# The Rise of Southern Republicans

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AGAIN FOR OUR FAMILIES
SENA AND SHAMEEM
DEBRA, CLAIRE, AND JULIA

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In this book we have made frequent use of the exit polls conducted in each presidential election from 1976 to 1988 by CBS News and the *New York Times,* as well as exit polls of selected Senate and House campaigns conducted by these news organizations in the 1980s. In the elec-

tions from 1992 to 2000, we have used the Voter News Service General Election exit polls. We have also made use of National Election Studies of presidential elections from 1952 to 1996 conducted by the Center for Political Studies of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan. The National Election Studies surveys, the CBS News/New York Times exit polls, and the Voter News Service exit polls were made available through the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research. We are grateful to the consortium for the use of these data collections; neither the collector of the original data nor the consortium bears any responsibility for the analysis or interpretations presented here.

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Our greatest debts, impossible to repay, are to our wives, Sena Black and Debra Larson, and to our daughters, Shameem, Claire, and Julia. It is a joy to dedicate this book to them. Shameem prepared the index.

All errors of fact and interpretation are our responsibility.

# THE RISE OF SOUTHERN REPUBLICANS

# CONTENTS

# 1

# THE SOUTHERN TRANSFORMATION

In 1964 Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, a tenacious champion of unreconstructed southern conservatism, abandoned the Democratic party to become the first Republican senator from the Deep South in the twentieth century. Three decades later Thurmond was bound and determined to make history again, this time by serving longer than any other U.S. senator. To satisfy his remarkable personal ambition he needed to win an unprecedented eighth term. Ignoring some pleas and many hints that he should retire gracefully, in 1996 the aged Thurmond asked friendly crowds to support him "just one mo' time."[1]

Late on election night, when his victory was at last assured, a dazed and plainly exhausted Thurmond was carefully shuffled to a podium for the customary televised victory speech. Looking not a day older than ninety-three, Thurmond mumbled a few words to the people of South Carolina. The senator made no reference to issues, ideology, or political principles, nor did he venture any coherent interpretation of his achievement. He said absolutely nothing of substance. Instead he slowly read, page by page, prepared thank-you messages directed to the men who had masterminded his final campaign. It was a thoroughly perfunctory and lifeless performance. That necessary duty completed, Thurmond was then ushered away a few steps, whereupon a young television reporter stuck a microphone in his face, described the campaign as extremely "hard-fought," and inquired whether the senator might harbor any "hard feelings" toward his Democratic opponent. Instantly

Thurmond perked up. "No haard feelins' on mah paart," he shouted, *"Ah won!"*[2]

Republicans from the South have transformed American politics. The collapse of the solid Democratic South and the emergence of southern Republicanism, first in presidential politics and later in elections for Congress, have established a new reality for America: two permanently competitive national political parties. Not since Democrats battled Whigs before the Civil War has there been such a thoroughly nationalized two-party system. The Democratic party has always been a national enterprise, commanding durable strength in both the South and the North. Traditionally, the Republican party's geographic reach was quite different. A broadly based *northern* party, Republicans maintained active wings in the Northeast, Midwest, West, and Border states but secured only a nominal presence in the South. Apart from the short-lived Reconstruction era, for many generations southern Republicanism "scarcely deserve[d] the name of party. It waver[ed] somewhat between an esoteric cult on the order of a lodge and a conspiracy for plunder in accord with the accepted customs of our politics."[3]

When the Republicans recaptured both houses of Congress in 1994 for the first time since 1952, they did not construct their Senate and House majorities in the old-fashioned way. Republican control of Congress traditionally involved a purely sectional strategy in which enormous Republican surpluses in the North trumped huge Republican deficits in the South. The novel feature of the Republicans' 1994 breakthrough was its national character. Republicans won majorities of House and Senate seats in both the North *and* the South, a feat they had not achieved since 1872, and their new southern majorities were vital to the Republicans' national victories. Across the nation Republicans as well as Democrats now realistically believe they have fighting chances to win both the White House and Congress in any particular election. Focusing on elections to both the Senate and the House of Representatives, this book examines the regional causes and national consequences of rising southern Republicanism.

