



A QUESTION *of* JUSTICE



New South Governors and Education, 1968–1976



G O R D O N E . H A R V E Y

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and Education, 1968–1976

Gordon E. Harvey

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A QUESTION OF JUSTICE

Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction	i
PART I: ALBERT BREWER OF ALABAMA	
1. "Deeper Than a Bus Running Down a Road": The Integration of Alabama's Public Schools	17
2. "Why Not the Teachers?": Education Reform in Alabama, 1968–1970	45
PART II: REUBIN ASKEW OF FLORIDA	
3. A Question of Justice: The 1972 Florida Busing Straw Vote	67
4. Building a Better Florida: The 1973 Florida Education Reforms	91
PART III: JOHN C. WEST OF SOUTH CAROLINA	
5. Forging a "New South Carolina": The Aftermath of Integration	117
6. Sunbelt to the Rescue: Education Reform in South Carolina	141
Conclusion	169
Notes	177
Bibliography	211
Index	221

Introduction

The South is ready to adjust and become part of the nation.

—Florida governor Reubin Askew, 1971

In southern politics 1970 marked a watershed. That year a group of southern governors entered office and changed the way the nation looked at the South and southern state chief executives. Across the region, southern politicians of a new style were elected governor: from the ranks of Democrats came “a no-liquor-no-tobacco Panhandle Presbyterian elder” named Reubin Askew in Florida; John C. West, a racial moderate who rose through the ranks of the South Carolina Democratic Party; a self-styled “country lawyer” in Arkansas named Dale Bumpers; peanut farmer Jimmy Carter of Georgia; William Winter in Mississippi; and Terry Sanford and James Hunt of North Carolina. Republicans A. Linwood Holton in Virginia and Tennessee’s Winfield Dunn also represented this new style of governor. So did Democrat Albert Brewer, who inherited Alabama’s governorship in 1968 but was not reelected in 1970. Just as the post–World War II economic boom transformed the southern economy, the combination of the civil rights movement, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the subsequent political party realignment, and the rise of moderate southern governors changed the South’s political landscape in 1970.¹

These governors benefited from paramount changes in southern politics. V. O. Key had predicted as much when he wrote *Southern Politics in State and Nation* in 1949. Key asserted that for the South to experience a political revival it had to gain its freedom from four major institutions that had constricted the region’s political development for decades: disfranchisement; the one-party system; malapportionment of state legislatures; and Jim Crow segregation. Twenty-six years later, Numan Bartley and Hugh Graham examined the three decades following Key’s seminal study and found that his analysis had proven correct. *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the civil rights movement, and the subsequent legislation expand-

ing voting and civil rights had sounded the death knell for the traditional, one-party, segregated South. In the years after 1950, Bartley and Graham found a neopopulist resurgence whereby loyal New Dealers such as James "Big Jim" Folsom, Earl Long, John Sparkman, and Estes Kefauver gained state and federal offices by appealing to coalitions of white rural voters, working-class urbanite voters, and the growing number of black voters. Thus, over the twenty-six years between Key's study and that of Bartley and Graham, all four institutions of stagnation and disfranchisement in the South had been destroyed.²

Of the four developments Key prescribed for a new political South, perhaps the most important to the rise of "New South" governors was the 1965 Voting Rights Act. For most of these governors black votes meant the difference in their victory over segregationist candidates. Before the 1965 legislation black voters were virtually nonexistent in the region. In Mississippi, only 6.7 percent of voting age blacks were registered to vote in March 1965. Next lowest was Alabama with 19.3 percent. In South Carolina 37.3 percent of blacks were registered. Florida seemed progressive with 51.2 percent, well behind Tennessee's substantial 69.5 percent.³

By 1967, the situation had changed drastically. Numbers of black voters in the South skyrocketed. The biggest jumps came in Mississippi and Alabama. Black voter registration in Mississippi increased 535.9 percent, Alabama's 167.9 percent. South Carolina black voter registration jumped a relatively modest 37.2 percent. As a whole, the region's black voter registration grew 72.6 percent. This increase contributed to the rise of racially moderate southern politicians as 52.1 percent of eligible blacks were registered to vote by 1967. It also corresponded with, and most likely contributed to, an abatement of racial tension in the region. Essentially, resistant whites realized in varying degrees that blacks and whites would integrate irrevocably. These whites realized, wrote Alexander Lamis, that with integration "the world did not come to an end."⁴

