

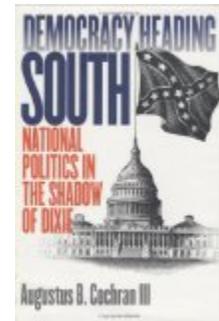
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Augustus B. Cochran, III. *Democracy Heading South: National Politics in the Shadow of Dixie.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001. x + 307 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1089-1.

Kari Frederickson. *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South, 1932-1968.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. ix + 311 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4910-1; \$65.00 (library), ISBN 978-0-8078-2594-5.

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Nationalizing the South's Politics

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The end of one-party rule and the rise of the Republican Party in the American South has had a marked effect on national politics, and as a result, the study of southern politics has become a veritable cottage industry. Historians have studied the remarkable changes in the South's society, its economy, and its relationship with the rest of the country, and political scientists have examined the structural and institutional shifts in the region's politics. These two works being reviewed seek to explain a portion of this story, as Kari Frederickson examines the role that the Dixiecrats played in fracturing the Solid South and Augustus B. Cochran III draws some parallels between southern politics in the Jim Crow era and national political conditions of the late twentieth century.

Most readers are familiar with the story of the 1948 presidential campaign and the Dixiecrats' role in that election. Frederickson goes beyond the traditional story of the election to explore the motives of the Dixiecrats, their campaign strategy, and the longer-term repercussions of their bolt from the Democratic Party. "The Dixiecrats," she argues, "were a reactionary protest organization comprised of economically conservative, segregationist southern Democrats who sought to reclaim their former prestige and ideological prominence in a party that had moved away from them" (p. 5). Predominantly

from the South's black belt counties, these individuals saw the Democratic Party's gradual movement toward supporting civil rights for African-Americans as a threat to their political control in their states and their influence in national politics. Moreover, Frederickson argues, black belt whites were uncomfortable with the increasing pace of social and economic change in the years following World War II.

Frederickson begins by summarizing southern reactions to the New Deal, emphasizing both the conservative nature of the region's political leaders and a growing grassroots movement that supported economic and electoral reform. She traces the increased racial tensions that arose during World War II. The growing pressure on the part of African-Americans for voting and other civil rights, the return of war veterans of both races to the South, and the rise of a new group of political leaders combined to make southern social relations ever more tense. The emergence of civil rights in the 1948 presidential election proved to be the spark that destabilized the whole system.

The next three chapters form the core of the book, as they detail the events leading up to the Dixiecrat bolt from the 1948 Democratic Convention and the ensuing presidential campaign. President Truman's endorsement of many proposals in *To Secure These Rights*, the report of

the President's Committee on Civil Rights, came scarcely a week before a previously scheduled meeting of the southern governors. While unified in their anger at Truman, most of the governors refused to commit to any revolt against the national party (p. 79). Mississippi and Alabama Democrats took the lead in supporting action against the national Democrats. The more they resisted, Frederickson finds, the more the nascent Dixiecrats discovered how disunited southerners were on the question of charting their own course away from the Democratic Party (p. 117)

The Dixiecrats emerged from their Birmingham convention with candidates for President and Vice President, but there was still confusion about the wisdom of their action. Some of the principals in formulating early strategy, including Arkansas Governor Ben Laney, felt that the best way to defeat "the civil rights plank was through the state Democratic organizations, not a third party" (p. 138) The candidates could not even agree on whether they were nominated for President and Vice President or as Wright claimed, men who were "recommended to the Democratic parties in the various states as men suitable..." for election (p. 139). Their immediate challenge was to organize a campaign and secure a place on the ballot in each state.

Frederickson argues that from the beginning, a clean sweep of the South by the Dixiecrats was unlikely. In chapter 5, she analyzes the political situation in most of the states where the Dixiecrats made a serious campaign, outlining the conditions in each that helped determine the outcome in that state. As their campaign got underway, the Dixiecrats found that the system their ancestors had helped create at the end of the Populist era worked against them in 1948 as they sought to take over their states' Democratic parties. Within each state, the Dixiecrats wanted to be listed as the Democratic Party nominee. Where the Dixiecrat faction controlled the state Democratic Party machinery, Strom Thurmond and Fielding Wright took the place of Harry Truman and Alben Barkley on the Democratic ticket. However, in most southern states, the Dixiecrats did not control the party machinery, and in those states, Dixiecrats had to secure an independent spot on the ballot. They had to spend valuable resources in this effort, and additionally, they had to convince voters in those states to vote for someone who was not on the Democratic ticket (p. 167). Frederickson describes these battles in some detail, recognizing that the interpretation and enforcement of political rules is an important structural aspect of the story.