It is easy to forget just how thoroughly the Democratic party once dominated southern congressional elections. In 1950 there were no Republican senators from the South and only 2 Republican representatives out of 105 in the southern House delegation. Nowhere else in the

United States had a major political party been so feeble for so many decades. A half-century later Republicans constituted *majorities* of the South's congressional delegations—13 of 22 southern senators and 71 of 125 representatives. This immense partisan conversion is our subject. Just as the emergence of southern Republicanism restored competition to America's presidential politics, so has the rise of Republican senators and representatives from the South revitalized congressional politics.

The old southern politics was transparently undemocratic and thoroughly racist. "Southern political institutions," as V. O. Key Jr. demonstrated, were deliberately constructed to subordinate "the Negro population and, externally, to block threatened interferences from the outside with these local arrangements."[4] By protecting white supremacy, southern Democrats in Congress institutionalized massive racial injustice for generations. Eventually the civil rights movement challenged the South's racial status quo and inspired a national political climate in which southern Democratic senators could no longer kill civil rights legislation. Led by President Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas, overwhelming majorities of northern Democrats and northern Republicans united to enact the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Landmark federal intervention reformed southern race relations and helped destabilize the traditional one-party system. In the fullness of time the Democratic party's supremacy gave way to genuinely competitive two-party politics.[5]

But if the old solid Democratic South has vanished, a comparably solid Republican South has not developed. Nor is one likely to emerge. Republican politicians hold majorities of the region's House and Senate seats, but their majorities are much smaller than those traditionally maintained by southern Democrats. Even more important, neither Republicans nor Democrats enjoy majority status among the southern electorate. In the old southern politics, whites overwhelmingly considered themselves Democrats and voted accordingly. Political battles in the contemporary South feature two competitive minority parties rather than the unmistakable domination of a single party. "Republicans know we are a minority party," observed former Republican senator Howard H. Baker of Tennessee even as his party enjoyed huge victories in 1994, "but the Democrats have had a terrible time facing [the fact] that they are, too."[6] For Republicans the new competitive situation represents a

vast improvement over their past standing, while for Democrats the transition from an assured majority party to a competitive minority party has been experienced as a marked deterioration in their grassroots base.

Modern competitive two-party politics is grounded in the region's rapidly growing and immensely diverse population. The central political cleavage, as ancient as the South itself, involves race. When the Republican party nominated Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater—one of the few northern senators who had opposed the Civil Rights Act—as their presidential candidate in 1964, the party attracted many racist southern whites but permanently alienated African-American voters. Beginning with the Goldwater-versus-Johnson campaign more southern whites voted Republican than Democratic, a pattern that has recurred in every subsequent presidential election. Two decades later, in the middle of Ronald Reagan's presidency, more southern whites began to call themselves Republicans than Democrats, a development that has also persisted. These two Great White Switches, first in presidential voting and then almost a generation later in partisan identification, laid the foundations for highly competitive two-party politics in the South. Gradually a new southern politics emerged in which blacks and liberal to moderate whites anchored the Democratic party while many conservative and some moderate whites formed a growing Republican party that owed little to Abraham Lincoln but much to Goldwater and even more to Reagan. Elections in the contemporary South ordinarily separate extraordinarily large Democratic majorities of blacks from smaller Republican majorities of whites.[7]

Yet modern southern politics involves more than its obvious racial divisions. The South, an increasingly complex society, is the largest region in the United States. More than 84 million people, three of every ten Americans according to the 2000 Census, now reside in the eleven states of the old Confederacy. During the 1990s the region's population grew by 19 percent, much faster than the increase (11 percent) that occurred in the rest of the nation, and its congressional delegation expanded from 125 to 131 seats in the 2002 apportionment.[8] The South's population growth was rooted in the liberating effects of civil rights legislation and the tremendous expansion of the economy. As Dan Balz

and Ronald Brownstein have concluded, "The decline of the agrarian South and the rise of a modern economy grounded in manufacturing, defense, tourism, services, and technology has been, by anyone's measure, one of the great success stories of the late twentieth century–but in creating a more diversified society, the South's transformation made it difficult for Democrats to speak for the interests of all, as they once claimed to do."[9] Whites and blacks born and raised in the region no longer had to leave in search of better opportunities in the North. Many individuals reared elsewhere in the nation and world–whites, blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and others–now found the South an acceptable, even desirable, place in which to work and retire.

