


THE VITAL *South*

The word "South" is written in a large, red, cursive script. The letter "O" is stylized to form a frame that contains a black and white photograph of the White House, showing the central portico with its columns and the surrounding grounds.

**How Presidents
Are Elected**

**Earl Black and
Merle Black**

EARL BLACK
AND MERLE BLACK

T H E
Vital South

HOW PRESIDENTS
ARE ELECTED

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All errors of fact and interpretation are our responsibility.

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I

The National Setting

The Republican Edge

Once upon a time, so the story goes, there was a legendary southern senator who was eager to begin campaigning for another term. Reaching his campaign chairman on the phone from Washington, the senator exclaimed, "John, John, we got to announce!"

"Announce what, Senator?"

"For reelection, of course."

"But Senator, that's four years away. Don't you think it's a little early?"

"No, no, we got to get going! Now, remind me, John, how'd I do against those first fellows who ran against me?"

"Why, Senator, you beat them so bad they couldn't get elected to anything."

"That's right!," the senator replied. "Beat 'em so bad they were finished in politics. Now, how'd I do against my next opponent?"

"Well, Senator, you whipped him so bad he couldn't win a seat in the House of Representatives."

"That's right! Time I finished whipping him, he couldn't get elected to the House of Representatives. Now, remind me about that last fellow I ran against."

"Now, Senator, you remember that was ol' Buddy —," not exactly a household name in the state.

"That's right! Knew his daddy. Tell me, what in the world happened to Buddy?"

"Ah, well, Senator, don't you recall? He got sick—and died."

"That's right! That's right!," shouted the senator. "We *killed* him!"¹

The victorious senator was a Republican, his vanquished opponents all Democrats. Only a small leap of the imagination is required to

stretch this story into a metaphor of presidential politics in the modern South. In the region where the Republican cause was once so hopeless that Republican presidential candidates never bothered to campaign, the list of thoroughly beaten Democratic presidential nominees—Hubert Humphrey in 1968, George McGovern in 1972, Walter Mondale in 1984, and Michael Dukakis in 1988—seems to grow longer with each new election.

The 1988 contest illustrates the pattern. Once again the Republicans convincingly swept the South. George Bush defeated Michael Dukakis by 58 to 42 percent, a margin of victory unapproached by the Republicans in any other region of the nation and matched or surpassed only in a few small western states. In most southern states the campaign was essentially over a month before the actual voting. The Democratic party, having nominated a politician who could be attacked in the South as the most naive sort of northeastern liberal, lacked both a convincing message and a credible messenger. Bush easily secured the overwhelming white majorities that continue to be the hallmark of Republican victories in the South.

"I can't understand the type of thinking," Bush charged in speeches across the region (and nation), "that lets first degree murderers who haven't even served enough time to be eligible for parole out on parole so they can rape and plunder again and then isn't willing to let the teachers lead the kids in the pledge of allegiance."² Most white southerners (including some who voted for Dukakis anyway) could not understand it, either. The shrewd Texas Republican Senator Phil Gramm captured Dukakis's predicament: "There's no one silver bullet, but you combine three or four of those issues and it induces Joe to say to Sarah across the kitchen table, 'Honey, this Dukakis guy is not our kind of person.'"³ Perceived as someone who did not share their values, and who therefore could not be relied upon even to recognize, much less to defend and advance their interests, Dukakis was not a believable candidate to the vast majority of southern white voters.

The fall of the South as an assured stronghold of the Democratic party in presidential elections is one of the most significant developments in modern American politics. For more than six decades, from 1880 through 1944, the eleven states of the old Confederacy—Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia—regularly voted as a solid bloc in favor of the presidential candidate nominated by the Democratic party.

Over the past half-century, however, the South has shifted from an overwhelmingly Democratic area to a region characterized initially by balanced competition between the two parties (1952–1964) and, more recently, by a distinct Republican advantage.⁴ Lyndon Johnson's administration (1963–1969) combined racial, economic, and cultural liberalism in pursuit of the Great Society at home with an ineffective escalation of the Vietnam War. These unpopular policies divided the southern Democratic party into antagonistic and sometimes irreconcilable factions. Once the third-party adventure of Alabama Governor George C. Wallace was exhausted, Republican strategists discovered many salient issues and themes that could be used to fashion presidential victories in the South.⁵ Aside from Jimmy Carter's victory in 1976, Republican presidential candidates have now carried all or almost all of the region's electoral vote since 1972.

