Politics in FLORIDA

Thomas R. Dye

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The James Madison Institute

and

Florida State University

PRENTICE HALL, UPPER SADDLE RIVER, NEW JERSEY 07458

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Dye, Thomas R.
Politics in Florida / Thomas R. Dye
p. cm.
Includes index.
ISBN 0-13-690330-4
1. Florida—Politics and government. I. Title.
JK4416.D93 1998
320.9759—dc21 98-10060
CIP

Editorial Director: Charlyce Jones Owen
Editor in Chief: Nancy Roberts
Acquisitions Editor: Beth Gillett
Editorial Assistant: Kathryn Sheehan
Marketing Manager: Christopher DeJohn
Project Manager: Serena Hoffman
Buyer: Bob Anderson
Cover Director: Jayne Conte

This book was set in 10/12 Palatino by ElectraGraphics and was printed and bound by Courier Companies, Inc. The cover was printed by Phoenix Color Corp.

Simon & Schuster/ A Viacom Company
Upper Saddle River, New Jersey 07458

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN: 0-13-690330-4

Prentice-Hall International (UK) Limited, *London*
Prentice-Hall of Australia Pty. Limited, *Sydney*
Prentice-Hall Canada Inc., *Toronto*
Prentice-Hall Hispanoamericana, S.A., *Mexico*
Prentice-Hall of India Private Limited, *New Delhi*
Prentice-Hall of Japan, Inc., *Tokyo*
Simon & Schuster Asia Pte. Ltd., *Singapore*
Editora Prentice-Hall do Brasil, Ltda., *Rio de Janeiro*

Politics in Florida

Preface

Politics in Florida may be a forecast of politics in America in the twenty-first century. If the next century is to see an ever more mobile American people, a more elderly population, an ethnically and racially more diverse society, and an electorate ever more dependent on the media of mass communication, then Florida is at the forefront of the nation's changing political culture. Most Florida voters come from someplace else. They have no deep roots in the state. They are aptly described as an "electorate of visitors." Even if they know the state capital is Tallahassee, not Miami, they are unlikely to know much about what goes on there.

Politics in Florida is an overview of government, politics, and public affairs in the Sunshine State. If indeed we have a transient electorate in the state, the need for such a volume would appear to be especially pressing. The book is addressed primarily to the state's constant flow of new voters—retirees, immigrants, transplanted workers, professionals, and businesspeople, as well as college students and younger people.

Politics in Florida grew out of the public service commitment of the author and the James Madison Institute. The book is designed to be nonpartisan, informative, and descriptive. It summarizes the political culture of the state, prevailing public opinion, the state's constitution, political parties, power centers and interest groups, legislative affairs in Tallahassee, the roles of the governor and cabinet, the law enforcement and judicial systems, and city, county, and special district government in the state. It also provides brief summaries of policy issues in education, social welfare, growth management, and taxation in the state.

The author is indebted to the James Madison Institute and its chairman, J. Stanley Marshal, for supporting this project; to Harriet Crawford of the Policy Sciences Center at Florida State University for turning his scribbling into a manuscript; and to Serena Hoffman at Prentice Hall for turning the manuscript into a book.

Thomas R. Dye

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

THE JAMES MADISON INSTITUTE

Research for *Politics in Florida* was supported in part by a grant from the James Madison Institute, Tallahassee, Florida. The James Madison Institute is a nonprofit research and educational organization chartered in 1987. The guiding philosophy of the Institute is rooted in the thought of James Madison: limited government, federalism, private property, and individual liberty coupled with individual responsibility. The work of the Institute is distributed through the *Madison Messenger* (newsletter), the *Madison Journal* (quarterly of opinions, speeches, views), the *Madison Review* (quarterly for policy research), as well as through research reports and books. Membership information is available by writing James Madison Institute, 2017 Delta Boulevard, Tallahassee, FL 32304.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thomas R. Dye, formerly McKenzie Professor of Government, Florida State University, is Senior Research Scholar at the James Madison Institute and editor of the *Madison Review.* He is also the author of *Politics in America,* 2nd ed. (Prentice Hall, 1989); *Politics in States and Communities,* 9th ed. (Prentice Hall, 1997); *Understanding Public Policy,* 9th ed. (Prentice Hall, 1998); and other books and articles on public affairs. He has served as president of the Southern Political Science Association and secretary of the American Political Science Association.

