

**SOUTHERN POLITICS
IN STATE AND NATION**

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With the Assistance of

ALEXANDER HEARD

A New Edition



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THE South may not be the nation's number one political problem, as some northerners assert, but politics is the South's number one problem.

From afar, outlanders regard southern politics as a comic opera staged on a grand scale for the amusement of the nation. They roared when Texans elected "Ma" Ferguson as their governor to serve as proxy for her husband, barred from office by an earlier impeachment and conviction. They shuddered when Louisiana was ruled by Huey Long, a flamboyant advocate of the subversive doctrine of "Every Man A King." Yet he put on a good show. The connoisseurs of rabble-rousing relished the performance of Gene Talmadge, he of the "red galluses" and the persuasive way with the wool-hat boys. Bilbo's artistry in demagoguery excited, if not admiration, attention from beyond the hills of Mississippi. Alabama's "Big Jim" Folsom, the "kissing governor," Texas' W. Lee O'Daniel, flour salesman and hillbilly bandsman, South Carolina's "Cotton Ed" Smith, eloquent exponent of the virtues of southern womanhood, and other fabulous characters have trod the southern political stage to the accompaniment of hilarity—often derisive—from the other side of the Mason and Dixon line.

That not all the actors in the southern political drama have been clowns or knaves may be dismissed as a detail obscured by the heroic antics of those who were. That the South's spectacular political leaders have

been indiscriminately grouped as demagogues of a common stripe, when wide differences have actually separated them, may likewise be regarded as an excusable failing of the Yankee journalist insensitive to the realities of southern politics.

Nor does the fact that, as southerners are wont to say, "the North is just as bad" give ground for complacency about the political plight of the South. It may be conceded that Illinois' Republican party is an evil combination of North Shore plutocracy and downstate, rural backwardness; that Pennsylvania's Republican party has been unbelievably corrupt; and that Boston's Democratic party has about it little of the attar of roses.

When all the exceptions are considered, when all the justifications are made, and when all the invidious comparisons are drawn, 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. In its shortcomings the South has all the failings common to the American states. The South after all is a part of the United States, and everywhere state governments have a long way to go to achieve the promise of American democracy. The states, often dominated by the least forward-looking elements and always overshadowed by Washington, only infrequently, North or South, present inspiring performances as instruments of popular government.

Southern politics labors under the handicaps common to all states. Southern politicians are also confronted by special problems that demand extraordinary political intelligence, restraint, patience, and persistence for their solution. The South's heritage from crises of the past, its problem of adjustment of racial relations on a scale unparalleled in any western nation, its poverty associated with an agrarian economy which in places is almost feudal in character, the long habituation of many of its people to nonparticipation in political life—all these and other social characteristics both influence the nature of the South's political system and place upon it an enormous burden.

Thus southern politics is no comic opera. It is deadly serious business that is sometimes carried on behind a droll façade. By the process of politics we determine who governs and in whose interests the government is run. Politics embraces far more than campaigns and elections. Actions by legislature, by governors, and by all agencies of government between campaigns are readings of the balance in a continuous competition for power and advantage. The management of government is as much a part of politics as is campaign oratory. Moreover, the political process extends beyond the operations of those formal mechanisms that we usually call government. Custom, the organization of the economic system, and, now and then, private violence have a role in determining who governs and who gets what.

In its grand outlines the politics of the South revolves around the position of the Negro. It is at times interpreted as a politics of cotton, as a politics of free trade, as a politics of agrarian poverty, or as a politics of planter and plutocrat. Although such interpretations have a superficial validity, in the last analysis the major peculiarities of southern politics go back to the Negro. Whatever phase of the southern political process one seeks to understand, sooner or later the trail of inquiry leads to the Negro.

Yet it is far from the truth to paint a picture of southern politics as being chiefly concerned with the maintenance of the supremacy of white over black. That dominance is an outcome, but the observer must look more closely to determine which whites and which blacks give southern politics its individuality. 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.

It is the whites of the black belts who have the deepest and most immediate concern about the maintenance of white supremacy. Those whites who live in counties with populations 40, 50, 60, and even 80 per cent Negro share a common attitude toward the Negro. Moreover, it is generally in these counties that large-scale plantation or multiple-unit agriculture prevails. Here are located most of the large agricultural operators who supervise the work of many tenants, sharecroppers, and laborers, most of whom are colored. As large operators they lean generally in a conservative direction in their political views.

If the whites of the black belts give the South its dominant political tone, the character of the politics of individual states will vary roughly with the Negro proportion of the population. The truth of that proposition will be abundantly illustrated as the story progresses. At this point it is only necessary to call attention to the marked differences in the composition of the population of the southern states. Over a third of all Mississippi whites live in counties over half Negro, while only 2.4 per cent of Florida whites reside in such counties. Equally striking differences prevail between the two states in their politics.