The rise of a middle and upper-middle class has produced millions of voters with substantial incomes subject to substantial federal and state taxation. Many of these upwardly mobile individuals, wanting to keep the lion's share of their earnings, view the Republicans as far more sympathetic than the Democrats to their economic interests and aspirations. Another major fault line divides white southerners who are part of the religious right political movement (strongly pro-Republican) from the much larger group who are not (slightly pro-Republican). And among whites who are not attracted to conservative religious groups, men are strongly pro-Republican while women are more evenly divided in their partisanship. Thus economic class, religion, and gender also structure the social foundations of southern two-party politics.

## THE SOUTHERN REPUBLICAN SURGE

In January 1995, at the beginning of the 104th Congress, the power and visibility of the southern Republicans transcended their sheer numbers. Never before in American history had southerners, much less aggressively conservative southerners, dominated the Republican leadership in the House of Representatives. All three of the most influential leaders of the new Republican majority in the House of Representatives–Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, of Atlanta, Georgia; Majority Leader Dick Armey, of Dallas, Texas; and Whip Tom DeLay, of Houston, Texas–represented overwhelmingly white, suburban, middle-class districts in key southern metropolitan areas. Southern Republicanism

especially thrived in the region's new suburbs. "In concert with the economic changes, in-migration from the North and the swell of refugees from the farms to the cities and the imposition of court-ordered busing gave rise to a suburban South where one had never existed," observe Balz and Brownstein. "Around cities like Dallas and Houston, Atlanta, Birmingham, Orlando, Raleigh, Richmond, Charlotte, and Greenville, suburbs sprouted relentlessly . . . Almost every new housing development rising in the suburban and exurban counties of the South represented another potential Republican enclave and a further nail in the Democrats' coffin."[10]

Operating from their safely Republican districts, Gingrich, Armey, and DeLay epitomized the interests, beliefs, values, and priorities of the South's rising white middle class. Gingrich's political base, "Newtland," located in the northwestern Atlanta suburb of Cobb County, symbolized the worldview of much of modern southern Republicanism. According to *New York Times* reporter Peter Applebome, "Gingrich likes to cite Cobb County as an entrepreneurial, technologically savvy model for a Republican America of economic prosperity and conservative values."

As Gingrich casually explained the lay of the land in 1994:

> "What they [his constituents] find here is a sort of Norman Rockwell world with fiberoptic computers and jet airplanes. But the values that would have been the *Saturday Evening Post* of the mid-fifties are the values of most of these people now." Soon he was on a roll, contrasting the pristine work ethic of Cobb versus the "welfare state" values of Atlanta, a pitch as old as the South. Fifteen years ago even a Strom Thurmond or Jesse Helms would have been leery of using the most transparent of codes to stigmatize a whole race. But the South they grew up in was one where blacks and whites always, on some level, had to confront one another. Cobb's past was full of the starkest issues of race, but in Cobb now blacks were largely symbolic rather than real—representing the unseen menace, horror, and decay of Atlanta, 70 percent black, just across the Chattahoochee [River]—so Gingrich's words flew out in his usual, breezy, unfiltered flow.

> "People in Cobb don't object to upper-middle class neighbors who keep their lawn cut and move to the area to avoid crime," he [Gingrich] went on. "What people worry about is the bus line gradually destroying one apartment complex after another, bringing people out for public housing who have no middle-class values and whose kids as they become teenagers often are centers of robbery and where the schools collapse because the parents who live in the apartment complexes don't care that the kids don't do well in school and the whole school collapses."

Gingrich concluded this remarkable interview "with a ringing endorsement of his constituents. 'It's the places like Cobb that are entrepreneurial, that have weak unions, that have a strong work ethic, that are going to do well,' he said." In the suburbs of "Newtland," as well as in scores of small towns and rural areas across the South, the dominant beliefs summed to "Low tax, low union, strong work ethic, strong commitment to family and community."[11]

Southerners were also conspicuous among Republican leaders in the Senate, although they were initially less prominent than in the House of Representatives. While Robert Dole of Kansas was unopposed as he shifted from minority leader to majority leader, Trent Lott of Mississippi successfully challenged Dole's veteran deputy, Alan Simpson of Wyoming, for the position of Republican whip. Mississippi's Thad Cochran continued in the third leadership position as the Republican conference chairman, and Connie Mack of Florida filled Lott's vacancy as conference secretary. Southerners thus held three of the four elected Republican leadership positions at the beginning of the 104th Congress, and Lott later defeated Cochran for majority leader when Dole resigned his Senate seat to run for president in 1996.