The Republicans have understood the dynamics of presidential politics in the South far better than the Democrats. The southern electorate—like the rest of the nation—is now splintered into Democrats, Republicans, and independents, with neither of the two parties able to attract a majority. In this broken field of partisans and independents, the basic formula for success is straightforward. Each party needs to unite the various factions that constitute its base. Even a completely united Democratic party is no longer large enough to win by itself, however, and even the most cohesive Republican party still falls short of constituting a majority of the entire electorate. In order to win, both southern parties also have to appeal to independents and even to some adherents of the rival party.

Since the end of the Great Society, Republican presidential candidates have usually beaten their Democratic rivals at both tasks, unification and outreach. Southern Republicans have rallied more cohesively than southern Democrats around their presidential nominees. Even more important, Republican nominees have run well among white independents and conservative Democrats. By contrast, all of the recent Democratic presidential candidates, with the sole exception of Carter in 1976, have fared poorly among independents. None of the Democratic nominees has generated significant support from Republicans.

Several factors have helped the Republicans secure enormous votes from white southerners in the modern era. The list begins—but hardly ends—with the parties' contrasting positions on civil rights and race relations. In the 1988 presidential election, according to the CBS News/New York Times Exit Poll, whites constituted the vast

majority—83 percent—of southern voters. Much smaller shares of the region's presidential electorate were accounted for by blacks (14 percent) and Hispanics (3 percent). The Republicans have understood that, despite the successes of southern Democratic biracial coalitions in many state and local elections, it is still possible to win presidential contests without appealing directly to the region's black voters—provided that their candidate wins an overwhelming majority among the much bigger group of white voters.

From the end of Reconstruction through the last election of Franklin Roosevelt in 1944, traditional southern one-party politics rested in part on the notion that the Democratic party was the white South's chosen instrument in national politics for maintaining white supremacy. When the national Democratic party shifted decisively to a pro-civil rights position in response to the civil rights movement of the early 1960s, southern Democratic politicians correctly expected the party to lose support among white conservatives. Shortly after he signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, President Johnson told an aide, "I think we just delivered the South to the Republican party for a long time to come."⁶

As Johnson took the Democrats to the left on civil rights, Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater led the Republicans to the right.⁷ Many white southerners now regard as settled such important, permanent changes in race relations as the right to vote and equal access to places of public accommodations. Nonetheless, numerous whites remain unsympathetic to governmentally sponsored efforts to desegregate schools (particularly in metropolitan areas, where extensive busing would be required) and to monitor racial discrimination in employment.

Although majorities of both white and black southerners agree that "There would be a lot fewer problems if people were treated more equally," the issues of affirmative action and preferential treatment sharply split the races. In a spring 1988 poll conducted by the Center for Political Studies of the University of Michigan, southern whites and blacks were asked the following question: "Some people say that because of past discrimination blacks should be given preference in hiring and promotion. Others say that such preference in hiring and promotion of blacks is wrong because it gives blacks advantages they haven't earned. What about your opinion—are you for or against preferential hiring and promotion of blacks?" So salient was this controversy that few whites (less than 2 percent) or blacks (about 4 percent) had no opinions. The result was a very strong degree of

racial polarization. Eighty-six percent of the southern whites were opposed to preferential treatment of blacks, while 69 percent of blacks were in favor.

Given these attitudes among whites, Republican presidential candidates have usually been seen as far more sympathetic with the views of the white majority in the South than have their Democratic opponents. Among many southern whites who think about these matters, especially since Ronald Reagan's presidency, the Republicans are generally seen as shutting the door against governmentally initiated racial change, while the Democrats are commonly perceived as opening the door.

Presidential elections still offer many ways to use racial themes to win votes. "Direct appeals to racial prejudice may no longer be acceptable in American politics," Thomas B. Edsall has observed, "but race, in an indirect and sometimes subliminal way, remains a driving force in the battle today between Republicans and Democrats."⁸ Prejudicial feelings and conflicts of interest between whites and blacks can still be exploited in elections, especially when the appeal can be packaged in symbols or issues that have no explicit connection with race.

