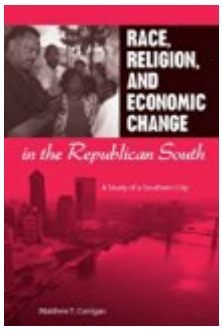
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Matthew T. Corrigan. *Race, Religion, and Economic Change in the Republican South: A Case Study of a Southern City.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007. ix + 146 pp. $55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-3160-6.

Reviewed by Marcella Washington

Published on H-Urban (March, 2008)

The phenomenal rise of the Republican Party in Southern politics is documented, examined, and explained in Matthew T. Corrigan's book. Using case study methodology, Corrigan focuses on the city of Jacksonville, Florida (population at nearly 840,500, using the 2004 census update). Corrigan describes the racial makeup of Jacksonville as 64 percent white, 28 percent black, and 8 percent other. Jacksonville is suitable for this study because it is a Southern city with a history of racial strife and oppression. Moreover, just like the South in general, the city of Jacksonville is growing in the number of African Americans, Republicans, and non-Southerners. Corrigan projects, "These factors are good indicators that a study of the political trends of Jacksonville/Duval County can give the reader insights into what is happening in the region as a whole" (p. 24). Three variables inform the research: race, religion, and economic change. Although not as charged as race relations, religious affiliation and activity, as well as economic change, are also characteristic of Jacksonville, the largest city in the state of Florida. The author uses a series of questionnaires, a historical perspective of Southern politics, and statistics to validate his case study.

Corrigan observes the nature of Southern politics and culture in a contemporary setting. The rise of the Republican Party in the South coincided with passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Corrigan explains that by 1972, Jacksonville voters began leaning Republican at the presidential level, but maintained the Democrats at the local level. Ronald Reagan's 1980 presidential victory energized Southern Republicans and accelerated the party's rise. Jacksonville elected a Republican mayor in 1995. That election was a turning point. Jacksonville has been dominated by Republican politicians ever since. Southern Republicans--comfortable with framing issues in a moral context--captured and promoted religiosity in order to secure votes. This practice has helped to secure popular majorities for the Republican Party in the South. Corrigan adds vital information on the growth and diversity of the economy in the New South. Southern cities, characterized by low taxes and cheap labor, provide an attractive location for business and industry.

In 1968, at the peak of the civil rights movement, and as African Americans in Jacksonville were reaching majority status, the city and the county joined, forming a consolidated government. Consolidation resulted in dilution of African American voters. Corrigan writes, "By adding the surrounding growing suburbs to the city/county, Jacksonville's racial dynamics changed forever. The nearly 50 percent decline in the proportion of African American voters in Jacksonville reshaped politics in the region" (p. 34). Partisan politics shifted from Democratic to Republican, with race the defining characteristic. At the present time, there are no white Democrats holding elective office in Jacksonville. Corrigan explains, "While some black Republican officials have had success running for office, most elected Republicans are white, and most elected Democrats are black" (p. 41).

A striking example of the consolidation of power in the hands of white Republicans in Jacksonville was played out in the 2000 presidential election. While George W. Bush handily carried the city of Jacksonville over Al Gore, 58 percent to 41 percent respectively, more than 27,000 votes were discarded. These undervotes (when the machine does not detect a choice for a candidate) and overvotes (the machine detects votes for more than one candidate) came from the predominantly black Democratic inner city. The ballot was two pages long, with ten presidential candidates listed. Voter confusion resulted. There were also discrepancies between instructions printed on the sample ballot versus the actual ballot. In the face of African American protest over the irregularities, the elected Republican supervisor of elections blamed the voters for not being responsible and not following instructions. Given the fact that George W. Bush carried the state of Florida by less than 600 votes, Corrigan's assertion that it was probably in Jacksonville that Al Gore lost the election in Florida makes sense.