The result of such massive increases in black voters was the creation of new majority coalitions in state legislatures and new faces in state government, especially the governor's office. The change was so dramatic that by 1972, every southern state save Alabama had elected moderate governors who avoided racial rhetoric and advocated progressive policies. But the progressivism of the class of new southern governors in the 1970s was limited largely to their views on race and reform of state governmental structures. On economic issues they could be quite conservative, reflect-

ing the anti-tax mood of their day. These governors were often less progressive than the populist, segregationist governors of the earlier twentieth century. Although contemporary journalists may have labeled these state chief executives as “populists” or “progressives,” such titles are misleading. The reforms of the class of governors of the 1970s more closely resembled those of “business progressivism” of the 1920s, which emphasized highway improvement, educational expansion, health reform, and general expansion of public services. Even this comparison is tenuous, however. The progressivism of the post–civil rights era New South governors rarely extended beyond racial moderation and reform of state governmental structures, prisons, mental health programs, and education. As noted by political scientist Larry Sabato, the irony of the New South governor is apparent: “The modern southern governors are in some respects far less progressive on economic policy than many of the populist segregationist governors of earlier times who combined racism with programs for their poor white constituents (which blacks, of course, shared in).” Some of their reform measures did not follow the standard model for reform.⁵

Examined here are three New South governors of the late 1960s and early 1970s: Albert Brewer of Alabama; Reubin Askew from Florida; and South Carolina’s John West. Most surveys of the modern South address New South governors in a tangential manner, briefly listing several and explaining their ascent to power. John Boles’s *The South through Time* and Numan Bartley’s *The New South*, as well as Dewey Grantham’s *The South in Modern America*, give passing mention of the election of southern moderate-to-liberal Democrats and Republicans after 1970, but go no further. Most discuss Jimmy Carter’s rise from New South governor to president and provide a general definition of the New South governors: supported by a biracial coalition of moderate-to-liberal black and white voters, outspoken on race, won elections against segregationist opponents, and reformed state government and education. Beyond that there exists no in-depth study of any of the class of 1970 other than Jimmy Carter.

Although John West and Reubin Askew are regularly named, such survey listings do not include Albert Brewer. I believe this is a mistake, and it may be the result of chronology more than anything else. It is not easy to pinpoint the beginning of a historical era or phase. It is much easier to declare watersheds—in this case 1970—by way of introducing new political phenomena, namely, the election of moderate governors at a time

when the region was voting solidly Republican with Richard Nixon. But watersheds are artificial constructs, used by historians to provide nice, clean transitions from one era to another. Because Brewer assumed the office when Lurleen Wallace died and served from May 1968 to January of 1971, he does not neatly fit into the commonly held chronology of the New South governors and is often left out of any group listing. Although he lost to George Wallace in the 1970 Democratic primary, Brewer's shortened term resulted in a sweeping education reform package that still stands as the most progressive the state has seen in a generation. Brewer also made the last genuine attempt by an Alabama governor to reform the state's antiquated constitution, while at the same time eliminating to a large degree corruption in the state's executive departments. No Alabama governor has met the standard of reform set by Brewer in 1969. That he does not neatly fit into the arbitrary 1970 watershed model should not preclude Brewer from the group.⁶

The only New South governor never elected by his state, Albert Preston Brewer was born in 1928 in Tennessee and grew up in Decatur, Alabama, where his father worked for the Tennessee Valley Authority. Brewer attended the University of Alabama from 1946 to 1952, where he earned his undergraduate and law degrees. In 1955, when only twenty-five years old, he won election to the state house of representatives and entered the legislature with many of his law school classmates. They represented a core of young, professional, enthusiastic legislators who felt a genuine concern for education and other issues such as reapportionment of the state legislature, modernization of rules for the legal profession, highway construction, and economic development. This reform appetite was whetted even more because they entered office during "Big Jim" Folsom's second term as governor. Brewer's zeal for progressive issues, his solidifying of legislative friendships, and his building of his law practice paid dividends. In 1963, thirty-four-year-old Brewer defeated Hugh Merrill and Rankin Fite to become speaker of the state house, the youngest in Alabama history and in the nation at that time. He became one of the ablest legislators ever to preside over the state house. A large part of Brewer's success in this election was due to his friendships and alliances in the house, to his broad appeal to a variety of interests (especially a growing urban bloc resulting from reapportionment in 1963), and to the Wallace stamp of approval. Although considered a "Wallace-man," Brewer remained relatively independent of Wallace because, as Brewer put it, "the great thing about him