Asked in 1981 to discuss the role of race in Republican campaign strategy, an experienced official in the Reagan White House contrasted Republican strategy in the 1968 presidential campaign with its approach in the early 1980s. "As to the whole Southern strategy that Harry Dent and others put together in 1968," he stated, "opposition to the Voting Rights Act would have been a central part of keeping the South. Now [the new southern strategy] doesn't have to do that. All you have to do to keep the South is for Reagan to run in place on the issues he's campaigned on since 1964 . . . and that's fiscal conservatism, balancing the budget, cut taxes, you know, the whole cluster." The official described the evolution of Republican thought on the race issue as follows:

You start off in 1954 by saying "Nigger, nigger, nigger." By 1968 you can't say "nigger"—that hurts you. Backfires. So you say stuff like forced busing, states' rights, and all that stuff. You're getting so abstract [that] you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're talking about are totally economic things and a by-product of them is [that] blacks get hurt worse than whites. And subconsciously maybe that is part of it. I'm not saying that. But I'm saying that if it is getting that abstract, and that coded, that we are doing away with the racial problem one way or the other. You follow me—because obviously sitting around

saying, "We want to cut this," is much more abstract than even the busing thing *and* a hell of a lot more abstract than "Nigger, nigger."⁹

While the Republicans' advantage in presidential politics stems in part from taking positions on racial questions that run with the main currents of white opinion, the contemporary appeal of the party among southern whites goes far beyond concerns about race. The perennial issue of fostering prosperity has usually worked in favor of the GOP. Jimmy Carter, the sole Democratic president since 1969, stood for reelection in a year that combined high interest rates with high inflation; in the experience of many white southerners, the Democratic party became associated with bad economic times. In contrast, economic recovery since the recession of 1982–83 has prompted millions of southerners to view the Republican party positively as an instrument of economic opportunity and upward mobility. The Reagan tax cuts have allowed Republican strategists to claim that the GOP wants to let Americans keep more of what they make and that the Democrats would let the federal government tax away their earnings.

These perceptions concerning economic well-being are correlated with support for Republican presidential candidates. In the 1988 CBS News/New York Times Exit Poll, a majority (56 percent) of southern white voters said they were better off financially in 1988 than they had been in 1981. Bush won 88 percent from this group. By comparison, Bush won only 29 percent of the vote among the one-quarter of southern whites who said their economic situation was worse in 1988 than when Reagan took office. There is no reason to think the state of the economy will always work to the Republicans' advantage, and Republicans someday may have to test their candidate's appeal during an economic downturn. In 1984 and 1988, Republican presidential candidates benefited from favorable economic conditions among majorities of white southern voters.

Recent Republican presidential candidates and presidents have also benefited from the perception that they will better defend the nation's international interests. Again the comparison between the Carter and Reagan years is instructive. Whether rightly or wrongly, President Carter came to be viewed as too irresolute to stand up to the Iranians, much less to the Soviet Union. Although the Reagan record on national security was hardly a string of unbroken victories, the president did succeed in reviving national pride. President Reagan sharply increased military expenditures and concluded an arms

reduction treaty with the Russians only months before the 1988 election, allowing Vice-President Bush to claim that the Reagan approach of bargaining through enhanced military strength had actually worked.

Beyond providing peace and prosperity, the Republicans have emphasized the importance of symbolic conservative values, including the preservation of traditional family values, the importance of religion, support for capital punishment, and opposition to gun control. The rhetoric of the Reagan administration was warmly received by many conservative and moderate southern whites who agreed with much of Reagan's cultural conservatism.

Finally, the Republicans have greatly benefited in the South from the popularity of Ronald Reagan. The former movie star and California governor had long been a favorite among Republican activists, and Reagan's thoughts and deeds generally ran with the grain of received white opinion. Southern Republicans discovered an authentic folk hero to personify their beliefs and goals. According to the CBS News/New York Times Exit Poll, in 1988 72 percent of southern white voters approved of Reagan's presidency, considerably more than the 60 percent of white voters outside the South. Reagan's popularity was his greatest gift to Bush, who received 89 percent of the vote among southern whites who approved of Reagan while winning only 15 percent among the 28 percent who disapproved of Reagan.

