

How the GOP Conquered the South

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The greatest change in American national politics of the past 60 years has been the transformation of the South from the most solidly Democratic to the most solidly Republican region of the country. In the 1930s and 1940s, Democrats enjoyed a strong advantage in presidential elections because they could count on winning the 127 electoral votes cast by the 11 states of the old Confederacy. Congress was almost always Democratic because Democrats owned all 22 Southern seats in the Senate and all but a couple of the South's 105 seats in the House of Representatives. In other words, the Democrats began every election nearly halfway to the finish line.

Consider how much has changed. In 2004 John F. Kerry ran up a 252–133 electoral-vote lead over George W. Bush outside the South but lost the election because the South went 153–0 for Bush. In the current Congress, although Democrats from non-Southern states outnumber Republican non-Southerners by 41–37 in the Senate and 154–150 in the House, the GOP has converted its Southern majorities—82–49 in the House and 18–4 in the Senate—into control of both chambers. The South not only switched parties from the 1940s to 2000, but it also became, because of rapid population growth, a bigger political prize.

The 2004 election was no fluke. The GOP has won seven of the last 10 presidential elections (interestingly, the three Democratic victories belonged to Southerners, Jimmy Carter of Georgia in 1976 and Bill Clinton of Arkansas in 1992 and 1996), and it has controlled both houses of Congress since 1994, the longest period of Republican legislative dominance since the 1920s. John Roberts's confirmation as chief justice of the United States is just the latest example of how control of the presidency and the Senate has also enabled the Republicans to populate the third branch of government, the judiciary. Since 1968 Republican presidents have made 10 of 12 Supreme Court appointments, along with 65 percent of all federal appeals-court appointments and 62 percent of all district-court appointments.

The new Republican majority did not come about through a sudden and dramatic realigning election like the ones in 1860 and 1932. Instead, there has been what Karl Rove calls a “rolling” (or, to use a preferred term of political scientists, a “secular”) realignment in which the GOP has gradually

become home to the great majority of Southern white voters of all social and economic classes.

The tale of how the South's secular Republican realignment came about can be understood in large part through three recent books, each of them by or about a major southern GOP leader: *Strom: The Complicated Personal and Political Life of Strom Thurmond*, by Jack Bass and Marilyn W. Thompson; *Here's Where I Stand: A Memoir*, by Jesse Helms; and *Herding Cats: A Life in Politics*, by Trent Lott. The well-researched Thurmond biography is illuminating because of—and Helms's and Lott's self-serving memoirs despite—what the authors have to say.

The story of the South's Republican transformation begins in 1948, even though the national Democratic majority that Franklin D. Roosevelt built in the 1930s was then in the midst of winning its fifth consecutive presidential election, and the Republicans weren't competitive in a single Southern state. FDR's New Deal coalition was a complex assemblage, constituted differently in different parts of the country. In the North, it rested on the support of groups that Roosevelt himself had helped to attract into the Democratic fold: blue-collar workers, Roman Catholic and Jewish voters, ideological liberals, and African-Americans.

The Southern part of the New Deal coalition—essentially, every white voter in a region where, in most counties, only whites could vote—was one that Roosevelt inherited. The South was solidly Democratic because of the antipathy Southern whites had developed during Reconstruction toward the occupying Republicans and their agenda of civil rights for the newly freed slaves. Thurmond, Helms, and Lott were heirs to this tradition. Each of them was a politically active Democrat before he became a Republican.

Despite the Democrats' majority status, a fault line ran through their coalition: The interests of integrationist blacks and segregationist Southern whites were clearly not harmonious. As long as African-Americans did not press a civil-rights agenda on the federal government, this fault line remained unexposed and, therefore, politically insignificant. But in the aftermath of World War II, returning black veterans who had fought against racism and tyranny abroad increasingly

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demanded federal protection for their civil rights at home. Northern liberals and labor-union leaders supported those demands.

Forced to choose between the Northern and Southern wings of his party, President Harry S. Truman reluctantly accepted a strong civil-rights plank in the 1948 Democratic platform. He won the election, but only at the price of a crack appearing in the solidly Democratic South. From 1932 to 1944, FDR had carried every Southern state in all four elections. In 1948, however, Georgia stayed with Truman, but the other four Deep South states—Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina—cast their electoral votes for Democratic Gov. Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, the nominee of the rebellious Southern Democrats who had walked out of their party's pro-civil-rights convention and formed the States' Rights Party, or Dixiecrats.

Curiously, Thurmond had risen through the ranks of South Carolina politics as a strong advocate for improving the public schools that served both races, so much so that Bass and Thompson title their chapter on his governorship "Progressive Outlook, Progressive Program, Progressive Leadership." As a public-school teacher and, at age 26, the winner of an election that made him the youngest county superintendent of education in the state, Thurmond crusaded for adult literacy, especially among African-Americans. But the educational improvements Thurmond wanted to make were to schools that he insisted remain segregated. Truman's 1948 civil-rights program not only took Thurmond by surprise—he had actually endorsed Truman for re-election the year before—but also spurred him to run against the president.