. . . was he didn't interfere. He didn't want to fool with it. He didn't want to be bothered with governing." Although successful as speaker, in 1966 Brewer believed it was time to "move up or move out." In that year he ran for and was elected lieutenant governor.⁷

After Lurleen Wallace's death from cancer in 1968, many in the state welcomed Brewer's assumption of office. The *Montgomery Advertiser* described an "electric excitement" and a "new enthusiasm" surrounding the new governor. He was the only person in Alabama history to hold in succession the offices of speaker, lieutenant governor, and governor. The newspaper also predicted a new approach to state government: "It seems that five years or more of tilting at federal windmills, without knocking a single one of them over, is just about enough." Although Brewer was not a vocal opponent of segregation or an outspoken proponent for integration, capitol watchers did not expect him to follow Wallace's defiant lead. He was generally silent on desegregation. In the legislature, he was a vocal supporter of Wallace measures in the house but bristled at being called a "Wallace man." The *Mobile Register* asserted that Brewer had the qualifications to become one of the best governors the state ever had but that he would have to watch his step. Alabamians could be "highly fickle."⁸

Brewer learned just how fickle in 1970 when he stood for election to a full term as governor. Despite contrary public and private pledges following Lurleen's death, George Wallace ran against Brewer. The ensuing campaign became by some accounts the dirtiest the state had ever witnessed, including bags of cash for the Brewer campaign from President Richard Nixon. The first primary, relatively quiet on the race issue, ended with a slight Brewer victory, 42 to 41 percent, with Brewer leading Wallace by twelve thousand votes. The candidacy of millionaire and perennial office-seeker Charles Woods, however, siphoned almost 180,000 votes that probably would have gone to Brewer, forcing the contest into a runoff. The runoff campaign saw Wallace revert to his old tactics. After suffering technical defeat for the first time since 1958, Wallace used race as a means of scaring Alabamians away from Brewer. When Brewer garnered virtually all the black vote in the first primary, Wallace accused Brewer of making deals with black political leaders to gain the "bloc" vote. Wallace disparaged Brewer and his family and eventually won the election with 52 percent of the vote. Because Alabama Republicans declined to run anyone against Wallace he became governor by default. This race put an end to what many saw as Alabama's best opportunity to contribute to the region-

wide political moderation. The victory by the “poor man’s segregationist” proved that race was not quite a dead issue in Alabama. For Brewer the irony was thick. Wallace’s endorsement helped him become speaker and lieutenant governor, and it was Wallace’s candidacy that ended Brewer’s gubernatorial aspirations.⁹

Although Brewer’s past political ties to Wallace and relative silence on race may seem to preclude him from status of “New South governor,” his short time in office clearly reveals a reform impulse. In terms of support from the black community, Brewer enjoyed levels of support comparable to West and Askew. In his loss to Wallace, Brewer received almost all the black vote, polling upward of 98 percent in Birmingham and 89 percent in Montgomery, and this he achieved with an African American candidate also running for governor. Although definitely more conservative than the outspoken Askew, Brewer nonetheless marked a clear departure from Alabama’s recent political past and defiant anti-integration posturing under George Wallace.¹⁰

Reubin O’Donovan Askew was not a native Floridian. Born to impoverished parents in Muskogee, Oklahoma, in 1928, Askew and his five siblings came to Pensacola with their mother in 1937. Abandoned by his father, Askew sold magazines, shined shoes, bagged groceries, and sold his mother’s homemade pies to supplement her income as a waitress and Works Progress Administration seamstress. Between stints in both the army and air force, Askew earned his undergraduate and law degrees from Florida State University and the University of Florida. Elected to the state house of representatives in 1958 and the state senate in 1962, Askew quickly rose in legislative respect and prominence. He fast became an expert on government finance. In 1969 he was elected president pro tempore of the senate. Askew’s decision to run for governor in 1970 was questioned by many. Political commentators greeted Askew’s candidacy by asking, “Reubin who?”¹¹

