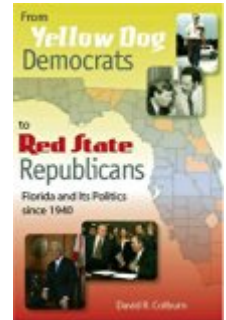


David R. Colburn. *From Yellow Dog Democrats to Red State Republicans: Florida and Its Politics since 1940.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007. x + 262 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-3155-2.



Reviewed by Seth A. Weitz

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Florida has long remained an enigma, confounding scholars who attempt to study and analyze the state's history. Throughout its history, Floridians have strived to create an identity for the state based on other states and even foreign nations. The fact that Florida is today and always has been a unique entity that never completely fit in with its neighboring Deep South states has led numerous historians and political scientists to study the state. David R. Colburn, noted scholar of Florida politics and history, has produced another insightful look into Florida politics. His latest work, *From Yellow Dog Democrats to Red State Republicans*, is an attempt to explore the complexities that make up Florida's political history and explain why and how the Democratic Party lost power in the late twentieth century, a power that it had maintained since the end of Reconstruction in 1877.

In his introduction, Colburn notes that for forty years, beginning in 1940, Florida gradually abandoned its southern "past," which he refers to as "racist" traditions (p. 6). While this is partially an accurate statement, it is somewhat misleading.

Floridians did not discover race or racism as a political tool in 1940, nor did they abandon it. Race and the idea of white supremacy and hegemony had been used in Florida as early as the antebellum period as means for the slave owning aristocracy to protect their business ventures and political interests, and would be continued to be employed by the ideological descendents of these groups well into the latter half of the past century.

Throughout the book, Colburn overlooks or downplays the efforts of rural northern and central Florida politicians, many of whom made up the ranks of the Pork Chop Gang, to use ignominious tactics, such as racism, to maintain power. In fact, one of the shortcomings of an otherwise excellent study is the lack of attention given to the Johns Committee, officially known as the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee (FLIC). FLIC was a reaction to the growing changes in Florida's demographics, as well as to the profound shifts in Florida's population in the twentieth century. Their efforts were a last gasp attempt to stave off change. Although these omissions could likely be explained by the fact that Colburn's work covers

over sixty years of Florida politics, this issue should be explored deeper since one cannot downplay its significance. The work of the Johns Committee and other tactics employed by the Pork Chop Gang in the 1950s and 1960s mirror those used by the Bourbon Democrats during and immediately after Reconstruction when conservative northern Florida Democrats sought to redeem the state from Republican rule; this connection is vital to understanding Florida's political history.

While Colburn does a good job explaining the malapportioned legislative districts that were created and protected by the state's 1885 constitution, he again overlooks the importance that race and, more specifically, racism played in what was a century-long struggle by conservative Democrats to maintain their stranglehold over the state's political system. He also does not even mention the 1885 constitution until the end of the first chapter, which is odd considering this document cemented the power of the northern Florida Democrats (p. 35). At times, Colburn is also repetitive, especially in the introduction and first chapter where he is extremely focused on explaining his argument to the reader.

Colburn is at his best when describing the impact that retirees, Cuban and Latin American immigrants and exiles, and liberals from the Northeast and fiscal conservatives from the Midwest had on the state during the twentieth century. His analysis and in-depth breakdown of the various gubernatorial contests from the 1940s through the present shed light on how Floridians not only chose their governors, but, more important, how power shifted from the Democrats to the Republican Party. He also succeeds in highlighting the change in ideology of not only the parties but the voters as well. One of the more interesting segments of his work is the speculations he provides on what path Florida will take in the future. He does this, while at the same time noting that no one can make accurate predictions since Florida's demographics and politics are ever-changing. In

this regard, Colburn sums up the political history of Florida, allowing readers to understand how complex the state's politics are and likely will remain in the future.

While Colburn relies heavily on secondary sources, he makes good use of various archives and collections as well as the U.S. Census Bureau to relay his argument. In spite of the fact that Colburn's work is full of statistics and in-depth examinations of election results and population shifts, *From Yellow Dog Democrats to Red State Republicans* is not a book that only historians, political scientists, or serious scholars will enjoy and comprehend. Colburn's writing style is extremely effective, and this book is a useful resource for anyone interested in Florida's politics, both past and present.

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