POLITICS

AND

SOCIETY

IN THE

SOUTH

Earl Black and Merle Black

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For our families
Sena and Stacey
Debra, Claire, and Julia

Preface

ALTHOUGH the South has experienced tremendous change in recent decades, it remains the most distinctive American region. Southern political conditions, trends, and possibilities profoundly interest many Americans within and without the region. For almost two generations, V. O. Key's *Southern Politics in State and Nation* has been the standard book on regional politics. Key's magnificent analysis remains unsurpassed in its treatment of the old southern politics, but subsequent changes have rendered it inadequate as a guide to the new southern politics.

Our study progresses from the new political sociology of the region to the most significant features of the emerging southern politics. We seek to provide an understanding of the social forces that are reshaping southern politics and are propelling the region toward party competition, as well as to explicate the South's most important political tendencies, both national and state. We identify and analyze the critical changes and continuities in the region's social order, economy, race relations, and mass public opinion, and then relate these changes and continuities to the most salient characteristics of the new southern politics.

In attempting to explain the complexities of southern political life we have explored many topics and employed a variety of research methods. Because the new southern politics cannot be fully appreciated unless it is measured against traditional southern institutions and practices, we have compared and contrasted, whenever feasible, the era of classic one-party politics (1920–1949) with the developments of the subsequent thirty-five years (1950–1985). By subjecting the occurrences of the past six decades to systematic investigation and interpretation, *Politics and Society in the South* provides a synthesis of regional trends and prospects.

We are very much aware, however, that our study tells only part of the story of regional politics. It is not about the politics of individual states, and it does not depict major regional politicians in any detail. We have sought to explain the changing milieu within which southern politicians operate, without describing the particulars of specific situations. These omissions are not due to a lack of interest in such topics. Neither

time nor space permits adequate coverage of general tendencies and specific illustrations in a single book. In our judgment a broad synthesis of southern political developments is the most urgent and compelling need in the field of regional politics. We hope to write other books that will do justice to the most prominent and influential southern politicians and will compare more thoroughly the politics of the southern states.

We have used the conventional definition of the region that Key employed in *Southern Politics,* that is, the eleven former Confederate states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. Our only regular departure from this convention occurs when we use the presidential election year surveys of the Center for Political Studies of the Institute for Social Research of the University of Michigan (formerly the Survey Research Center). Their representative sample of the South ("Solid South") is based on ten states, the former Confederate states minus Tennessee. The SRC-CPS election studies data were made available through the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research; neither the collector of the original data nor the consortium bears any responsibility for the analyses or interpretations presented here.

   We assume responsibility for all errors of fact and interpretation.

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Changing
South

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Old Politics,
New People

AT MIDCENTURY V.O. Key published *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, the definitive study of the "old" southern politics. Focusing mainly on the period 1920–1949, Key critically analyzed the South's most salient political practices, including the development and maintenance of one-party political systems, highly depressed rates of white political participation, the relentless subordination and exclusion of blacks from politics, and state politics devoted principally to advancing and protecting the interests of "haves" rather than the much larger group of "have-nots." It was a portrait neither of political democracy nor of efficient governance. "When all the exceptions are considered, when all the justifications are made, and when all the invidious comparisons are drawn," Key wrote, "those of the South and those who love the South are left with the cold, hard fact that the South as a whole has developed no system or practice of political organization and leadership adequate to cope with its problems."[1]

The "Old" Southern Politics

The "old" or "classic" southern politics originated around the turn of the century and began to disintegrate about midcentury. J. Morgan Kousser convincingly demonstrated in *The Shaping of Southern Politics* how southern Democrats decimated their political opponents—blacks, white Republicans, and white Populists—in state after state during the 1890s and 1900s and thereby established one party politics.[2] Ways and means of achieving disfranchisement varied across the region, but everywhere stringent new suffrage requirements (poll taxes, literacy and "understanding" tests, secret ballots, registration and residency requirements) were

enacted and enforced. When the new laws were combined with such informal means of handling despised opponents as "persuasion," verbal and economic intimidation, ballot box fraud, and selective violence (including political assassinations, burnings, and beatings), it was not difficult for conservative white Democrats to clear the electorate of former slaves, sons of slaves, and "worthless" white men.[3]

