

# THE SOUTHERNIZATION OF AMERICAN POLITICS

John S. Jackson, III  
(Southern Illinois University)

## Introduction

When I was growing up in South Arkansas in the 1950s the Civil War was very much still with us. I had a great-grandfather who fought in the war and his Civil War musket was an heirloom in our home. My friends drove pick-up trucks with Confederate flags and signs that showed a mean looking Confederate soldier saying "Forget Hell" or "The South's going to rise again!"

My thesis here tonight is that the old slogan "The South's going to rise again" has proved prophetic in American politics.\* That is, in the words of the title of my lecture, we have seen over the past two decades the "Southernization" of American politics.

("Southernization" may not be an officially-designated, Webster's approved word, but niceties of formal language use have never been a major problem for us Southerners. For example, notice the ubiquitous "ya'll", which, by the way is much to be preferred over the "you'se guys" or simply "you'se" which I here constantly in the North).

At any rate, in a more scholarly vein I am taking my text from V.O. Key's. That book, first published in 1949, was then one of the path-breaking works of its day and remains today one of the great classics of Political Science. Let us review briefly some of the points Key made in that book. As he noted then the South was the nation's most distinctive region culturally and politically. He said:

The South is our last frontier. In the development of its resources, human and natural, must be found the next great epoch of our national growth. That development, in turn, must in large measure depend on the contrivance of solutions to the region's political problems. A first step toward solution is identification . . . .(p. x)

Key identified a political system whose hallmarks were one-party politics and the dominance of the politics of personality and of race. Remember the picture he painted of the one-party South with the real political action taking place within the Democratic Party and especially in the crucial Democratic Primary. He depicted a politics of race where the "Big Mules" conspired with

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\*Dr. Jackson's remarks were originally presented as a guest speaker at the Arkansas Political Science Association Convention in February, 1986.

the “Rednecks” to keep the blacks in “their place” and to insure that the political and economic elites maintained their positions of economic dominance. This contrivance was held together by a series of colorful and even outrageous leaders who got elected by extremely flamboyant appeals stressing personality and even charisma over any reasonable discourse about the issues. Who can forget such great Southern demagogues as Theo Bilbo of Mississippi, Eugene Talmadge of Georgia, Huey Long of Louisiana and “Pitchfork” Ben Tillman of South Carolina? (The only reason our own Orval Faubus and Alabama’s George Wallace didn’t make the list is that the book was written too early for them.)

Keep in mind the party system as Key described it. It was a one-party dominant system where everyone was a Democrat so party really meant very little. The absence of party as a guide to politics and ideologies was particularly harmful to the average voter since as we now recognize party identification is especially helpful as an information seeking device.

It was a system where personalistic voting by the masses responded to “friends and neighbors” and racist appeals by the candidates. It was a time of low voter turnout and lesser interest and information levels. It was a system virtually devoid of strong party organizations and where factions formed and reformed at the drop of a hat into the electoral ring. It was a highly fluid and volatile political situation.

Note that Key characterized the various southern states with a thumbnail label:

- (1) Alabama: “Planters, Populists, and Big Mules”
- (2) Florida: “Every Man for Himself”
- (3) Georgia: “Rule of the Rustics”.(p. xi)

Finally, let us briefly recap Key’s 1949 vintage view of Arkansas which he termed: “Pure One-Party Politics” characterized by “Party Consensus and Factional Fluidity” and the “Politics of Personal Organization and Maneuver” (to adopt the chapter’s title and subtitles)(p. xii).

“It would seem that in Arkansas, more than almost any other southern state, social and economic issues of significance to the people have lain ignored in the confusion and paralysis of disorganized factional politics,”(p. 184).

“Whether Arkansas’ fluid factionalism or its issueless politics came first, or whether each feeds on the other, the upshot is a politics singularly free of anything save the petty argument and personal loyalty of the moment,”(p. 189).

My thesis for this lecture is that Key was right about the major outline of southern politics then and that his description of southern politics of the 1940s is in broad outline relevant to and characteristic of American politics in the 1980s. In other words the rest of the nation has become more like the South politically while the South was becoming more like the rest of the nation culturally.

In addition, Key was right in predicting that if the South’s politics could



change, the economy and quality of life in the South would also change—and for the better. He may have suggested the wrong causal sequence however. That is, the economy in the South may have led to the political changes as much as vice versa.