The 1970 Florida Democratic gubernatorial primary was historic in that it was the first time since the *Brown* decision that all the candidates campaigned as nonsegregationists and openly courted more than three hundred thousand registered black voters. After defeating three of the best-known men in the state for the Democratic nomination with 58 percent of the vote, Askew took on bombastic Republican incumbent Claude Kirk. The campaign gave voters a clear choice between Old and New South outlooks. Kirk had seized personal control of the Manatee County

School District in 1969 in order to prevent implementation of an integration court order. Askew supported busing as a means of achieving equal educational opportunity. Askew denounced Kirk as an embarrassment to the state, whereas Kirk called Askew a “momma’s boy” and a “permissive liberal.” Kirk tried to pull Askew into a racially motivated campaign, but Askew stuck to his main theme—tax justice. Askew argued that Floridians were tired of “government by antics” and ran a populist campaign proposing his “fair share” program, which called for an income tax on corporations, general tax reform, and increased school funding. Askew defeated Kirk handily, garnering almost 57 percent of the vote. It was the second largest margin of victory in Florida political history. Askew’s 821,190 votes also exceeded the total Republican voter registration by 380,474 votes. He soon became an outspoken proponent of racial justice and racial healing. If George Wallace appealed to the alienated voter with the politics of fear, Askew courted the same group, and more, with the “politics of trust.”¹²

Like Askew and Brewer, John Carl West rose to power through traditional state Democratic Party connections. Born in 1922 of moderate means, West was raised by his widowed mother on a farm in Camden, South Carolina. After attending the Citadel and earning an undergraduate degree, West served as an army intelligence officer during World War II. Following the war, West earned a law degree from the University of South Carolina under the GI Bill. After a brief stint as highway commissioner, West ran for and won a state senate seat in 1955, serving for eleven years. In 1966, West was elected lieutenant governor, serving under Governor Robert McNair. By that time, West had made his mark on South Carolina politics as a racial moderate. Earlier in his political life, he had publicly denounced the Klan and had even given the keynote address at a testimonial dinner in honor of Roy Wilkins, the national director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).¹³

In 1970, with Governor McNair constitutionally unable to succeed himself, West easily won the Democratic nomination and squared off against U.S. senator Strom Thurmond’s handpicked candidate, U.S. congressman Albert Watson. A gifted public speaker, Watson was also a fervent segregationist. As in Alabama and Florida, the 1970 South Carolina gubernatorial campaign provided voters with a clear choice, segregation versus moderation. With full backing from Thurmond, President Nixon, and the Republican Party, Watson waged the last overtly segregationist campaign

in South Carolina's political history. So conspicuous was this strategy that the *Columbia State*, a staunchly Republican newspaper, endorsed West. Suburban Republicans also repudiated Watson by voting for the moderate West.¹⁴

South Carolina's 1970 campaign illustrated the great impact of the 1965 Voting Rights Act and the obsolescence of racist campaigns in a region where more than half the eligible black population was registered to vote. In the biggest nonpresidential election year voter turnout in state history (471,000), West won the governor's office with 51.7 percent of the vote over Watson's 45 percent. The black vote clearly pushed West over the top. He received almost 90 percent of the black vote, whereas Watson received only 58 percent of the white vote. Black voters represented 25 percent of the total votes cast. West's victory and ensuing moderate racial course led the *New York Times* to take note: "The stars and bars of the Confederacy still fly above the South Carolina state capitol. But beyond the heroic statue of Pitchfork Ben Tillman and within the walls of the beautiful old building permanently scarred by shells from Gen. Sherman's guns, Governor John C. West has set out upon a new political course."¹⁵ West's victory forced Strom Thurmond to court black voters actively for the first time, winning reelection two years later. To many in South Carolina, West was another in a "long line of moderate governors who have steered [South Carolina] to safety through the swirling waters of Civil Rights changes without major violence."¹⁶

Although the three governors shared many reform concerns, their efforts to improve education provide the most extensive framework for comparison. Education was usually the most pressing concern for most southern governors in this period. They differed on other issues. Albert Brewer attempted to reform Alabama's constitution; John West did not. Askew's focus on environmental protection was not matched by similar concerns in Alabama or South Carolina. Education, however, consumed all three. They shared a vision for what education could do for the region. It was essential to their plans for the South's economic future, which required a literate workforce possessing the skills to operate modern machinery. All three wanted to advance economic development through better funding of public education. Education was also the largest part of their state budgets and the most visible issue.¹⁷