While imposing insurmountable burdens upon blacks, the new suffrage rules also severely handicapped unschooled whites, who often could not read (and thus correctly mark) the ballots, and whites with meager incomes, who could not afford to pay a poll tax. Once the disfranchising provisions were established, the southern elite could enforce its beliefs that blacks were not members of the political community and that, among whites, voting was a privilege to be earned rather than a right to be exercised. "By 1910, almost no Negroes and only about half of the whites bothered to vote in the most hotly contested elections," Kousser estimated, and "the Southern political system which was to last through mid-century had been formed."[4] As a "democracy" of white and black males gave way to a "broadly based oligarchy" of white males, "southern politics [shifted] from active competition to mandatory tranquility."[5]

With their rivals destroyed in most states and crippled elsewhere, the winning Democrats proceeded to enforce white partisan solidarity to preserve the dominant group's way of life.[6] No one has better captured the meaning of the Democratic party to these white southerners, only a generation or so removed from the Civil War and Reconstruction, than W. J. Cash:

> The world knows the story of the Democratic party in the South; how, once violence had opened the way to political action, this party became the institutionalized incarnation of the will to White Supremacy. How, indeed, it ceased to be a party *in* the South and became the party *of* the South, a kind of confraternity having in its keeping the whole corpus of Southern loyalties, and so irresistibly commanding the allegiance of faithful whites that to doubt it, to question it in any detail, was *ipso facto* to stand branded as a renegade to race, to country, to God, and to Southern Womanhood.[7]

Under these intense pressures for conformity, Jasper B. Shannon argued, "adherence to the name and symbol of Democracy became the chief article of faith in the new political creed."[8]

There was more to southern orthodoxy, of course, than enthusiasm for white supremacy, hostility to full-fledged democracy, and loyalty to the Democratic party. Most southern Democrats' core beliefs included the glorification of the Confederacy and veneration of the Lost Cause, the primacy of state's rights over rights of the national government, a

constricted sphere of legitimate functions for state and local governments, minimal taxation and expenditure, an emphasis on individual rather than social responsibility for personal and family economic well-being, and the legitimacy of extralegal force (epitomized by lynching) to punish perceived violations of the region's caste system.[9] Though this creed was not entirely conservative (William C. Havard has emphasized several progressive themes, including the regulation of out-of-state corporations),[10] it was resolutely biased in favor of the economic and power interests of the more affluent whites.

The white South's main device for preventing national challenges to its racial practices, its tenacious loyalty to the Democratic party, powerfully conditioned and constrained state political activity. In Key's words, "Consistent and unquestioning attachment, by overwhelming majorities, to the Democratic party nationally has meant that the politics within southern states—the election of governors, of state legislators, and the settlement of public issues generally—has had to be conducted without benefit of political parties." When the southern states achieved regional unity in national politics, they "condemned themselves internally to a chaotic factional politics."[11]

In establishing one-party rule, southern Democratic leaders transformed general elections into empty and meaningless rituals.[12] The real political contests, those where outcomes were in doubt, concerned *which* Democrat would receive the party's nomination. Democrats had previously chosen their nominees for statewide office in party conventions, but these elitist gatherings, composed of successful local party activists, denied rank-and-file Democrats any direct voice in selecting their party's candidates. Losing candidates and their followers could always charge that the "people's choice" had been rejected by the party leadership, an increasingly troublesome accusation in political systems that failed to provide mechanisms for authentic popular choice. Astute in matters affecting their own survival, leading Democrats gradually began to understand the advantage of determining nominees in primary elections, where the final decision rested with registered white Democrats.[13]

Between 1896 and 1915 every southern state adopted some version of the direct primary system to nominate Democratic candidates.[14] In its most typical form—the dual primary system—Democratic nominees had to demonstrate wide acceptability by winning a majority, not simply a plurality, of the total vote. If no candidate secured a majority in the first primary, most southern states either required or permitted a second (runoff) primary limited to the two leading candidates from the first primary. Thus came into being the white South's most renowned institution of political choice, an electoral system whose main purpose, as Kousser has

argued, was far more to forestall irreconcilable divisions and bolts among white Democrats than to provide "democracy" for whites.[15]