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1 Politics in the Sunshine State

"Welcome to Florida, where everyone is from someplace else!" Or almost everyone—fully 70 percent of the population come from outside of the state. Florida is more of a crowd than a community—a large and growing population of very diverse people, spread over a thousand miles, few of whom have deep roots in the state. Retirees fleeing cold winters, Cubans fleeing Castro, Haitians fleeing poverty flow into Florida, along with workers seeking jobs, investors seeking opportunities, tourists seeking entertainment, and drug traffickers seeking markets.

Florida politics is largely shaped by four key characteristics of the state's population:

- Rapid population growth and heavy in-migration
- A large elderly population
- Racial and ethnic diversity
- Multiple population centers and media markets.

The result is a state political culture fractured along geographic, racial, ethnic, and age lines, the absence of a sense of statewide community, and "a sense of rootlessness and restlessness"[1] among voters. With so many newcomers, many with lingering attachments to their home states, political loyalties are fluid and changing. Many voters lack information or interest in statewide issues; they are more attentive to news about their city than about events in the state Capitol in Tallahassee. Indeed, Florida has been described as "an electorate of visitors."[2]

GROWTH, CHANGE, AND ROOTLESSNESS

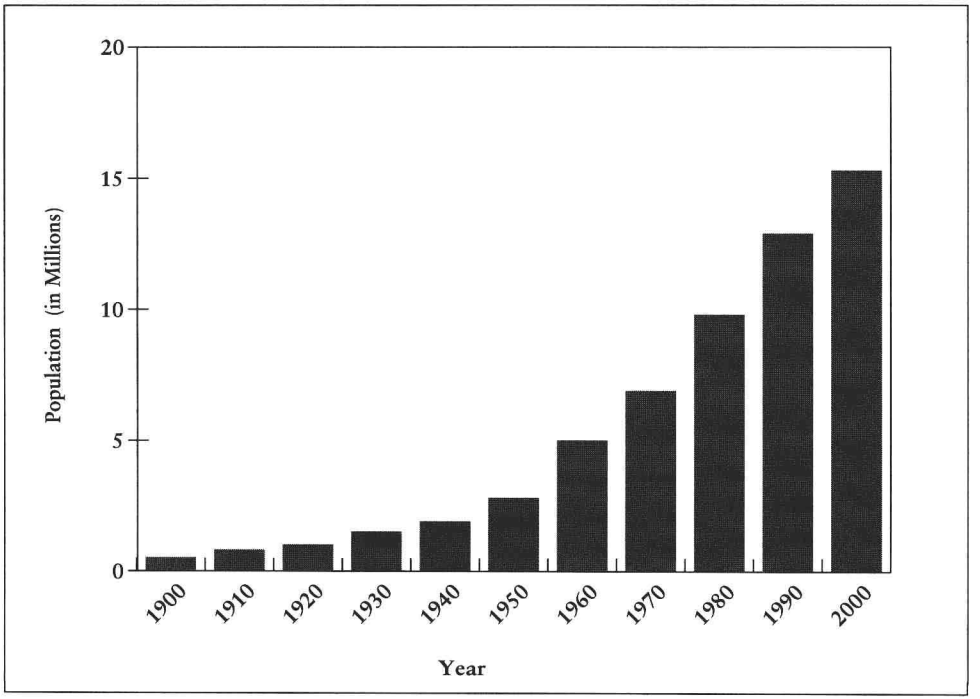
Fifty years ago, Florida was a sparsely populated, humid, swampy collection of country towns, fishing villages, migrant labor camps, Indian settlements, sugar cane fields, and orange groves, with a few plush coastal resorts catering

to wealthy winter guests (see Up-Close: "A Short History of Florida"). There were fewer than 2 million residents, and the state ranked twenty-seventh in population. Political power rested in the northern tier of counties with the "pork choppers," who dominated the state legislature, the state's multiple executive offices, and the state courts. Florida politics was white, conservative, segregationist, and one-party Democratic.[3]

Today Florida is the nation's fourth largest state, with nearly 15 million people, 85 percent of whom live in urban areas within ten miles of either coast (see Figure 1–1, "Population Growth in Florida"). Each day about 2,100 people move into the state; 1,400 move out, leaving a net *daily* increase of about 700 people. More than 1.2 million people moved into the state between 1990 and 1995. New Yorkers constitute the largest number of annual in-migrants, followed by people from New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania. Far fewer come from outside the United States (about 250,000 over five years), but among those who do, the largest numbers come from Haiti, Cuba, and Central America. More than 40 million people visit the state each year.

