the nation. Many even supported the U.S. invasion of Cambodia—an action that sparked massive protests on campuses elsewhere—and rated President Richard Nixon's handling of the war as "excellent" or "pretty good." A minority of white college students in the South protested the war, and the tactics used by these minority dissenters tended to be less violent and less radical than tactics used by college students elsewhere.

Black southerners' relationship to the Vietnam War was different from that of their white counterparts. For African American college students in the region, antiwar activities took a backseat to agitation for domestic racial issues. African American students remained "acutely aware of the deadly force directed at the protestors" on Black college campuses. Protesting the war was much riskier for Black college students than for white. As for military service, the motives of Black soldiers from southern states differed from those of white soldiers. The prevalence of poverty, the racism of draft boards, and African Americans' inability to join Army Reserve and National Guard units meant that southern Blacks faced fewer options and consequently served in numbers greater than their share of the population. They also were more likely than white soldiers to be drafted, to serve in combat, and to be wounded or killed.⁴¹

With their prospects in presidential contests at an all-time low, Democrats confronted challenges at the state level. If Democrats were going to remain competitive in gubernatorial and congressional races, they had to build viable biracial coalitions. The 1970s witnessed the rise of what came to be known as New South governors, moderate Democrats who won the support of the majority of Black voters and enough suburban white voters to overcome white majorities that backed Republican candidates. To accomplish this, Democratic candidates had to mix relatively conservative positions on social and economic issues to appeal to whites with moderate positions on race to satisfy Black constituents. Their positions diverged from those of the national Democratic Party, which was moving further to the Left in the early 1970s. Included in this group were Reubin Askew of Florida, Jimmy Carter of Georgia, Dale Bumpers of Arkansas, James Hunt of North Carolina, and William Winter of Mississippi. Among Deep South states, only Alabama failed to elect a New South moderate. These Democratic governors focused on providing efficient and honest government, and continued the goal of modernizing the South through the attraction of outside investment and the capture of federal dollars. They understood as well as anyone that investment dollars would not come to a region roiled by racial strife. They prided themselves on promoting racial harmony and on acquiring funding for public infrastructure, health, and education. They eschewed generous spending on welfare or other programs designed to help the impoverished. Despite the U.S Supreme Court's explosive 1971 decision that school districts could use busing to achieve racial balance, most New South leaders studiously avoided the issue.

Much of the federal spending that occurred in the South was related to the military. Because the South had a strong presence in the Pentagon and southern leaders enjoyed congressional seniority, southern states received more than their fair share of military installations and military contracts. Facilities for the space program and for military and nuclear weapons programs abounded in the South. Such spending became a huge part of the region's growth. Between 1959 and 1980, the South led all regions in economic growth. But defense spending did little to aid the poor, particularly the Black poor. Jobs in many of these new industries were at the skilled or professional level, and most went to recent transplants from elsewhere in the country. As one historian has put it, the growth strategy of southern leaders privileged place over people.⁴²

Perhaps the most consequential of these New South governors was Jimmy Carter of Georgia, elected in 1970. Declaring at his inauguration that "the time for racial discrimination is over. ... No poor, rural, weak, or black person should ever have to bear the additional burden of being

deprived of the opportunity of an education, a job, or simple justice," Carter focused on making state government more efficient and government services more effective. Carter's 1976 nomination as the Democratic Party's candidate for president was nothing short of phenomenal. A proud Southern Baptist and lifelong resident of the rural Deep South, Carter's outsider status and image as a man of integrity made him an appealing choice for many voters disgusted by the corruption of Republican Richard Nixon and the Watergate scandal. Nixon's resignation had rebounded in Democrats' favor in Congress and in southern statehouses in 1974, where Democrats reclaimed a number of seats. But in 1976, although Carter won every southern state except Virginia, he only garnered 46 percent of the white vote despite his conservative religious credentials and southern roots. His victory was largely the work of African American voters who went to the polls in even greater numbers than they had in 1968.