Shifting nominations from conventions to direct primaries changed the style of many southern politicians because it forced them to cultivate an appeal beyond local party notables. Candidates for statewide office now tried to "stand out in a crowd" through the rhetoric of exaggeration and ridicule. Reflecting upon the campaign styles of successful Democratic politicians after Republicanism had been banished, Cash detected an enhanced emphasis on "the personal and the romantic" in distinguishing rival campaigners. "Was this candidate or that one more showy and satisfying? Did Jack or Jock offer the more thrilling representation of the South in action against the Yankee and the black man? Here, and here almost alone," Cash concluded, "would there be a field for choice."[16]

Kousser argued that the transition to primary nominations facilitated "demagoguery" because "primary candidates had to lambaste their opponents publicly." Furthermore, "when the statewide primary became the only important election, candidates had to fabricate issues. Since no deep cleavages divided the voting public in the primaries, campaigns usually revolved around questions of personality, petty scandal, or charges that one or more candidates represented an evil political machine or a despised, but politically impotent group such as the Communists or the blacks. To attract attention, competitors were virtually forced to make charges they could not prove, promises they could not keep."[17] Sensational accusations might inspire a lively and close contest but normally failed to stimulate extensive popular participation. Nor did such battles produce many victories for politicians striving to represent the economic interests of the bulk of the potential electorate, the have-little and have-not whites.

Time and again Key demonstrated the triumph of the haves and the defeat of the have-nots in matters of state taxing and spending. Economic *and* racial conservatism generally predominated among the South's governors and congressional delegations, as exemplified by Richard Russell, Carter Glass, Pat Harrison, Harry Byrd, James Eastland, Walter George, John McClellan, Strom Thurmond, and John Stennis. The South's conventional wisdom was embedded even more firmly in the leadership of state legislatures, where small groups of experienced, professional politicians returned, session after session, to preserve and enhance the political and economic interests of the region's county seat elites.[18] This outcome requires explanation, for in most southern states even the shrunken electorates of the early twentieth century probably contained more have-littles and have-nots than middle-class whites simply because there were so few middle- and upper-class whites in the populations.

Although the numerical center of political gravity may have rested with nonaffluent whites, the region's haves provided most of the politicians, supplied most campaign finance, and controlled the society's wealth. Affluent whites had the most to lose from state governments bent on redistributing wealth from haves to have-nots. For politically alert haves the strategic objective was to maintain steady control over the major institutions of state government despite being—even after massive disfranchisement—still outnumbered by have-nots. It was not an insuperable problem. Close attention to the political agenda, timely use of impressive financial resources, years of experience in practical politics, continuous efforts to ensure the presence of a core of senior senators and representatives in the state legislatures and Congress, and the ability to frame issues and identify candidates who could appeal for the votes of common whites without simultaneously arousing them against the upper classes—all of these political skills and resources could be adroitly employed in order to keep critical state and national offices in safe and reliable hands.[19]

The common touch was indispensable. Colorful phrases, memorable anecdotes with well-conceived punch lines, an ability to defend one's honesty and integrity at the drop of an accusation or to attack an opponent's character, intelligence, ancestry, and morals should the occasion demand it—such attributes were all part of the paraphernalia necessary to survive in the mass political culture of the rural and small-town South in the early twentieth century. Countrified verbal slugging came naturally to many ambitious politicians (particularly to experienced damage suit lawyers) but was a necessary evil to others. Sometimes dignity was sacrificed. Former *New York Times* editor Turner Catledge, a Mississippi native, once reminisced about observing the stately and otherwise dignified Georgia Senator Walter George engage in "anti-Negro, anti-Semitic, anti-labor, and anti-Yankee" oratory, using fiery language that quickly had the crowd "on their feet, cheering wildly. Shouts of 'Go to 'em, Walter,' and 'Let 'em have it,' were punctuated by rebel yells." The conservative senator, under attack in 1938 from President Franklin Roosevelt for his lack of enthusiasm for the New Deal, easily won renomination. "George had done what he had to do," Catledge concluded. "It reminded me of what [Mississippi Senator] Pat Harrison used to say— that he could be a statesman for five years, but on the sixth—election year—he went back home to 'sling the shit.' "[20]

Conservatives thrived in the old southern politics, although they did not completely dominate electoral politics. The situation was far different for the few authentic champions of the lower orders, such politicians as Huey Long, Lister Hill, John Sparkman, James Folsom, Claude Pepper,

