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Stanley P. Berard. *Southern Democrats in the U.S. House of Representatives.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001. 250 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8061-3305-8.

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The empirical work of political scientists frequently provides a valuable statistical resource for historians of the postwar South. In light of a clutch of recent works on the southern origins of recent American politics by Kevin Kruse and Matt Lassiter among others, it is worthwhile to consider the conclusions reached a few years ago by Stanley Berard in his thorough and well-argued work on the voting behavior of southern Democrats since the 1970s in the U.S. House of Representatives.[1]

Berard sets out to examine the driving forces behind the tendency, since the late 1970s, of southern Democrats to vote ever more closely with their non-southern colleagues and ever more distinctly from southern Republicans.

Berard divides the possible explanations into two groups–pressure for more partisan behavior due to changes in the way that the House of Representatives conducted its affairs, and pressure for more partisan behavior due to the political priorities of the electorate in southern congressional districts.

While not discounting the notion that changes within the House did exert some pressure, Berard convincingly argues that, given a similar increase in partisanship among southern Democrats in the Senate, institutional changes cannot account for the bulk of the change.[2]

Using a combination of data from roll call votes in Congress and National Election Survey (NES) returns, Berard tests a range of different causal factors, including urbanization, education, and size of black population, for their explanative value in determining the increased partisan unity exhibited by southern Democrats in Congress. In the process, he rejects the view that the more liberal voting record of southern Democrats resulted simply from the fact that their constituencies became more "northern" or urbanized, and now included larger nonwhite voting blocs–therefore, they were more liberal.

Berard challenges this "northern" hypothesis by arguing that, while urbanization may indeed lead to a more liberal outlook on social issues, it was not necessarily associated with liberal attitudes towards economics. Additionally, while black voters are more liberal than white voters on many issues, this is not universally so. Through the NES responses surveyed, Berard shows that on social/cultural issues not involving race, black voters are often more conservative than white voters in the South.

Rather than focus simply on the changes in the makeup of southern congressional districts as a whole, Berard instead highlights the importance of the changes within certain sub-sections of that electorate, especially what he at one point terms "the politically involved strata" (p. 198). Since at least the 1970s, political scientists have talked of the need to understand the difference between a Congressman's geographical constituents (all the voters in a district), their reelection constituents (those whose support they need in a general election) and their primary constituents (those whose support they need to win their party's nomination).[3] Berard spends a good deal of time on this latter category, and argues that a major impact on increased partisan voting in the House has been the increased polarization of party activists on an ever-rising number of issues in the South since the late 1970s (p. 92).

Berard also points out that the partisan unity exhibited by southern Democrats varied from issue to issue. The greatest level of coherence, and the earliest issues on which it became apparent, were on matters relating to economics and race. Berard argues that voters identifying themselves as southern Democrats were, from the 1970s onwards, ever more distinctly liberal on economic matters than those labeling themselves Republican. And while white southern Democrats were hardly more liberal on racial matters than Republicans, black southern Democrats were substantially more so, leading to pressure on Democrats in the House to vote the party line on racial questions.

Through the 1980s, southern Democrats in the House remained distinct from their party colleagues in terms of voting behavior on defense, social welfare, labor and civil

liberties not involving race. Beginning with the 1990s, however, Berard finds that the gap within the Democratic Party was shrinking, and that southern Democrats aligned themselves more closely with Republicans than with the rest of their party only on votes relating to defense (p. 103). This was a far cry from the old "conservative coalition" of Republicans and southern Democrats, beginning in the late 1930s, which had been a dominant force on several issues in Congress.

Berard concludes with a chapter examining the response of southern Democrats to minority status in the region and the Democratic Party's loss of Congress in 1994. Berard credits several factors with producing the Republican majority in 1994, including the creation of "minority-majority" districts to elect more black Democrats (in the process creating heavier, pro-Republican white majorities in other districts) and the GOP's ability to make the elections a national referendum on a President and national party that was unpopular in the South. However, he once again pays particular attention to the leftward drift of Democratic party activists (and rightward drift of Republican ones) on social issues in the late-1980s. By the mid-1990s, a notion had solidified in the minds of a majority of the southern electorate that the Democratic Party was socially and culturally too liberal for their tastes. Overall, Berard convincingly argues that the changing attitudes of the "politically involved strata" were as important, if not more so, in altering the voting behavior of southern Democrats in Congress than the changing attitudes of the mass southern electorate as a whole.

