

**POLITICS AND
SOCIETY IN
THE SOUTH**

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In 1940 the South still stood apart from the rest of the nation. Most Southerners lived in rural areas and small towns; have-littles and have-nots far outnumbered middle-class folk; and few—white or black—had a high school education. Courthouse cliques controlled local politics. The all-white primary indirectly disfranchised the small number of urban black voters. Poll taxes, literacy tests, and “understanding” requirements excluded a

goodly number of poor whites and virtually all rural blacks from politics. The result was a solid South where a conservative elite kept the electorate as small and apathetic as possible, and issues “went round and round in circles . . . a politics of limited taxation, limited spending, and, above all, determined resistance to any changes in the racial status quo.”

The racial status quo, then, was the keystone of the South’s peculiar brand of politics. Southern whites rallied to the Democratic Party as the best way to prevent outside interference; in return, they expected the party to stand by the Old Confederacy. But as Northern Democrats began to embrace civil rights and insist on liberal candidates for president, Southern loyalty began to fade. Today, no region in America is as politically volatile as the Old South.

The immediate cause of the region’s political realignment was the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and ’60s. Sit-ins, freedom rides, and civil disobedience transformed the voting practices of a generation. The defense of the Jim Crow color line, which had segregated blacks from whites in the public arena, collapsed. In the states of the Deep South, less than one-third of the black electorate was registered to vote. In Black Belt counties, fraud, intimidation, and violence blocked registration. The brutality of Selma’s “Bloody Sunday” on March 7, 1965, brought direct congressional action. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 put voter registration in recalcitrant counties under federal supervision. By the 1968 presidential election, 57 percent of the Deep South’s eligible black voters had registered. Faced with an unprecedented change in race relations and a liberal Democratic candidate, 34 percent of all the Deep South’s voters turned to George Wallace’s American Independent Party, while 35 percent supported the Republicans’ Richard Nixon. “In every election since 1968,” as the authors point out, “Republican presidential candidates have either beaten their rivals decisively [in the South] or, at the very worst, remained competitive with them.”

In the South of the 1980s, segregation is no longer an issue. A majority of white voters consider the pace of change in race relations “about right,” politicians avoid blatant racism, and roughly the same percentage of blacks and whites register and go to the polls. In fact, the percentage of black children attending integrated schools is larger in the Old Confederacy than in the North.

The region’s small-town profile has also changed significantly. Until the

1960s, rural Southerners were in the majority; in 1980, only one-third of the South's inhabitants resided in the countryside. As elsewhere in the nation, political power has shifted to the cities and suburbs, where the middle class predominates. The New South is home to banking empires, insurance companies, real estate conglomerates, hospital corporations, university think tanks, and industrial parks. Little power remains with the good old boys down at the courthouse. Whether in its race relations, the character of its economic development, or the nature of its class structure, the South has never before so closely resembled the rest of the country—at least on the surface.

Beneath the clutter of fast-food chains and Interstates, however, the apparent convergence comes to an abrupt end. Closer scrutiny reveals that the South is still the most homogeneous part of America, the most self-satisfied, the most conservative, and the most inconsistent politically.



In religious beliefs, values, and ethnic background, Southern states rank at the top of the nation's homogeneity index. When asked in the 1968 Comparative State Elections Project (CSEP) survey to assess their home towns, both white (59 percent) and black (65 percent) Southerners rated their communities as "the best" and in "the best" state, in marked contrast to the rest of the country. Contented with itself and intolerant of any deviation from its way of life, Dixie shies away from self-criticism. "The Northeastern states were civilized and discontent[ed]," wrote historian John Shelton Reed, summing up the results of the CSEP survey, "the Southern states were happily backward, and the Midwest was, as usual, mediocre all the way around."

Despite their shared boosterism, have-not blacks and have-little whites in the South have not been able to forge a political coalition. Results from the University of Michigan Survey Research Center-Center for Political Studies (SRC-CPS) 1972-84 opinion polls show rather a deep divide in their views on government versus individual responsibility for economic welfare. Whites (49 percent) value individual initiative and oppose such government programs as student aid, funds for big cities, and employment training programs. They react negatively to words such as *unions*, *women's liberation*, *liberals*, or *welfare*. Black Southerners feel quite positive toward these same words, and 72 percent favor federal aid to everybody for almost any purpose. On social and political issues the white working class and the white-collar country-club set still constitute a solid South.

If white Southerners are, by and large, more conservative than other

Americans, why doesn't the region get its political loyalties straight? In fact, it does—in presidential elections. The reason is obvious: National Democratic candidates stand for most things white Southerners find unpalatable. On such issues as defense spending and welfare, abortion, prayer in the schools, and women's rights, Republicans have such an advantage among white voters that the black vote hardly matters. Since the Nixon-Humphrey race of 1968, the Republicans have consistently carried counties that account for 48 percent of the region's total vote, while counties that consistently back Democratic candidates make up only 13 percent of the vote. A Republican presidential candidate cannot lose in the South, unless he works hard at it.

State and local elections are a different matter. To be sure, the Republicans disproportionately attract the college-educated white vote. But the Democrats can counter with reliable black support, and in the Deep South, black voters today make up between one-quarter and one-third of the electorate. Home-grown Democrats, if they steer clear of the symbolic issues that chill white voters (e.g., welfare, unions, civil rights), can combine the black vote with the white working-class vote, which is still predisposed toward the Democrats. Given the populist strain in Southern politics, Democrats do best there by rallying the common man against the country club. The result determines which segment of the local white middle class will rule. But whether the "moderates rule through the Democratic Party or conservatives govern through the Republican Party, Southern politics," conclude the authors, "can be expected to perpetuate" the traditional class and color differences of the past.

—James Lang '77-'78