The campaign was difficult for other reasons, not the least of which was the presidential candidate. "Thurmond's love of the campaign trail," Frederickson argues, "arose from political egocentrism rather than a desire to build a viable and lasting political movement" (p. 170). Frederickson argues that Thurmond did not take well to being managed, and that in 1948 he was not quite the "poster boy for white supremacy" for which he later gained a reputation (p. 170). She argues, persuasively, that Thurmond was more of a pro-development, good-government politician who espoused a different brand of conservatism than the Mississippi and Alabama Dixiecrats. Thurmond recognized that it would be difficult to formulate a broader conservative platform that went beyond race, yet Frederickson argues that he attempted to develop one. And the language that Thurmond used foreshadowed the combination of segregation, anti-communism, and distrust of big government that would gel in the 1960s (p. 171). In terms of the development of southern political language for the last half of the twentieth century, this may be the most significant point in the book.

After the Democratic victory in 1948, national Democrats and southern Democrats who had not bolted the party were left to decide how to treat their wayward brethren. With Truman's re-election came a Democratic congressional victory, which returned many rebellious southerners to powerful committee chairmanships. Not surprisingly, none of the bolters were punished for fear that attempts at retribution would boomerang on the loyalists (p. 189). Frederickson concludes with a chapter analyzing presidential politics in the South in the twenty years after the 1948 election. The South during these years presented anything but a solid front to the rest of the country. While Strom Thurmond quickly retreated from the party and refused to remain its titular leader, others wanted to keep their options open. Ultimately, Frederickson concludes that the 1948 election marked the end of the South's allegiance to the Democratic Party and launched a period of wild swings in black belt voting patterns.

One of the more intriguing arguments that Frederickson presents is a gendered interpretation of the Dixiecrat movement. Examining the political rhetoric in a number of their speeches, she finds they used "familial metaphors and gendered scenarios to play to the deep-seated fears and paranoia of white southerners..." (p. 96). Southern whites had represented (at least in their own minds) the masculine group within the Democratic Party, but increasingly, they came to see themselves as pow-

erless and unwanted “red-headed step-children” or “illegitimate children” (p. 99). The Dixiecrats also viewed themselves as the abused wife in the Democratic marriage, as Frederickson demonstrates by including one group’s adaptation of a song about wife-beating, “Slap us down again, Pres.” (p. 99). For this reason, Strom Thurmond made an attractive candidate, as Frederickson notes, his persona combining “a political outsider’s fighting rhetoric with personal sexual potency” (p. 102). In other words, for a group of white southern men concerned about their waning power, Strom Thurmond was a dose of political Viagra.

It seems that politicians like Strom Thurmond, James F. Byrnes, and many of their close associates in South Carolina were really proto-Republicans. Perhaps this is more visible in hindsight, but when they were “cut free from the moorings,” as Frederickson suggests, they were looking for some political organization to lead (p. 217). South Carolina’s Democratic Party was dominated by the Barnwell Ring, which hailed from the lowcountry black belt. While segregationist in outlook, they were mostly Democratic loyalists bent on controlling the state for the benefit of their small counties. By the early 1950s, there was no room for Thurmond (who many Barnwell Ring members disliked) in the state’s Democratic leadership. His 1954 write-in victory in a U.S. Senate race was, even more than his Dixiecrat bid for president, his declaration of independence from the Democratic Party. While Frederickson demonstrates some of the opposition of white liberals and African-Americans to Thurmond’s candidacy, she omits the opposition of many leading South Carolina Democratic politicians to Thurmond.

Augustus Cochran’s *Democracy Heading South* starts with the claim that southern politics of the Jim Crow era and modern American politics have a number of parallels. His principal argument is that America’s political and electoral institutions “for all sorts of complicated and interrelated reasons, are coming increasingly to resemble the irrational and undemocratic politics of the old Solid South” (p. 2). He defines southern politics in the Jim Crow era as a system of one-party domination, meaningless elections, anti-democratic rule by a group of elites, and manipulation by those men to preserve white supremacy. Recent political trends throughout the country, Cochran argues, have shown an “absence of healthy party competition, low participation in politics, and racialized campaigns...” (p. 3).

Cochran devotes the first portion of the book to an exploration of southern political history. He relies heavily

on the work of V. O. Key, using *Southern Politics in State and Nation* as the basis for much of his analysis. He argues, as did Key, that “politics is the South’s number one problem,” as it was at the root of all the other problems.[1] Cochran takes this a step further, arguing that “Politics is now the number one problem of the United States” (p. 22). In the second chapter, he traces the creation of a system that saw black belt whites take control of southern politics and exclude large numbers of potential voters from participating in the political process. He describes a system that was at the same time authoritarian and disorganized. As a result, politics focused on personalities, and on occasions where politics focused on issues, it was only in the most general way possible. Issueless, partyless campaigns meant that voters could not hold politicians responsible for what few campaign promises they made once they were in office, Cochran argues. This undemocratic region, he concludes, was “a plague on national political life,” as it undermined the nation’s moral position abroad and distorted party competition at home (p. 49).

