

November 1995

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### Recommended Citation

Moore, William V. (1995) "Southern Politics in Transition," *Journal of Political Science*: Vol. 23 : No. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops/vol23/iss1/1>

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# SOUTHERN POLITICS IN TRANSITION

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In his 1949 landmark work Southern Politics in State and Nation, V. O. Key, Jr. described four institutions as underpinning the Southern polity: disfranchisement, the one party Democratic political system, malapportionment and segregation. Despite the undemocratic qualities of the American South, Key optimistically concluded that southern liberalism was not to be underestimated and that fundamentally within southern politics there was a powerful strain of agrarian liberalism.

During the 20 years following Key's pronouncements, all four of these institutions either disappeared or began to change. Voter participation increased among both African-Americans and whites in the South during the decades of the 1950s and 1960s. Supreme Court decisions abolished the poll tax and made voter registration easier in the South. The 1965 Voting Rights Act greatly increased the rate of African-American participation, especially in the black belt areas of the deep South, by eliminating the literacy test as a prerequisite for participation in those areas which fell under its jurisdiction.

In the 1960s the U.S. Supreme Court entered the political thicket over malapportionment. In Baker v. Carr and Reynolds v. Sims the Supreme Court used the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment to establish the right of the courts to review election district lines for state legislative bodies. Throughout the South the reapportionment of these institutions resulted in a decrease in power for the rural areas dominated by conservative Neobourbons.

Reapportionment and the growth of an urban middle class has resulted in the development of a two party system in the American South. In 1964 Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater carried the five deep South states and established the Republican Party

as a major actor in the South. Goldwater's support came from a combination of new South urban voters and black belt segregationists. In subsequent presidential elections, the South moved from being the solid Democratic South to the solid Republican South, and today this region represents the strongest base of Republican support in presidential elections. For example in 1988, Republican George Bush's share of the vote in the South was 59% compared to 47 to 53% in other regions of the United States. In 1992, George Bush received a majority of votes in Mississippi and 48% of the vote in South Carolina in the three person race for president. These were his highest percentages nationally.

These Republican gains are also reflected at the Congressional and state levels. Following the 1994 elections the Republican Party held a majority of the southern Congressional seats, U.S. Senate seats and governorships for the first time since Reconstruction. These gains have occurred in both the deep South and border South. In 1994 South Carolina became the first deep South state to have a Republican majority in the lower house of its state legislature. In the same election, South Carolinians elected a Republican governor for the third straight election.

Desegregation in education began to occur in the South following the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision. The pace of desegregation in other areas was enhanced by the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Today de jure segregation is only a memory and the South has the highest percentage of African-Americans attending integrated schools as well as the highest number of African-Americans elected to public office in the country. African-Americans have ceased to be the object of southern politics and are once again participants in the politics of the South.

But despite the removal of these institutions, Key's agrarian liberalism has not emerged as a major force in the South. Rather the region has become the most conservative section of the United States. In addition, race remains a defining characteristic of the American South much like it did in 1949.

The 1995 issue of the Journal of Political Science is devoted to an examination of Southern Politics in the contemporary era and provides insight into why the South has evolved in the direction it has

gone. In "Forgotten But Not Gone: Mountain Republicans and Contemporary Southern Party Politics," Robert Steed, Tod Baker and Laurence Moreland examine one of the groups of Republicans which V.O. Key identified in 1949 as existing in the South. Their study compares these Mountain Republicans to the newer groups of Republicans in the South today. Laura van Assendelft analyzes a relatively new phenomenon which has occurred as a result of the growth of southern Republicans: Republican governors' relationships with Democratic legislatures in the states of Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina and Tennessee in her article "Southern Republican Governors and Democratic Legislatures."

Donald Beachler illustrates the role that race has played in the growth of congressional Republicans in the contemporary South in "Racial Gerrymandering and Republican Gains in Southern House Elections." Clearly the increase in African-American representation has been beneficial to white Republicans and detrimental to white Democrats. Judson Jeffries analyzes the election of the only African American governor in the United States in his essay "Race and the Election of Douglas Wilder." Jeffries' study reinforces the assertion that race continues to be an important factor in the politics of the South.

John Shelton Reed in The Enduring South noted that one of the distinguishing characteristics of the South was religion. The South is over 90% Protestant and over 50% Baptist. In addition, Southerners are more likely to attend church regularly and a disproportionate percentage of Southerners are religious fundamentalists. Oran Smith's essay on the "Christian Coalition and the Fundamentalist Right" and Glen Broach's analysis in "Christian School Educators" show how religion provides a partial explanation for the political conservatism of the New South.

Certainly the South has changed in the almost 50 years since V.O. Key conducted his research on this region. Key would probably not recognize the American South today because of the dramatic economic political and social changes which have occurred. These are changes which were inevitable but, in some cases, these are changes which are quite different from those which political scientists envisioned in 1949.