An examination of John West's education initiatives reveals that reform did not always include conventional education changes, such as increased

teacher pay, accountability and assessment, standardized testing, or revision of school funding formulas. John West provides an alternative definition of reform, or at least an alternative method. West's goal in office was to create an economic condition that would allow the state to pay for reform without raising taxes or entering into massive budget deficits (which, by the way, South Carolina suffered from as West took office). This goal was admirable, but it took West longer than he wished, especially because he was prohibited by the state constitution from succeeding himself. Limited to one term, West had little time left to embark on a reform course, and when he approached the subject, he found that the affluence he helped bring the state had dashed any reform impetus. The economic foundation built in part by West aided future South Carolina governor Richard Riley in passing a massive 1986 education reform program.

The selection of these three governors merits discussion. Alabama is the only state never to elect a New South governor because Brewer assumed the office constitutionally. Nevertheless, he brought to the office reform initiatives and integrity. Reubin Askew is held by many as the archetype New South governor. He has been called "one of the most outstanding of the new breed of southern chief executive" by political scientist Larry Sabato. John West's vision for a new South Carolina directly contributed to the transformation of that state from a symbol of the old Confederacy to Sunbelt stalwart.¹⁸

Albert Brewer tried to bring to Alabama significant reform in the face of court-ordered school integration. Although disdainful of court-ordered integration, Brewer tried to preserve freedom of school choice and at the same time not to appear as another Wallace-style segregationist. He honestly thought if given a good-faith effort, choice could work. Choice, Brewer thought, would preserve the valuable public support he needed for significant educational reform. Unfortunately, Brewer's call for good faith from the courts was too late, as Alabama under Wallace had dashed any goodwill the courts might spare. Brewer's was an argument used often by segregationists as a means to delay implementation of integration court orders as well as by those who supported honest attempts at school choice as a means to preserve the ideal of the "neighborhood schools." Brewer might have wished for good faith, but the courts had none to give. In addition, at times it was difficult to distinguish his remarks from those of segregationists. Brewer enjoyed his most successful year as governor in 1969, when he passed the most progressive education reform legislation

the state had ever seen. Still, indicative of the position Alabama held in the nation, Brewer's reforms remained a generation behind Askew's. Nevertheless, Brewer's education reform success solidifies his status as a New South governor.

In 1972 Florida held a statewide referendum on the merits of a constitutional amendment banning busing. Although it held no legal authority, many thought the vote would serve as a cross-section of national opinion because of Florida's diverse population. Askew risked his political future in campaigning against any such amendment to the constitution. Although Floridians overwhelmingly voted to support a constitutional busing ban, Askew showed the rest of the nation that the leaders of the New South supported racial justice even if it meant taking unpopular positions. Just one year after his sound defeat on the busing referendum, Askew maintained sufficient legislative influence to make his state a national leader in education reform. His successful campaign for school reform also provided further evidence of Askew's vision for the New South, which included equal opportunity to a quality education for all children.

John West perceived that integration meant more than just placing black and white children in the same classroom. He attempted to meet the needs of disadvantaged black children, who had been left behind white students because they had been mired in dual education systems. West also committed himself to allaying fears on the part of both black and white parents that with integration came school disorder and violence. His commitment to order and discipline helped make South Carolina's one of the smoothest transitions to integrated schools. John West was the only governor in this group not to pass substantive conventional education reform legislation. Unwilling to raise taxes on his rather poor state to pay for such reform and inheriting an imposing budget deficit, West was forced to pursue other funding options, including reviving his state's flagging economy and making South Carolina a full member of the rising Sunbelt South. Yet he also had to mollify increasingly militant teachers in search of long-awaited pay increases. Still, he succeeded at both.

These governors may have benefited from paramount changes in southern politics, but they also held a common devotion to and hope in the power and necessity of education. Reflecting the philosophy of southern progressive education reformers of the early twentieth century, New South governors believed that education was a gateway to progress. Like their Progressive predecessors, New South governors viewed education