The black belts make up only a small part of the area of the South and—depending on how one defines black belt—account for an even smaller part of the white population of the South. Yet if the politics of

the South revolves around any single theme, it is that of the role of the black belts. Although the whites of the black belts are few in number, their unity and their political skill have enabled them to run a shoestring into decisive power at critical junctures in southern political history.

Two great crises have left their imprint on southern political behavior: The War of the 'sixties and the Populist revolt of the 'nineties. Both these social convulsions had an impact on political habit whose influence has not worn away even yet, and in both of them the black-belt whites played a determining role. In the maneuvers leading to The War those

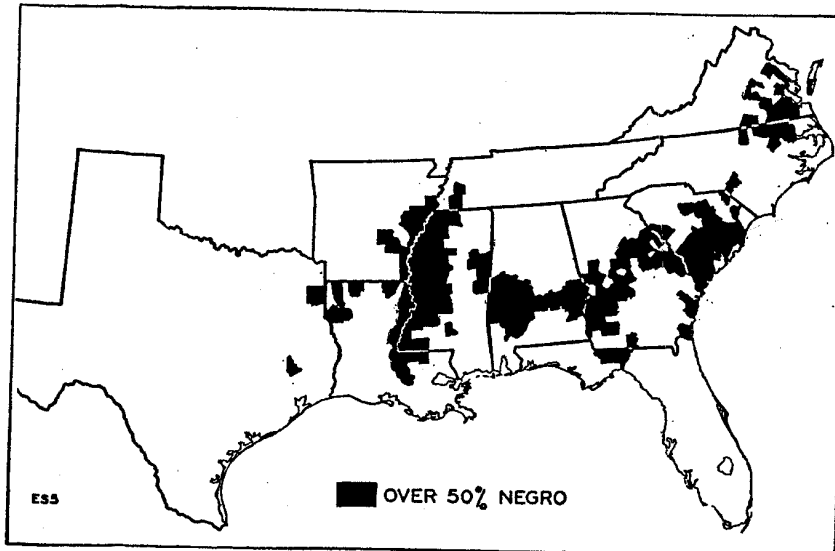


FIGURE 1

Bedrock of Southern Solidarity: Counties of the South with 50 Per Cent or More Negro Population, 1940

with most at stake—the owners of large numbers of slaves—were to be found roughly in the same areas as present-day black belts. They recruited allies wherever they could find them; their allies were fewest in the regions of few Negroes. Opposition to The War was most intense in the highlands and in the upcountry, where the soil would not support a plantation economy and where independent yeomanry had no overwhelming desire to take up arms to defend the slave property of the lowland planters.

The impressive—and unfortunate—political victory of the large slaveholders came in their success, despite their small numbers, in carrying their states for war. Within the South the scars of the dispute over whether to go to war remain in persistent Republican enclaves in the

highlands of eastern Tennessee, western North Carolina, northern Georgia, northern Alabama, and in isolated pockets elsewhere over the region. West Virginia, which was torn away from the Commonwealth, stands as an even more impressive reminder of the lack of unanimity within the South over a policy of war. Yet even more significant for the practical politics of the South of today is the fact that The War left a far higher degree of southern unity against the rest of the world than had prevailed before. Internal differences that had expressed themselves in sharp political competition were weakened—if not blotted out—by the common ex-

TABLE I

Proportion of White Population of Each Southern State Residing in Counties with Specified Percentages of Total Population Negro, 1940

STATE	PERCENTAGE OF STATE'S WHITE POPULATION RESIDING IN COUNTIES		
	50 PER CENT OR MORE NEGRO	40 PER CENT OR MORE NEGRO	30 PER CENT OR MORE NEGRO
Mississippi	36.6	50.3	69.9
South Carolina	20.2	46.8	61.1
Alabama	11.6	16.9	49.4
Georgia	11.3	28.3	58.8
Louisiana	8.2	25.2	71.6
Arkansas	8.1	14.9	26.9
Virginia:			
Counties	5.1	10.5	18.3
Independent Cities	0.0	1.9	16.4
North Carolina	4.5	17.7	38.9
Florida	2.4	8.4	33.1
Tennessee	0.8	9.2	12.6
Texas	0.5	2.2	7.8

periences of The War and Reconstruction.¹ And; however unreasonable it may seem, it follows—as even a sophomore can see from observing the European scene—that a people ruled by a military government will retain an antipathy toward the occupying power.