Within the Democratic party different regional realities prevailed. Throughout most of the twentieth century a southern Democrat had usually held at least one of the House Democrats' top leadership positions (Speaker, majority leader, or whip when the Democrats were the majority party and minority leader or minority whip when they were not). After Texas Democrat Jim Wright resigned as House Speaker in 1989, however, the new leadership chosen by the House Democratic

caucus consisted of Washington's Tom Foley as Speaker, Missouri's Richard Gephardt as majority leader, and, for the first time, an African American, Philadelphia's William Gray, as whip.[12] Since then not a single southerner has appeared in the upper ranks of Democratic leadership in the House of Representatives, a telling indicator of the region's declining influence in the congressional party. Indeed, when Charlie Rose of North Carolina rashly challenged Gephardt of Missouri for the position of minority leader after the 1994 election, he was resoundingly defeated in the Democratic caucus.

In the Senate Jim Sasser of Tennessee, the influential chair of the Budget Committee, expected to succeed the retiring George Mitchell of Maine in 1995 as Democratic majority leader. Only reelection to a fourth term stood between Sasser and the leadership of the Senate Democrats. Yet despite his excellent prospects, a political unknown drove Sasser out of the Senate in 1994. After David Pryor of Arkansas subsequently decided not to seek reelection as conference secretary, the nine remaining southern Democrats entered the 104th Congress without formal representation in their party's leadership. Times had indeed changed radically when southerners could achieve major leadership positions in the Republican party while failing to do so in the Democratic party.

Overrepresenting southerners in the Republican House leadership, and especially overrepresenting southerners with utterly safe suburban districts, placed a national media spotlight on combative conservatives drawn from the most conservative region in the country. Gingrich, Armey, and DeLay assuredly knew how to challenge and confront House Democratic leaders, but they were completely inexperienced in the practicalities of governance. Their economic conservatism translated into an ambitious attempt to shrink the size of the national government that threatened (or could easily be attacked as so doing) long-established New Deal and Great Society entitlements, ranging from Social Security, Medicare, and welfare to a wide array of domestic programs with established beneficiaries.

Beyond threatening economic benefits, the southern Republicans' dependence on the religious right meant that public policies involving such social and cultural flashpoints as abortion, gun control, school prayer, and the treatment of gays and lesbians appeared to be up for

grabs. The incessant moralizing of the new Republican leaders quickly raised fears and anxieties among many Americans, North and South, who did not share the southern Republicans' cultural values, economic conservatism, and policy objectives generally. Particularly under Gingrich's mercurial leadership, the defining image of the congressional Republicans was one of a southern-led Republican party not only bent on telling millions of Americans precisely how they should and should not live their lives but even willing to shut down the federal government in order to get their way. Republican actions, particularly as communicated to the nation by news media generally unsympathetic to the Grand Old Party, resulted in a devastating portrait of the House Republicans as irresponsible political extremists.

By winning an unexpected victory, the House Republicans assumed the duties of a majority party without any previous experience in that role.[13] Because of their thin majority, House Republicans could pass their conservative program for reform–Gingrich's Contract with America–only by establishing unprecedented party unity between northern Republicans and southern Republicans. Although the southern Republican leaders and many rank-and-file southern Republicans did not have to face the discipline or accountability of running in highly competitive districts, fewer northern Republicans enjoyed the luxury of similarly safe districts. Many northern Republicans were forced to vote more conservatively than they wished, and the result was precarious Republican national majorities during the 1990s (see Table 1.1). While the southern Republicans increased their lead over southern Democrats from three seats in 1994 to seventeen in 1996, in the North the Republican surplus fell from twenty-three in 1994 to three in 1996 and dropped to a five-seat deficit two years later. After 1998 southern surpluses alone accounted for the Republicans' tiny majorities in the House of Representatives. In the Senate Republicans maintained small southern and northern surpluses from 1994 through 1998. However, the 2000 Senate elections resulted in a partisan standoff in which the Republicans' southern surplus of four seats equaled the party's deficit in the rest of the nation, and only the vote of Republican vice president Richard Cheney allowed the GOP to organize the Senate. This unusual pattern of Republican control was exceedingly short-lived in the Senate. In May 2001 Vermont senator James Jeffords abandoned the Republican party,