For political scientists and those interested in general statistical research about Congress, this book is extremely valuable. Berard's work also speaks to several wider issues, however, that historians of the South (and particularly of its politics) will find interesting. Its relevance is most obvious to what is still the central topic of works on southern politics, namely the reasons for the establishment of a Republican majority in the once "solidly" Democratic South. While Berard demonstrates that racial context does play a part in determining partisan identification for southern whites (as it clearly does for southern blacks), he argues that economics drive electoral choice. In this sense, the book is a useful precursor to the recent work by Byron Shafer and Richard Johnston, *The End of Southern Exceptionalism* (2006), which makes a similar argument.

Berard also draws attention to what is still an understudied topic in the rise of southern conservatism, namely the interaction between fundamentalism and the conservative movement. In one of the most interesting parts of the book, Berard shows that rural whites in the South are universally socially more conservative, particularly on abortion and school prayer, than urban residents, yet they are generally more economically liberal. This pattern is reversed, however, for those considering themselves fundamentalists, who, regardless of income, are likely to identify with both socially and economically conservative positions (p. 62). A fuller understanding of how this came about would add greatly to an understanding of the modern South.

Berard places political activists at the center of his analysis and, in doing so, raises questions about the locus of agency in generating political change. By emphasizing the grassroots, Berard is providing valuable assistance to the likes of Lisa McGirr and others who have of late been focusing on the role of grassroots activists in the rise of the New Right since the 1950s.[4] What remains to be done is a similarly detailed investigation of change at the grassroots level of the Democratic Party. If Berard is correct in his conclusions, then this is a critical arena of change in southern and American politics, and it is not yet satisfactorily addressed in the existing historical literature.

For all its merits and clear argument, there are some weaknesses in the book, which may well prove irksome, especially to historians. On a minor note, while the points made in the book can be understood without recourse to statistical method, those not versed in the calculations Berard uses will most likely find themselves skimming through several pages worth of tables to get to the conclusions the author wishes to make.

More problematically, for all his analysis of urbanization and its impact, there is little differentiation between "urban" and "suburban" areas–both are treated as "urban" in this work, and yet the role of a rising suburban population in the South should not be understated. There is also the question of the direction of political transformation. Berard rejects the idea of a "northernization" of the southern electorate, but does not address the question (raised periodically since the 1970s at least) of whether the non-southern electorate has, in John Egerton's terms, perhaps been "southernized."[5]

In fact, readers may query whether the tripartite distinction between "southern Democrats," "Republicans" and "northern Democrats" is really all that viable. These were the three blocs used to calculate the "conservative coalition," but are all Democrats outside of the former Confederacy that similar? Do Democratic Congressmen from the Mountain West respond to the same con-

stituency pressures and vote the same way as those in urban New England? Berard's work is clearly intended to tackle the issue of Democrats from the South, so this is less a complaint than a curiosity, but one does wonder how the findings would have changed if the categories of "non-southern" Democrats had been broken down as well.

Finally, as is the case with many empirical works, it would have been nice to have some more actual people and events as case studies of the process which Berard describes. He does mention occasional specific votes in Congress, but everything else is a highly impersonal and mechanistic process. How did "constituency pressures," or activist outlook, effect the decisions of southern Democrats in how to vote on the Martin Luther King Jr. Federal Holiday? The Reagan tax cuts of the early 1980s do come up for discussion, but the actual people involved remain essentially nameless, giving the impression that they are simply at the mercy of larger forces they cannot control. It is at times similar to trying to establish the decisive moments in a baseball game based purely on a printout of the statistics, without any description of the action or the players.

There is no doubt, however, that Berard's work is a valuable addition to the literature on southern and American politics, and that it provides plenty of food for thought not only for further historical study, but also for contemporary political issues.

Notes

[1]. Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

[2]. For a discussion of the change in the Senate, see M. V. Hood III, Quentin Kidd and Irwin L. Morris, "Of Byrds and Bumpers: Using Democratic Senators to Analyze Political Change in the South, 1960-1995," *American Journal of Political Science* 43, no. 2 (1999), pp. 465-487.

[3]. Richard Fenno, *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts* (Boston: Little Brown, 1978).

[4]. Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[5]. John Egerton, *The Americanization of Dixie: The Southernization of America* (New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1974).

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