Cochran argues that since the Civil Rights movement, a “dual convergence” has taken place, where both north and south have adopted attributes of the other’s political systems. This has been accomplished partly by migration, partly by economic change, partly by educational improvements, and partly by political changes surrounding the Second Reconstruction. He examines two states, North Carolina and Georgia, as examples of the South’s move to Republicanism. By the early 1990s, before the 1994 Republican Revolution, Cochran argues that the South had experienced a “split-level realignment,” or perhaps a de-alignment, where Republicans won races at the top of the ticket and Democrats at the local level (pp. 83, 143).

The second part of the book explores trends in recent American politics. >From the beginning, Cochran does not suggest that the “southernization” of American politics has come about because of the increased number of southerners in leadership positions in the federal government; he suggests this is a symptom rather than a cause. It seems as though he blames the system of money, marketing, and media for the problems in our political system (p. 147). He argues that politicians outside the South adopted racialized themes in their campaign speeches (p. 164). National politics moved rightward, and Democratic presidents Carter and Clinton, Cochran suggests, adopted many “Republican” positions while in office. He observes the disappointment and frustration that liberals feel because of this (p. 176). Cochran con-

cludes with the observation that the roots of democracy must be nurtured, for otherwise, the South's past may become America's future. "The substance of democracy can be lost even while the trappings of democracy are retained," he writes (p. 205). The final chapter is a call for a more participatory, deliberative, responsible, popular, and organized democracy.

While Cochran makes a number of interesting arguments, this book seems to take the form of an extended opinion piece. The book, while a good summary of the writings of political scientists and journalists about American politics, contains little in the way of statistical or documentary evidence to support his arguments. He argues that both the Jim Crow South and modern America share a narrow electoral base, but a modern American's decision to abstain from voting is quite a different thing from barring an African-American from the polls before the civil rights movement. It is hard to see how the comparison is useful, though I understand that the effect of both situations is to limit voter participation (p. 157).

Cochran passes up an opportunity to discuss the effects of suburbanization on southern and national politics. Perhaps he felt it was outside the scope of his book, but it seems that the suburbanization of American politics is a trend that transcends region. Many of the southern Republicans he mentions most prominently, including Newt Gingrich, Bob Barr, Tom DeLay, and Dick Armey, hail not from traditional rural southern districts, but from the suburbs of the South's major urban centers. In fact, suburban Atlanta's trio of Gingrich, Barr, and John Linder, as well as Dallas's Armey, were all born outside of the South. Seeing how both parties target suburban voters in their campaigns, and an analysis of how the growth of a southern suburban middle class affected campaigning in the South, could have fit within the scope of his book.

The book also contains a number of small errors, either of identification (for example, he refers to Oklahoma congressman J. C. Watts as J. W. Watt on page 181) or of chronology (on page 148 he refers to the Campaign Reform Act of 1972 when I think he probably means the 1974 Federal Election Campaign Act, passed after Watergate).

Both of these books examine how southern politics and political change are reflected in the development of modern American politics, and as such they have some similarities. Both books raise serious questions about the viability of the concept of the "solid south." Frederick-

son's detailed explanation of political conditions in several states shows a fluid situation in many of them, with shifting alliances and factional infighting for control of the Democratic Party and of state government. What makes the Solid South solid, it seems, is that its representatives in Congress tried to present a united front in Washington.

Both authors express degrees of disappointment with certain aspects of southern politics.[2] As she discusses the rejection of challenges from various African-American and liberal white delegates by the Democratic National Convention's credentials committee, Frederickson says "party leaders set the tone for the postwar era by squandering this opportunity to strike a blow against oppression in the South" (p. 119). It seems unlikely that the Democratic Convention could have been expected to take any other action; considering the south's visceral reaction to Truman's relatively moderate position on civil rights, a decision to seat opposing (and black) delegations would have driven even more southern voters away from the Democrats.

Likewise, Cochran's book clearly expresses his disappointment with the way that modern southern and American politics has developed. He forthrightly states in the book's introduction that his "political values color the points" he makes, and that he was not willing to disguise them in search of a "value free sense of objectivity" (p. 4).

While the 1948 race has become something of a favorite for historians and journalists to recount because of Truman's surprising come-from-behind victory and because of his "whistle-stop" train campaign, perhaps it is more important as an early example of a modern political campaign. Thurmond's speeches are great examples of how to attack an opponent, and many of them sound like speeches other southern Republicans have given in recent years. Perhaps Thurmond realized more quickly than most southern politicians that the combination of anti-communism with other wedge issues could be a potent campaign tool.

Both these books demonstrate that the study of southern political history continues to thrive and can contribute further to the understanding of modern American society. In particular, Frederickson presents a picture of southern politics that is complicated, differs from state to state, and reflects trends that we today may observe in our own political system.

Notes

- [1]. V. O. Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York: Knopf, 1949), p. 3.
- [2]. David L. Carlton, "Review of Numan V. Bartley, *The New South, 1945-1980*," H-South, H-Net Reviews, March, 1997. URL: <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?~path=14684858516199>.

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