Political power in Florida has shifted from rural North Florida to the urban centers in Central Florida (Orlando, Daytona, Titusville, and the Space

FIGURE 1–1
Population Growth in Florida



SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1996* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1996).

UP-CLOSE

A Short History of Florida

Written records about life in Florida began with the arrival of the Spanish explorer and adventurer Juan Ponce de Léon in 1513. Ponce de Léon called the place "La Florida" in honor of Pascua Florida, Spain's Eastertime Feast of Flowers.

In 1562 the French Protestant Jean Ribault explored the area; two years later, fellow Frenchman René de Goulaine Laudonnière succeeded in establishing Fort Caroline at the mouth of the St. Johns River, near present-day Jacksonville.

These French ventures prompted Spain to accelerate its plans for colonization. Pedro Menéndez de Avilés hastened across the Atlantic, his sights set on creating a settlement. Menéndez arrived in 1565 at a place he called San Augustín (St. Augustine) and established the first permanent settlement in what is now the United States.

As late as 1600, Spain's power over what is now the southeastern United States was unquestioned. So when Englishmen came to America, they wisely planted their first colonies well to the north—Jamestown, Virginia (1607), and Plymouth, Massachusetts (1620). But in 1702, swept up in European conflicts and angered in particular by Spain's policy of granting freedom to escaped slaves, South Carolinians, and their Indian allies led by Colonel James Moore, laid siege to Spanish Florida, destroying St. Augustine but failing to capture Castillo de San Marcos. England's southernmost continental colony, Georgia, founded in 1733, brought Spain's adversaries even closer. Gorgians attacked Florida in 1740 and besieged the Castillo for almost a month but failed to capture it.

Britain temporarily gained control of Florida in 1763 following the Seven Years' War (1756–63). Spain evacuated Florida, leaving the province virtually empty. At that time, St. Augustine was still a garrison town with fewer than five hundred houses, and Pensacola was an even smaller military town. But Spain regained Florida in 1783 in the settlement that ended the American Revolution. However, instead of becoming more Spanish during this "second Spanish period," the Floridas (Britain had divided the area into two provinces) became more American. Finally, after several official and unofficial American military incursions into the territory, Spain ceded the Floridas to the United States in 1821.

One of those military operations, in 1818, brought General Andrew Jackson into western Florida for skirmishes with Florida's Indians, later labeled the First Seminole War. Jackson returned in 1821 to establish the new territorial government for the United States over what was an unspoiled, underdeveloped wilderness, occupied mainly by Indians, blacks, and Spaniards. Tallahassee was chosen as the capital city because it was halfway between the existing governmental seats of St. Augustine and Pensacola. By 1830, the territory boasted a population of 34,730, many of whom had come from Georgia, Virginia, and the Carolinas. Of this population almost half were slaves.

Seminoles, already respected for their fighting abilities, won the admiration of professional soldiers for their bravery, fortitude, and ability to adapt to changing circumstances during the Second Seminole War (1835–42). That war, by far the most significant of the three conflicts between the Indians and the federal government in Florida, began when the Seminoles resisted removal across the Mississippi River to what is now Oklahoma. Jackson, now president, sought their removal through force, sacrificing the lives of countless Indians, soldiers, and citizens. But in the end, the issue remained in doubt. Some Indians migrated "voluntarily," some were captured and sent west under military guard, and others escaped into the Everglades, where they carved out a life

away from contact with whites. One name which has remained familiar after more than a century is that of Osceola, a war leader of the Seminoles who would not leave his home. Seized under a flag of truce, he died in captivity in 1838. Today there are Indian reservations at Immokalee, Hollywood, Brighton (near the city of Okeechobee), and along the Big Cypress Swamp. In addition to the Seminole tribes, Florida also has a Miccosukee population.