Jacksonville has more than 300 places of worship. Religion is taken seriously in the city and is reflected in the political culture. Matthew Corrigan recalls the thirty-ninth Super Bowl held in Jacksonville in 2005: "With media from all over the country converging on the city, local churches gathered their members and marched downtown to remind their followers not to enjoy too much revelry" (p. 63). There is a growing Catholic presence in the city, which Corrigan finds would not have been possible thirty years ago. Despite the historically tense relations between Catholics and evangelical Protestants, a new alliance has been forged. Corrigan states that these two groups now join forces to oppose abortion and gay marriage. Republican politicians openly appeal to white church members on moral or social issues, such as gay marriage and abortion, in the vast number of churches, the most numerous being Baptist. These same politicians are not pressured to address other social issues such as poverty, racial inequities, and fair housing, because of the racial composition of the mostly white Republican Party. Moreover, Corrigan documents connections between white and black churchgoers on religious values: these include the high value placed on political leaders holding moral/religious beliefs, and the need for morality in politics. However the groups disagree as to which party should lead on moral and social issues, as well as which issues should dominate in the political arena.

Most churches in the city of Jacksonville are racially segregated. Corrigan adds that these churches are now the source of political segregation: Democrats attend black churches, Republicans attend white churches. As the need for more government programs and actions to assist African Americans trapped in the inner city continues to grow, many white Southern churches are restructuring in order to offer social services to their congregants. Corrigan observes, "The very organizational structure of churches in the South has made government action less necessary and less wanted among some churchgoers" (p. 81).

Corrigan notes that most Baptist and other evangelical churches offer a wide range of assistance to members, from preschool programs to after-school activities, to activities for senior citizens. The socialization of church members is further enhanced by these programs and, as Corrigan suggests, "may make white Christian conservatives the bedrock of the Republican Party for years to come" (p. 82). With increased advances made by white churches into politics and public-policy decisions, African American congregants and their leaders are segregated and isolated in a political atmosphere dominated by white Republicans who are not necessarily sympathetic to their issues, needs, and concerns.

Jacksonville is home to two military bases, a vibrant port, and the St. Johns River, which has been a source of economic activity for the city. Banking, real estate, construction, and technology-driven jobs have given Jacksonville a diversified economy. Corrigan divides the Jacksonville labor market into two categories: low-level service jobs and jobs that require high levels of education and skills. In Jacksonville, the disparity in income is understood in terms of race. The per capita income of white residents is 47 percent higher than that of blacks, according to the source that Corrigan cites (p. 93). Some new residents pouring into the city come from other parts of the country, but others come from the South. Corrigan explains that these new Southerners are younger and better educated than those native to the city.

Corrigan notes another racial component in the economy of Jacksonville: low-income whites identify closely with the Republican Party while low-income blacks identify strongly with Democrats. The Republican Party's image as being pro-business and anti-union is evident in Jacksonville. In Corrigan's survey, when asked if unions or business were favored in labor disputes, white respondents supported business, while the black respondents favored labor.

As the economic status of the South changes, Corrigan wonders how Republicans will govern and how they will address issues of poverty, education, and low wages. Democrats must also show that they can implement economic policies that will maintain the growth of business, as well as address poverty and other pressing social concerns. Corrigan does not see a way for the Democrats to succeed. He writes, "There are no arrows left in the current Democratic quiver. This dynamic must change for Democrats to become viable again in the region" (p. 104).

Matthew T. Corrigan's study is a work of art, a picture painted in black and white over a region of the nation that is red. His book, ***Race, Religion, and Economic Change in the Republican South: A Case Study of a Southern City***, is a major contribution to the literature on Southern urban politics. We are challenged with the facts that race, religion, and economic change will continue to be dominant issues in the region for some time to come.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban

Citation: Marcella Washington. Review of Corrigan, Matthew T. *Race, Religion, and Economic Change in the Republican South: A Case Study of a Southern City.* H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. March, 2008.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14270