Thus recent Republican presidents have been viewed by many white southerners as more committed than their Democratic rivals to protecting their values and advancing their interests over a wide range of questions: moderating the pace of governmentally sponsored racial change, resisting tax increases, defending the nation in a dangerous world, and preserving traditional cultural values. Many factors, not a single grand factor, account for the Republicans' southern advantage in presidential politics.¹⁰

These momentous changes within the South have had enormous consequences for American politics. Although the fact is not always fully appreciated, the eleven states of the old Confederacy now constitute the largest region in the United States. Beginning in 1992 the South alone will contain 54 percent of the electoral votes needed to elect a president. The transformation of the South from a sturdy Democratic base into a prominent Republican stronghold has shaken the foundations of modern presidential politics.

With the collapse of the Democrats' traditional southern base, the

Democratic party has been left without an assured starting point for winning presidential elections. Reduced to basics, the Democrats have failed to develop fresh support outside the South to compensate for their loss of the region that once automatically gave them about half of the electoral votes needed to win the White House. The Republicans, meanwhile, seized the opportunity to attract southern whites and thereby successfully executed the Sun Belt strategy that Kevin Phillips had mapped out in the late 1960s in *The Emerging Republican Majority*. By combining Republican votes in the West with new Republican strength in the South, the Republicans have been able to create a much larger base of fairly reliable support than have the Democrats.

The partisan transformation of the South in presidential elections is an absorbing story. Much of this book will discuss the conditions, candidates, and outcomes of presidential politics in the region over the past half-century. What has happened—and continues to happen—in the South has profound implications for the control of the world's most important political office. The Republicans had already developed extensive and durable support among the western states in the 1950s, and the addition of the South gave them a huge area from which to mount presidential campaigns.

Politics is about interests, emotions, and aspirations. Nowhere in the nation have the interests of various groups been more conflictual, the emotions more abrasive, the aspirations more noble or despicable, or the competition among rival politicians more fierce and relentless than in the South. The South has been crucial, if not indispensable, to the renewed success of the Republicans in modern presidential politics. Nowhere have Republican victories been larger, the changes more fundamental, and the outcomes more significant for winning the presidency.

The South's allegiance in presidential elections is important not simply for the millions who live in the region but also for the much larger number of Americans who live elsewhere. The addition of the South to the Republican party's presidential base has given the GOP a striking advantage over the Democrats. The Democrats' inability thus far to devise an effective countervailing electoral strategy, one which would either emphasize states outside the South to compensate for its southern losses or reclaim part of the Republicans' southern base, has left the party poorly situated to recapture the presidency unless the Republicans stumble so egregiously that they throw

an election away or are simply overwhelmed by adverse circumstances.

An image of the South as trendsetter for national politics should be kept in mind as we review the factors that have usually assisted the Republicans, and typically damaged the Democrats, in presidential campaigns in the South. Much of what we say about the South can be said of the rest of the country. Precisely. That is the point. Republicans know it and have profited handsomely from that knowledge; Democrats have yet to learn it.

Presidential Elections after the Great Society

Because presidential elections are won by carrying states, all of which adhere to the norm of "winner takes all" in assigning electoral votes to the winning party, the state is the critical political unit in presidential politics. Just as Democrats enjoyed a decisive advantage among the states in the New Deal presidential elections, since 1968 Republicans have been much better situated than Democrats to win the presidency. The magnitude of the GOP's current advantage can be illustrated by analyzing state voting histories in presidential elections since Johnson left office.

Because our goals are to understand the regional structure of the Republican edge in recent presidential elections and to lay the foundation for comparisons with other historical periods, we have separated states that have usually supported a single party from states that tend to shift back and forth from one party to another. Three types of states, which we will term *Usually Democratic*, *Swing*, or *Usually Republican*, will be distinguished. Partisan states, whether Democratic or Republican, are defined as those in which the same party carries a state in three-fourths or more of the elections. A partisan state may thus deviate occasionally from its support for a particular party, but by definition it typically awards its electoral votes to one party. To avoid needless repetition the modifier *Usually* will normally be omitted in the text from references to Republican or Democratic states, but it should be kept in mind that perfection is not required to be classified as a partisan state. All states not qualifying as partisan are considered Swing.

Knowledge of the relative size of each party's electoral vote base is essential if we are to understand the dynamics of majority coalition-building in presidential elections. A party which achieves a marked