The increase in the number of Black voters between 1970 and 1980, from 3.4 million to 4.3 million, also had an impact on Black officeholding. In the South in 1965, only 72 Black citizens

FIGURE 12.4. Black southerners made the greatest gains in public officeholding at the municipal and county levels in the 1970s. Among these new city leaders was Richard Arrington Jr. (standing), elected mayor of Birmingham in 1979. Courtesy of the Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery.



held public office; Mississippi had no Black public officials. By 1980, there were roughly 2,500 Black officeholders. The bulk of these positions were at the municipal and county levels. Blacks won mayoral contests, mostly in small and mid-sized towns such as Tuskegee but also in large cities such as Atlanta and Birmingham. Victories for Black politicians brought heightened expectations from Black constituents. Although Black voters finally had the ear of the officials who ran their communities, the tax bases in urban areas were seldom sufficient to deal with the myriad problems. Despite these gains at the polls, as of 1982 Blacks constituted a paltry 7 percent of state legislators.

As Democrats worked to create biracial coalitions to remain viable in the South, their power in Congress—especially their ability to kill what they considered threatening legislation—was diluted. Since the 1930s, the ability of southern representatives and senators to gain seniority, occupy important committee chairmanships, and operate as a bloc had been critical to protecting white supremacy. Since the late 1940s, liberals in the Democratic Party had been working to handicap conservative members of their party (mainly those from the South), who were increasingly out of step with the party's agenda. By the late 1950s, liberal Democrats were irate that the party's conservative members voted with Republicans roughly 80 percent of the time. Change followed the Supreme Court's decision in the 1962 case *Baker v. Carr*, which mandated redistricting. The result was a decline in the number of congressional districts with overrepresented rural population majorities and an increase in representatives who were less conservative and less wedded to the old ways. The impact in states such as Florida was profound, flip-flopping the preponderance of political power from the mostly white and rural panhandle to the racially and ethnically diverse urban regions and wealthy suburbs from Orlando south. The reapportionment took into consideration the enfranchisement of millions of Black voters; conservative rural white bastions as the sole means of electoral support were a thing of the past.

A reform movement within Congress simultaneously increased the power of members from underrepresented suburban districts and others who rejected the old hierarchical structure of Congress, which had granted enormous power to committee chairmen. The 1970s Legislative Reorganization Act required committee hearings to be public; many were broadcast on radio and television. Congressional reformers also succeeded in requiring the vote of the caucus for committee chairs; agreed that the Speaker, majority leader, and whip should serve on the powerful Ways and Means Committee; and succeeded in stripping the Ways and Means chair of the power to appoint committee members. New members to the House had sufficient power

to demand that all committee chairs be interviewed to determine whether they deserved reappointment. Three committee chairmen, all from the South, made bad impressions, and the caucus voted to remove them. The ironclad system of seniority in the House had been shattered. The Senate, likewise, underwent reform. Committee chairs were chosen by secret ballot. Most committee hearings were open to the public. The biggest reform, though, addressed the filibuster. For decades, southern Democrats had used this tool to paralyze the Senate and kill civil rights legislation. In 1975, the Senate voted to reduce the number of votes for cloture (which ends a filibuster) from two-thirds of the Senate (sixty-seven votes) to three-fifths (sixty votes). Southern politicians' ability to hold the Senate in a stranglehold had finally been broken.

At the state level, the Republican Party was practically nonexistent in the 1970s and 1980s. Republican success remained a top-down affair. Republican candidates struggled to dislodge Democratic incumbents who delivered federal projects—many related to defense work—for their districts. Beyond Senators Jesse Helms and Strom Thurmond, the Republicans could claim no southern congressman or senator of any stature some ten years after the passage of the Voting Rights Act. In the 1960s and 1970s, Republicans had little success electing candidates to Congress. Democratic candidates during these two decades won 97 percent of all congressional races.