In the second great crisis whose influence persists—the Populist revolt—political cleavages often fell along the same lines as in the dispute leading to The War. The details of the pattern differed, of course, from state to state as did the timing of the great upsurge of agrarian radicalism. Yet everywhere the most consistent, the most intense rural re-

¹ It may also be noted that The War left quite as permanent an imprint on parts of the rural North as on the South. In many rural northern counties Republicanism can be quite as clearly attributed to The War as can southern Democracy.

sistance to Populists and like radicals of the day came from the black-belt whites. They had valiant allies in the merchants and bankers of the towns and in the new industrialists. Against these defenders of the status quo were arrayed the upcountrymen, the small farmers of the highlands and other areas where there were few Negroes and where there was no basis for a plantation economy. And they were joined by many of the workers of the cities which were beginning to grow, as well as by many poor white farmers of other regions.

The black-belt whites, the townsmen, and all the allied forces of conservatism staved off radical agrarianism, although not without leaving a residue of a belligerent attitude that for decades found expression in support for leaders who at least talked, if they did not always act, against the "interests." And in crucial campaigns even now the counties of several states divide about as they did in the elections of the agrarian uprising.

The battle of Populism left a habit of radicalism in the upland areas; fortuitously it also strengthened the position of the black-belt whites. Intense agitation over Negro voting came as an aftermath of the Populist crisis. In some states the Negro had been disposed to go along with the coalition of upcountry white Democrats and Republicans under the Populist or fusion banner. Everywhere the plantation counties were most intense in their opposition to Negro voting; they raised a deafening hue and cry about the dangers to white supremacy implicit in a Negro balance of power. The Populists, with the death of their party on the national scene, dispiritedly returned to the Democratic party which offered them more than the party of McKinley and Hanna. And in the disillusionment brought about by Populist defeat, the black belts were able to recruit enough upcountry support to adopt poll taxes, literacy tests, and other instruments to disfranchise the Negro. Even on Negro disfranchisement, however, almost everywhere the battle was close. While the upcountryman had no love for the Negro he suspected, at times rightly, that the black belt was trying to disfranchise him as well as the black man.

In the fight against Populism and in the subsequent agitation about the place of the Negro, the black belts strengthened their position by reinforcing the South's attachment to the Democratic party. The raising of a fearful specter of Negro rule and the ruthless application of social pressures against those who treasonably fused with the Republicans under Populist leadership put down for decades the threat of the revival of two-party competition.

Two-party competition would have been fatal to the status of black-belt whites. It would have meant in the 'nineties an appeal to the Negro vote and it would have meant (and did for a time) Negro rule in some black-belt counties. From another standpoint, two-party competition would have meant the destruction of southern solidarity in national pol-

itics—in presidential elections and in the halls of Congress. Unity on the national scene was essential in order that the largest possible bloc could be mobilized to resist any national move toward interference with southern authority to deal with the race question as was desired locally. And the threat of Federal intervention remained, as the furor over the Lodge force bill of 1890 demonstrated.

This sketch of the broad outlines of the foundations of southern politics points to an extraordinary achievement of a relatively small minority—the whites of the areas of heavy Negro population—which persuaded the entire South that it should fight to protect slave property. Later, with allies from conservatives generally, substantially the same group put down a radical movement welling up from the sections dominated by the poorer whites. And by the propagation of a doctrine about the status of the Negro, it impressed on an entire region a philosophy agreeable to its necessities and succeeded for many decades in maintaining a regional unity in national politics to defend those necessities.

If the interpretation is correct—and there are many deviations in detail—the political prowess of the black belts must be rated high. The thesis, however, runs counter to the idea that many top-drawer southerners firmly believe, viz., that the poor white is at the bottom of all the trouble about the Negro. The planter may often be kind, even benevolent, towards his Negroes, and the upcountryman may be, as the Negroes say, "mean"; yet when the political chips are down, the whites of the black belts by their voting demonstrate that they are most ardent in the faith of white supremacy as, indeed, would naturally be expected. The whites of the regions with few Negroes have a less direct concern over the maintenance of white rule, whereas the whites of the black belts operate an economic and social system based on subordinate, black labor.

The critical element in the structure of black-belt power has been the southern Senator and his actual, if not formal, right to veto proposals of national intervention to protect Negro rights. The black belts have had nothing to fear from state governments on the race question, although control of state governments by hill people with their Populist notions might mean heavier taxation for schools and other governmental services. On the fundamental issue, only the Federal Government was to be feared. The black belts became bulwarks of Democratic strength. Their common attachment to the Democratic party gave them security of sorts against Republican meddling in the South. In the great apostasy of 1928 it was not the black belts that went Republican; they stood stalwart in the Democratic ranks. By the same logic, in 1948, after the Democratic party had abandoned the black belts, it was not the South as a whole that deserted the party. The seat of rebellion was the delta of Mississippi, the home of great planters, few whites, and many Negroes, as well as the last

vestige of ante-bellum civilization. In the Dixiecrat standard-bearers, Governor Thurmond of South Carolina and Governor Wright of Mississippi, there was neatly symbolized the roots of a southern solidarity that was in process of erosion. As chief executives of the two states with the highest proportions of Negroes in their population, they spoke fundamentally for the whites of the black belt and little more, at least if one disregards their entourage of professional Ku Kluxers, antediluvian reactionaries, and malodorous opportunists.