I would hypothesize that sequence (i.e. economic change stimulating political change) is partially what happened and that Key would agree with that sequence today. On the other hand, I believe the 1965 Voting Rights Act helped change the face of politics in the South with the increase in the black vote followed by increases in:

- (a) black elected officials
- (b) more moderate Southern Democrats being elected.

I think Key would review those changes, agree that is what happened empirically and approve on a value oriented basis.

### **Cultural Dissemination**

I want to briefly discuss the trends in intercultural dissemination first. The South is no longer the distinctive and unique place it was when V.O. Key wrote in the 1940s or when I grew up in Columbia County in the 1950s. All of us are familiar with the theme of “cultural homogenation” which is commonly taken to mean that the South has become more like the North.

There is much evidence of Northern intrusion into the South. This thesis is a familiar one. Pizza Huts and McDonald’s have come to Magnolia and Conway - if not yet to my native Waldo. More importantly, NBC, CBS, and ABC are the dominant cultural forces and sources of entertainment in Waldo as well as in Chicago and Carbondale.

In addition, we are all aware of the movement of Eastern and Midwestern populations to the Sunbelt. I am told that when the Texas Rangers play the Detroit Tigers in Arlington there are often as many Tiger fans in attendance as there are Ranger fans. We have all come to participate in a national popular culture where television and other media and mass entertainment are equally important and intrusive in all parts of the nation. There are very few remaining quiet little backwater sections where Bill Cosby and Tom Landry or Jane Fonda and Jerry Falwell’s names and faces remain unknown. This is what “cultural homogenization” usually means.

### **Southern Cultural Contagion**

I want to pose an alternative theory of the cultural homogenization thesis. That is, rather than focus on the usual contagion pattern of the cultural and economic influence spreading from North and West to the South - let me refocus

attention on how much the South has spread its influence to the rest of the country.

I started thinking about this when Wal Mart opened its first store in Carbon-dale. Wal Marts are now all over the Midwest and Sam Walton's stores are as much a part of the small town Midwestern scene as they are of the Southern scene.

The trends in business are like that these days. No longer is the South the quiet underdeveloped analogy to a third world country that it was in 1963 when I wrote my Master's degree thesis on the work on the Arkansas Industrial Development Commission. Factories and financial centers have shifted to the South and the Sunbelt from the north or have been native grown in those regions.

In the century after the Civil War we were the exporters of raw materials and people and the importers of manufactured goods. We served as the underdeveloped colony for the rest of the nation and suffered the economic deprivations attendant such subservient status.

It is now well recognized that much of that economic equation has changed and has shifted in ways favorable to the South and Southwest. The company a Midwestern worker labors for today is as likely to be headquartered in Dallas or Houston as in New York. The advertising jingle you hear on NBC is almost as likely to be written in Memphis or recorded in Nashville as in Los Angeles. Even the energy crisis, which has taken its toll to be sure, will not leave the South and Southwest as economically subservient as they once were.

As the South has moved into the mainstream of the nation's economy it has also moved more toward the mainstream of the nation's culture. It has influenced the culture and economy rather than always being the recipient of the influences from the North and East—as was the case through the 1950s.

### **Political Implications**

The important political point here is that those trends which have homogenized our culture and economy also have homogenized our politics. Southern politics are no longer as different as they once were. Southern Democrats in Congress largely are moderates and occasionally liberals, and usually vote like Northern Democrats — the Boll weevils notwithstanding.

Southern Republicans are like their northern and western colleagues. They are conservative but perhaps not systematically more conservative than say their western counterparts. The Congress as a body now acts like the old fragmented southern legislatures on many issues. The Congress is heavily fragmented by interest group influence and PAC money. Clearly the Congress behaves as an "every person for him or herself" body, looking first toward reelection politics and how it will play on the 6 o'clock news. In this area southern members of Congress are not noticeably different from the members from any other section.

The South also no longer deviates from the national patterns in presidential



politics. Ronald Reagan carried the South in 1984 and carried all but Georgia in 1980. Only in 1976 was there a bit of an echo of the Old South — and the Roosevelt New Deal coalition in the vote for Jimmy Carter that year. In short, in Presidential politics the South has generally joined the mainstream of American politics.

### **The Intrusion of Southern Politics on the Nation**

My major thesis is that much of the style and substance of southern politics is now the style and substance of national politics. To be specific the kinds of personalistic and imagine oriented politics that formerly marked the south is now dominant in the nation as a whole.