Florida became the twenty-seventh state in the United States in 1845, and William D. Moseley was elected governor. Five years later the population had increased to 87,445, including about 39,000 slaves and 1,000 free blacks. The slavery issue soon dominated the affairs of the new state. In the 1860 presidential election Republican Abraham Lincoln received no Florida votes, and shortly thereafter, a special convention drew up an ordinance of secession. Florida left the Union on January 10, 1861.

Civil War followed. Florida was not ravaged as several other southern states were. Indeed, no decisive battles were fought on Florida soil. Tallahassee was the only southern capital east of the Mississippi River to avoid capture during the war, spared by southern victories at Olustee (1864) and Natural Bridge (1865). Following General Robert E. Lee's surrender in Virginia, Union troops occupied Tallahassee on May 10, 1865.

The final quarter of the nineteenth century brought economic developments that propelled Florida rapidly into the twentieth century. Large-scale commercial agriculture, especially citrus growing and cattle raising, became the state's most important economic activity. Industry, particularly cigar manufacturing, took root in the immigrant communities of the state. Railroad construction began on a scale undreamed of in antebellum Florida. Between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of World War I, the Florida legislature offered free public land to railroad investors.

Perhaps the most fabled of Florida's railroad tycoons was Henry Flagler. As a partner to John D. Rockefeller in what would become the huge monopoly Standard Oil, Flagler amassed a fortune. In 1878, on the advice of a physician, Flagler brought his ailing wife (the first of three) for the winter to Jacksonville. That was as far as the rails would take him. Five years later he returned to Florida, this time purchasing a rail link to St. Augustine. Convinced that he was not the only winter-weary northerner who would enjoy the mild weather in Florida, Flagler began building a railroad and matching luxury hotels down the East Coast. In St. Augustine, he built the Moorish-style Ponce de Leon Hotel (now Flagler College) and the Alcazar. By 1894, the Florida East Coast Railroad reached Palm Beach, where Flagler built the largest wooden hotel in the world, the Royal Poinciana, and a palatial home, Whitehall, now a museum. With the additional enticement of land—8,000 acres of land given to him by the state for each mile of railroad he built south of Daytona—Flagler extended his railroad to Miami in 1896. Henry Plant, a rival of Flagler, brought a railroad down the Gulf Coast, opening it to development as Flagler pushed southward on the eastern coast of the state. In Tampa, Plant built a magnificent Moorish-style hotel with minarets, the Tampa Bay, that outshone Flagler's Ponce de Leon in St. Augustine. The Tampa Bay Hotel is now the University of Tampa. In nearby Bellair Plant built the Belleview, the largest wooden hotel in the world until Flagler outdid him with the Royal Poinciana. Plant's hotel, now called the Belleview Biltmore, is still a deluxe resort. Plant City is named after him.

Both agriculture and tourism benefited from railroad building. Citrus especially benefited, since it became possible to pick oranges in South Florida, put them on a train heading north, and eat them in Baltimore, Philadelphia, or New York in less than a week.

By the end of World War I, land developers had descended upon the state. With the rise in popularity of the automobile, it became commonplace for people to vacation in Florida. Many tourists stayed on, and developers even sold land sight unseen to northerners persuaded by fantasy advertisements. But the land bubble burst after 1925 when money and credit ran out and banks and investors abruptly ceased trusting devel-

opers. Although hurricanes received a measure of blame for wiping out the Florida boom, the hurricanes were merely the final blow. By the time the Great Depression came to the rest of the nation in 1929, Floridians had already become accustomed to tightening their belts.

World War II reinvigorated Florida. The state became a training center for troops, sailors, and airmen of the United States and her allies. Highway and airport construction was accelerated so that, by war's end, Florida had an up-to-date transportation network ready for use by its citizens and by the visitors who seemed to arrive in an endless caravan.