Perhaps 1948 marked the beginning of an even sharper rate of descent in the long curve recording the decline in the power of black-belt whites. Yet their success—in conspiracy with the grand accidents of history—in cementing the South to the Democratic party will for a long time exert a profound influence on the politics of the South. Attachments to partisan labels live long beyond events that gave them birth.

If the critical element in the southern political system has been solidarity in national politics, there is logic in defining the political South—as it is here defined—in terms of consistency of attachment to the Democratic party nationally. Eleven states and only eleven did not go Republican more than twice in the presidential elections from 1876 to 1944 (both inclusive). These states constitute the South for the purposes of this study. They are: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. Of these states only two went Republican twice in the period 1876–1944: Florida in 1876 and 1928 and Tennessee in 1920 and 1928. Five went Republican only once: South Carolina and Louisiana in the disputed election of 1876 and North Carolina, Texas, and Virginia in 1928. Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, and Mississippi maintained an unbroken record of Democratic loyalty.²

A high percentage of Negro population is associated with the Democratic voting tradition of those states we call "the South." In nine of them one-fourth or more of the population was Negro in 1940. Tennessee and Texas are marginal to "the South" by the criterion of Negro population. Tennessee in 1940 was 17.4 per cent Negro and Texas, 14.4. Maryland, which we exclude from the South, was 16.6 per cent Negro, but its voting habits diverged markedly from those of Tennessee and Texas. The range of Negro population—from 49.2 per cent in Mississippi to 14.4 in Texas—

² Over the same period border states that might be considered southern went Republican more than twice: Missouri, 5 times; West Virginia, 8; Maryland, 7; Delaware, 9; Kentucky, 3. Oklahoma, since its admission to the Union in 1907, has gone Republican twice, in 1920 and 1928. It has strong southern characteristics in its politics, but it leans more strongly Republican than any of the eleven states included in the South. In 1940, for example, Oklahoma, along with Kentucky, Missouri, West Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware, gave more than 40 per cent of its popular vote to the Republican presidential candidate. In none of the eleven states did the Republican strength reach the 40 per cent level.

suggests that even "the South" is by no means homogeneous and that if the Negro influences the politics of the South, there ought to be wide variations in political practices from state to state. That supposition will amply be borne out as the analysis proceeds.

Much labor could be expended on a definition of the South. Indices of illiteracy, maps of the distribution of cotton production, averages of per-capita income, and scores of other statistical measures could be used to delimit the region. Some writers have tried to delimit the South in terms of psychological attitude and have spoken of "the mind" and "the spirit" of the South. For the immediate purpose no better delimitation can be devised than one based on political behavior. And it can be contended, of course, that the regional cast of political attitude has a reality and a being over and beyond all the underlying social and economic characteristics that can be pictured in endless tabulations, correlations, and graphic representations.

Incidentally—and not without importance—it may be noted that the eleven states that meet the test of partisan consistency also are the eleven states that seceded to form the Confederacy.

The chapters that follow are not dedicated solely to the elaboration of the introductory proposition, which, in its unvarnished form, runs to the effect that 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. The main burden of the chapters that immediately follow lies not in the support of this thesis—to which exceptions and modifications in detail are admittedly in order—but rather in the consequences of solidarity in national politics on political life within the individual states.

The coin of southern politics has two sides: on one is seen the relations of the South as a whole with the rest of the nation; on the other, the political battle within each state. And the two aspects are, like the faces of a coin, closely connected.

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. As institutions, parties enjoy a general disrepute, yet most of the democratic world finds them indispensable as instruments of self-government, as means for the organization and expression of competing viewpoints on public policy. Nevertheless, over a tremendous area—the South—no such competing institutions exist and the political battle has to be carried on by transient and amorphous political factions within the Democratic party, which are ill-designed to meet the necessities of self-government. By yielding to their black belts in their

desire for solidarity in national politics, the states of the South condemned themselves internally to a chaotic factional politics. A survey of the factional arrangements in each of the eleven states will lay the basis for an understanding of the variations within the South, as well as a foundation for a treatment of elements common to all states of the South.

PART ONE

Political Leadership:

The One-Party System in the States