In addition, the political party has lost the “master cue” function for millions of the mass voters. The two parties are no longer as relevant for structuring political choices for the voters as they once were. Party identification was the central concept, and the most important explanatory variable in the classic model of the vote put forward by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan. It is important to stress that their basic model of the vote was based on research from the 1940s and 1950s. Their overall conceptual model is still the touchstone to which all subsequent research on voting behavior refers (Campbell, 1960).

Now, however, the emphasis on what are the most important explanatory variables has shifted. That is, in the mixture of party identification, issues, and candidate image, clearly party identification has declined and candidate images, and to a less extent issues have come to the front. It is interesting to note that the SRC team itself found candidate images to be the paramount explanatory variable in the 1972 Presidential election (Miller and Miller, 1975 reprinted in Abbott and Rogowsky, 1978: 163-207).

Arthur Miller and Warren Miller wrote the following based on their multiple regression study of the factors influencing the 1972 choice between McGovern and Nixon:

For the total population, all of the variables . . . had some independent effect. Clearly the most important as the assessment of the candidates . . . Ideology and issue voting . . . were also important explanations of the vote, though not as important as candidate assessments.(p. 188)

It may well be that 1972 marked the turning point in our explanations of the vote. Miller and Miller say further:

Although the 1972 election marked the first time that a substantial decline in the correlation between party identification and

the two-party presidential vote occurred, there is evidence suggesting the existence of a long-term trend toward the decreased importance of partisan attitudes as predictions of the vote and an increased importance of candidate images.”(p. 194)

Party identification staged a modest comeback in the 1976 election as Jimmy Carter temporarily rebuilt the Roosevelt New Deal Coalition. Nevertheless, this comeback, like Carter's presidency, proved to be only temporary. Ronald Reagan won a fairly easy victory in 1980 and a landslide in 1984. Scholars are still debating over whether 1980 and 1984 are “deviating elections” or mark the beginning points of an historic political realignment. Under either interpretation party identification has clearly declined or shifted dramatically in importance.

More crucial to my thesis is the increased role of candidate image. How else, except through candidate image can we explain the rejection of Carter as a candidate and as a President in 1980? How else except candidate image can we explain the mass appeal of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and especially 1984? More importantly, Reagan's mode of winning elections has extended to his style of governance. The emphasis is on rhetoric and on symbolic politics. It was a charge leveled at Carter and one that has been little noted about the Reagan Presidency.

Ronald Reagan is still running against the “liberal” federal government he has headed for over five years. Ronald Reagan has yet to submit a budget which could be taken seriously on Capitol Hill. The Reagan budgets are all campaign documents rather than realistic blueprints for our taxing and spending policies. They are designed to dramatize Reagan's philosophical abhorrence of many domestic programs and his belief that defense is the major obligation of the national government.

Another related phenomenon is the widely reported fact that Reagan's personal job approval ratings are at historic highs in his second term. These historic highs are achieved in face of related polls which show that substantial minorities - and even majorities of the American people disagree with and disapprove of his specific positions on most of the major issues. If that anomaly is not explained by the politics of personality, I don't know what is!

The politics of personality is not restricted to our presidential politics of today. Where do we get the Tommy Robinsons, and the Jesse Helms of today's political world if not via the politics of personality? Not only is their colorful and dramatic public persona the key to their getting elected, they also go out and hire a full-blown campaign organization to help them achieve election. It is well known that the political parties have become increasingly ineffectual in performing one of its major functions, i.e., the organizations of the campaigns. Public relations people, pollsters, marketing experts, and direct mail fundraisers are the new political king-makers.



## The South Rises Again

All of this should have a familiar ring to it. We have seen it all before - in southern politics! My thesis should now be clear. That is, the rest of the nation has become southernized in the way they vote and in the way they react to and evaluate their candidates and their Presidents. The candidates, in turn, now seem to be "southernized" by the way they behave once elected to office.

What matters is the colorful and flamboyant *images*. Issues are important - only in the most superficial sense - and only as they contribute to the image. Party identification is of less and less relevance in structuring the vote. The personalistic approach to politics produces a personalistic approach to government and the people react with approval for the person without any understanding of the policy and without endorsement of the program.

It is a politics of code words and using simple stereotypes to summarize complex issues and trends that many of the classic Southern demagogues of the past would be quite adept at using. It takes a slightly more sophisticated and subtle page from the book they wrote.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, my friends with the pick-up trucks and the sayings on the crown of their caps were right. The South did rise again! Southern politics are now the nation's politics. We may have lost the "War between the States" but we clearly won the long term war for political dominance.

## References

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