Republican prospects in the region began to change with the development of two phenomena. The first was the rise of the Christian Right and its political mobilization of conservative Christian voters. The so-called Rights Revolution, which drew inspiration and power from the civil rights revolution, prompted a political backlash. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Supreme Court handed down decisions that banned organized school prayer, protected the rights of accused persons, and, most important in this context, protected a woman's right to seek an abortion. In 1972, Congress approved the Equal Rights Amendment and sent it out to the states for ratification. For conservative evangelical Christians in both the North and the South, the nation was in cultural crisis. The survival of the family and traditional gender roles was at stake. Organizing nationally under the auspices of groups such as the Moral Majority, founded in 1979, and the Christian Coalition, founded in 1989, but operating locally through thousands of evangelical churches, Christian conservatives flexed their political muscles. They were almost universally wedded to the Republican Party. According to one historian of southern religion, evangelical churches essentially served as precinct headquarters for the Republican Party. This grassroots political realignment unfolded with stunning speed. In 1980, only 29

percent of Southern Baptist ministers identified as Republicans; within five years—by 1985—that number had grown to 66 percent.

The support of politically energized evangelicals was critical to the election of Republican presidential candidate Ronald Reagan in 1980. A former actor, corporate spokesman, and most recently governor of California, Reagan was a conservative icon. During the campaign, he appeared sympathetic to evangelicals' desires for a school prayer amendment and other conservative cultural ambitions but spent little political capital making them a reality once in office. Significantly for Republican prospects in the South, issues of culture and religion—framed broadly as “family values”—cut across class lines, giving the Republicans access to the allegiance of the region's working-class whites who had previously supported George Wallace. Also propelling Reagan to the White House was a backlash against the welfare state, which had expanded under Lyndon Johnson's Great Society agenda. To Reagan, government was the enemy; free enterprise was the people's friend. The downturn in the economy in the 1970s focused white conservatives' attention on government programs that, in their estimation, primarily benefited the Black poor. Beginning with the resounding defeat of Carter and the election of Reagan, and accelerating thereafter, Republicans began to pick up southern seats in Congress and state legislatures on platforms promoting cultural conservatism, low taxes, a strong military, and limited government. Before Reagan's election, 40 percent of southern white conservatives identified with the Republican Party; by the end of Reagan's presidency, 60 percent proudly did so.



FIGURE 12.5. Senator Strom Thurmond's switch to the Republican Party and the popularity of President Ronald Reagan among white southern conservatives set off a two-decade-long transition of white Democrats to the Republican Party. Congressman Floyd D. Spence (*left*) began his political career as a Democrat; in 1970 he won a congressional seat as a Republican. Courtesy of Floyd D. Spence Papers, South Carolina Political Collections, University of South Carolina.

Other issues cemented the Republican Party's strength in the South. Demographic change and the continued growth of the military-industrial complex worked in the party's favor. Cuban exiles from the Cuban Revolution in 1959 developed strong ties to the Republican Party in Florida because of its strong stance against communism and its support of conservative cultural causes. By 1980, the South was the recipient of 40 percent of the defense budget. Industries such as aircraft building and chemicals moved south, drawn by generous tax breaks and attracted by the antiunion climate. Still, success at winning congressional seats was slow. Between 1980 and 1992, the number of Senate seats and governorships the Republicans controlled remained about the same. At the state level, in 1988, only 23 percent of state legislators were Republican.

The consolidation of Republican power in the South occurred during the presidency of Democrat Bill Clinton, a white southerner. He won only 43 percent of the popular vote; the third-party candidacy of Texas businessman Ross Perot cut into the Republican vote for Pres-

ident George H. W. Bush. Already a minority president, Clinton's first two years were marred by political missteps. Republican whip Newt Gingrich of Georgia sensed an opportunity to flip seats during the 1994 midterm elections. Gingrich staged a national campaign for Republican House candidates, who pledged themselves to uphold the "Contract with America," a list of conservative agenda items that included lower taxes, decreased welfare spending, and legislation dedicated to promoting "family values." The Democrats were steamrolled, losing fifty-five seats and control of the House of Representatives for the first time in forty years. Republicans also picked up seats in the Senate. The Republican Party's increased presence in the South was obvious: they added sixteen new seats in the House to the nine they had won in 1992. The Republican Party now held a slim majority—51 percent—of the South's representation in the House of Representatives. The Republicans controlled the South's delegations in the House and the Senate and captured a majority of the statehouses.