Estes Kefauver, Albert Gore, and Ralph Yarborough. One-party politics reduced the incentives and compounded the hazards confronting politicians who wished to win office by appealing directly to the region's have-littles and have-nots on the basis of their economic self-interest.[21] Cash attributed much of the problem to the poor whites themselves: "Bound rigidly within the single great frame by the hypnotic Negro-fixation, estopped by the necessity of unity, if the black man was to be kept in his place, from any considerable development of faction, the masses were stripped of every possibility of effectual political action for the amelioration of their estate, even . . . when they themselves should come dimly to desire it."[22]

Key viewed "the absence of organized and continuing factions with a lower-bracket orientation" as the "striking feature of the one-party system."[23] Much of the natural constituency for the provision of goods and services to the lower orders had been permanently disfranchised; others faced formidable suffrage requirements; and still others did not vote because the typical "issues of one-party politics" were not considered "matters of importance." Leadership of the rarest sort would be required to arouse nonaffluent whites effectively. A successful politician would need the ability to identify and dramatize "issues that touch people deeply," the skill to mobilize and organize the potential constituency, and the savvy to secure tangible economic benefits. Moreover, in order to challenge effectively the powers that usually dominated state politics, an optimistic and fighting champion of the underdog was required. Such activities were intrinsically risky, for they cut against the grain of the active electorate and invited the malign attention of the upper orders. Once in a blue moon such politicians did appear—Huey Long is the standard example—but campaigning as an overt friend of the have-littles and have-nots amounted to "doing it the hard way" in the old southern politics.[24]

Thus emerged the main features of traditional southern politics: a politics compressed within a single political party, where the main differences centered on the personalities and qualifications of the candidates rather than significant issues; a politics in which most adult southerners were either ineligible to vote or did not bother to participate; a politics in which policy outcomes were egregiously slanted in favor of the haves, the few white men with wealth and political influence. As H. D. Price expressed the intrinsic stagnation of one-party politics, "The politics of black belt vs. non-black belt or of agrarian protest vs. Big Mules is fascinating to behold, but essentially a merry-go-round. The most interesting thing is the campaign itself, not any substantive policy results. Such politics is cyclic, if not plain static."[25] The old southern politics went

round and round in circles, seldom moving beyond the question of whether Jack or Jock would win public office. Essentially it was a politics of limited taxation, limited spending, and, above all, determined resistance to any changes in the racial status quo.

For Key (and countless other observers), the overarching explanation for the South's failure to nurture the institutions and beliefs necessary for stable democracy lay in the exigencies of white racial domination: "In its grand outlines the politics of the South revolves around the position of the Negro." Why was the preservation of white supremacy the paramount objective—the ultimate concern—of the old southern politics? Key attributed the primacy of racial politics to the values, interests, and leadership of the white politicians who lived in rural areas with substantial black populations. "It is the whites of the black belts who have the deepest and most immediate concern about the maintenance of white supremacy," he contended. "Those whites who live in counties with populations 40, 50, 60, and even 80 percent Negro share a common attitude toward the Negro."[26]

Though he sometimes used language (as in the following quotation) that appeared to blame the victims of white racism rather than the victimizers for the region's deficiencies, Key understood clearly which white southerners were the most zealous white supremacists and the most committed defenders of one-party solidarity:

> The hard core of the political South—and the backbone of southern political unity—is made up of those counties and sections of the southern states in which Negroes constitute a substantial proportion of the population. In these areas a real problem of politics, broadly considered, is the maintenance of control by a white minority. The situation resembles fundamentally that of the Dutch in the East Indies or the former position of the British in India. Here, in the southern black belts, the problem of governance is similarly one of the control by a small, white minority of a huge, retarded, colored population. And, as in the case of the colonials, that white minority can maintain its position only with the support, and by the tolerance, of those outside—in the home country or in the rest of the United States.[27]

Reducing Key's perspective to its bare essentials, the "fundamental explanation of southern politics is that the black-belt whites succeeded in imposing their will on their states and thereby presented a solid regional front in national politics on the race issue."[28]

Plantation or multi-unit agriculture commonly prevailed in the black belt counties, and the whites who controlled extensive agricultural operations wanted an ample supply of cheap, unskilled, and docile labor.[29] White authorities deliberately minimized black educational opportunities