Economically and culturally Florida witnessed several achievements that began following World War II and continued unabated into the 1980s: the move to Florida of major American corporations in increasing numbers; the completion of the interstate highway system throughout the state; construction of major international airports; an expansion of the state's universities and community colleges; the mushrooming of suburban housing; the introduction and proliferation of high technology; and the successful development of the NASA space program, punctuated by historic launches from Cape Canaveral, lunar landings, and the use of space shuttle craft. Although the shuttle program was temporarily shutdown after the Challenger disaster in 1986, flights resumed in 1988.

Despite periodic setbacks to the citrus industry caused by winter freezes, infestations of fruit flies, and outbreaks of citrus cankers, the industry remains vital to the state's economy. Tourism is thriving as never before in Florida, bolstered by huge capital investments. Symbolic of the trend toward increasing sophistication in Florida's tourist industry, Walt Disney World and its affiliated EPCOT Center have annually attracted more visitors from across the country and around the world than Florida has residents.

SOURCE: *A Short History of Florida* (Tallahassee: Florida Department of State, 1997).

Center), Southwest Florida (from the Tampa–St. Petersburg–Clearwater area to Sarasota, Fort Myers, and Naples), and Southeast Florida's "Gold Coast" (Palm Beach, Fort Lauderdale, and Miami).

Political Rootlessness Rapid population growth and heavy in-migration have fostered a sense of political rootlessness among voters. Traditional party ties, as well as loyalties to particular political leaders, are left behind in hometowns, home states, and home countries. Florida's newcomers lack some of the traditional political "anchors"—lifelong church memberships, labor unions, long-established neighborhoods, family and friendship ties—that may have served as sources of political allegiance in their city or country of origin. Florida's newcomers are more open to political cues from the mass media—newspapers and television. They are more "persuadable"; they drift from candidate to candidate with little lasting loyalty. Newcomers ensure that Florida always has an ample number of "swing" voters in elections—voters who can be influenced by slick television advertisements, snappy campaign slogans, and charismatic candidates.

Racial and Ethnic Diversity Florida's political culture is arguably the most diverse of any state in the nation. Conservative, white, North Florida Democrats, while no longer dominant, still draw their political traditions from Dixie. But Democratic conservatives are now outnumbered by white Republican conservatives in the booming central and southern regions of the state. Black liberal Democrats, representing the state's 15 percent African-American population, occupy key offices in big cities and exercise statewide power through a Legislative Black Caucus. Hispanics constitute another 15 percent of the state's population; the largest group are conservative Republican Cuban Americans.

Fractured Political Geography Florida is also fragmented geographically. Eight hundred miles separate Pensacola from Key West. Media markets are widely divided, with different newspapers and television stations serving each major city (see Figure 1–2, "The Political Geography of Florida").

The old adage of Florida politics is: The farther north you go, the farther south you get. The Northern Panhandle still reflects the Democratic, Bible Belt politics of the Old South. Military installations, including Pensacola Naval Air Station and the sprawling Eglin Air Force Base, add to the area's conservative bent. The "Redneck Riviera" describes the white sand beaches of the Gulf Coast, extending eastward from Pensacola to the "Big Bend," where the coastline curves southward. Pine trees, cotton fields, small towns, and large churches, both black and white, extend northward to the Alabama and Georgia border. The capital city, Tallahassee, with its state bureaucrats, and Gainesville, with its university community, provide liberals with oases of support.

Jacksonville is a booming business center, combining insurance, international trade, and commercial development, with the Mayport Naval Base and a new Mayo Clinic. The city's consolidation with surrounding Duval County make it the state's largest city. Its voters register Democratic but often vote Republican.

Florida's midsection—along the "I-4 corridor" linking Daytona Beach, Titusville, Orlando, and Disney World with Tampa, St. Petersburg, and Clearwater—is the most rapidly growing area of the state. The "Space Coast," Orlando, and Disney World attract many working families, while Tampa, St. Petersburg, and Clearwater, as well as Pasco and Hernando Counties to their north, are home to many retirees. the midsection is mostly conservative and Republican, but its retirees are extremely protective of Social Security and Medicare.

The Southwest Gulf Coast, from Sarasota and Bradenton to Naples and Fort Myers, is largely a resort and retirement area. Its retirees are somewhat more affluent than those in St. Petersburg and more likely to vote Republican.

But the heavily populated Southeast region—Miami and surrounding Dade County, Fort Lauderdale and Broward County communities, and Palm