Republican prospects were made considerably brighter by reapportionment of congressional districts following the 1990 census. Population growth had given the South nine new congressional seats. With no Democratic incumbents to challenge, Republican chances improved considerably. In redrawing congressional district lines, every southern state except Arkansas created a Black-majority district. Although these new Black-majority districts essentially ensured an increase in Black representatives, the remaining districts left African Americans in the minority, making them easier for Republicans to win. With the tremendous victories of 1994, Republican candidates seemed like a better bet to opportunistic donors. Funds flowed into campaign coffers. Republicans cemented their presence as the decade wore on. During the 2000 election, Republicans won 71 of the South's 125 House seats, 19 of 33 Senate seats, and 43 percent of seats in state legislatures.

The Republican Party was firmly entrenched in the South by the year 2000, little more than three decades since the landmark civil rights bills of the mid-1960s. It was clearly identified as the conservative party. Republicans in the region could point to some pockets of ethnic diversity, including Cuban Americans in Florida and Mexican Americans in Texas; otherwise the party was overwhelmingly white. Republican voters were attracted to the party's "family values" and low-tax orientation, as well as its probusiness agenda. Increased spending on social programs—which many white voters associated with poor Blacks—was anathema to Republican voters in the South. The Black poor were routinely demonized and scapegoated, and programs such as affirmative action and welfare were frequent targets of Republican wrath.

Racial exclusivity was key to the Republican Party's success, and the Republicans were the primary recipients of the "politics of rage" previously stoked by George Wallace.

Republican election gains were bolstered by conservative judicial decisions that further undermined the ability of the Democratic Party to successfully compete across the South. In 2013, in *Shelby County v. Holder*, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down an important provision of the Voting Rights Act of 1965: it declared that the coverage formula for determining which jurisdictions had to "preclear" changes to their elections rules was out of date and no longer necessary. The response from southern states was immediate. Texas announced that it would implement a strict photo ID law for voter registration, while Alabama and Mississippi declared that they would enforce similar laws that had been banned under the preclearance requirement. Studies have demonstrated that photo ID laws disproportionately disadvantage minority and elderly populations. In Texas alone, such a law would result in the purging of some 600,000 voters.

The Democrats remained viable, but their task was exceedingly difficult. They received the support of the vast majority of African American voters, but needed to attract between 30 and 40 percent of the white vote to remain competitive. A pledge to promote growth and high-quality public education became the default stance of most Democratic office seekers. Promoting agendas that kept this biracial coalition together would prove exceedingly difficult as the twenty-first century dawned.

Will a democratic, representative politics survive, if not entirely thrive, in the South? That remains an open question. By the end of the first decade of the new century, Black officeholding at the state level continued to lag behind the actual demographics. In Mississippi, for example, Black people made up roughly 38 percent of the population but held only 29 percent of the seats in the state's legislature. The picture looked a little brighter in Alabama, where Black people constituted 26 percent of the population and Black legislators held roughly a quarter of the seats. Partisanship has grown more extreme in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Republican state legislatures have used their power to deprive Democrats of representation, replicating the antidemocratic tools of an earlier era. Strict voter ID laws have fallen most heavily on the Democrats' core constituency, and grassroots advocates continue to fight hard to prevent voter purges. In addition, Democrats in southern states have seen their election prospects diluted by Republican gerrymandering. In North Carolina, despite a relatively evenly split electorate, Democrats garnered only three of the state's thirteen congressional seats following a 2016 redrawing of district lines by Republicans. Amplified by an expanding,

noisy right-wing media environment, Republicans in the South and nationwide have doubled down on a politics of white grievance, questioning the legitimacy of the nation's first African American president and using every possible political and legal tactic to effectively disfranchise people of color. Democrats in the South have been able to overcome these obstacles only through the most heroic of efforts. In this hyperpartisan political climate, race remains the defining factor of southern political life, and Republicans continue to practice a politics of subtraction. John Bankhead Jr.'s "new order of things" has returned, only this time it is Republicans erecting the barriers. A truly democratic South remains elusive.

NOTES

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13. Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 92–101.
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