In 1954, after the Supreme Court ruled segregated public schools unconstitutional in *Brown v. Board of Education*, Thurmond ran a write-in campaign for senator. He won, the only write-in candidate in the history of Congress ever to do so, and soon established himself as the South's angriest face of opposition to civil rights. "Listen to ol' Strom," said South Carolina's other senator, the Democrat Olin Johnston, as Thurmond waged a 24 hour and 18 minute filibuster against the rather weak 1957 Civil Rights Act. "He really believes all that shit."

All of the Deep South states that Thurmond carried returned to the Democratic fold in the 1952 and 1956 presidential elections, when the party muted its commitment to civil rights for the sake of unity. But by then a new crack had appeared in the Democratic South, this one along economic lines. The Republican candidate in both elections, Dwight D. Eisenhower, did well in the six states of the Peripheral South—Arkansas, Florida, North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia—where racial issues mattered somewhat less and, as metropolitan areas began to grow rapidly after World War II, the GOP's pro-business policies mattered more. Eisenhower carried all of the Peripheral South states except Arkansas and North Carolina both times he ran.

The Republican breakthroughs in the South proved to be enduring. In 1960 the GOP presidential candidate, Richard M. Nixon, lost the election but carried half of the Peripheral South. Four years later Sen. Barry Goldwater of Arizona, a prominent opponent of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, won all five Deep South states, including, with Thurmond's strong support, South Carolina. (The only other state Goldwater carried in losing overwhelmingly to President Lyndon B. Johnson was Arizona.) Thurmond not only campaigned for Goldwater but became a Republican, leading an exodus into the GOP that many of his fellow white Southerners joined. Starting with Goldwater in 1964, the Republican nominee has outpolled his Democratic opponent among Southern white voters in every presidential election.

The 1968 election took place in a changed political environment. Because of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, both championed by President Johnson, African-Americans in the South were newly enfranchised and enjoyed federal protection against many forms of racial discrimination. In reaction, a strong Southern Democratic opponent of civil rights, Alabama governor George C. Wallace, bid for the support of Southern whites in hopes of denying both major party candidates a majority of electoral votes and throwing the election into the House of Representatives. Polls showed him leading Nixon, the GOP nominee, and Democratic Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey in every Southern state. Thurmond, however, stood solidly by Nixon, touring the South to argue that "a vote for Wallace is a vote for Humphrey." "Strom killed us," Bass and Thompson quote Wallace's campaign manager, Tom Turnipseed, as saying. Although Wallace carried most of the Deep South, Nixon carried South Carolina and nearly all of the Peripheral South, enough to win the election.

During his first term as president, Nixon labored to bring Wallace's supporters into his 1972 re-election coalition. His efforts to use issues such as law and order and opposition to school busing to graft white support from all parts of the South onto the traditional Midwestern Republican base were rewarded on election day. Nixon swept the South, carrying every state in the region by majorities ranging from 65 percent to 78 percent.

The success of Republican presidential candidates in the South began to be echoed in other Southern elections. The infusion of millions of loyally Democratic African-American voters into the Southern electorate in the late 1960s made the party more liberal and drove many conservative whites into the GOP in Congressional and state as well as presidential elections. The number of Republican senators in the 22-member Southern delegation rose from 0 as recently as 1960 to 3 in 1966, 7 in 1972, 11 in 1982, 13 in 1994, and 18 in 2004. Similar gains occurred in Southern elections to the House, where the Republican ranks grew from 7 percent of Southern members in 1960 to 22 percent in 1966, 29 percent

in 1982, 51 percent in 1994, and 63 percent in 2004. In elections to state office, the number of Republican governors increased from 0 to 7 of 11 from 1960 to 2004. Republicans did not control a single Southern state legislative house as recently as the late 1960s; they now control half of them.

Two of the Southern Republicans who rode Nixon's 1972 coattails into Congress were Helms, the first Republican elected to the Senate from North Carolina since Reconstruction, and Lott, the first post-Reconstruction Republican from Mississippi to win a seat in the House. Like Thurmond, Helms and Lott were active Democrats before they migrated into the Republican Party—indeed, each had worked in Washington for one of his state's conservative Democratic legislators. "I'm tired of the Muskies and the Kennedys and the Humphreys and the whole lot," Lott said when he publicly announced his conversion.

Once in the Republican fold, each in his way helped to solidify the GOP's hold on Southern white voters. The rough-edged, goggle-eyed Helms, who quickly became the Senate's leading conservative gadfly on issues like defunding the National Endowment for the Arts, resisting the creation of the Martin Luther King holiday, and keeping the Panama Canal in U.S. hands, led the Republican campaign to win rural and blue-collar support based on these and other cultural and religious appeals. Lott, the blow-dried (he has a chapter in *Herding Cats* called "Hair: An Issue for Our Time") veteran of fraternity politics at Ole Miss, used his growing influence as House minority whip and Senate majority leader to promote conservative economic policies that reinforced Republican loyalties among the South's business and professional classes.

Helms based his 1972 Senate candidacy less on his erratic career as a newspaper and radio reporter in Raleigh, staff member for conservative Democratic Sen. Willis Smith, executive director of the North Carolina Bankers Association, and news director of WRAL-TV in Raleigh than on the enemies he had attacked during 12 years of nightly five-minute editorials that aired on WRAL and, through syndication, on many of the state's radio stations. The University of North Carolina was one of Helms's favorite editorial targets. As far as he was concerned, UNC was an arrogant bastion of Northern radicalism on issues like civil rights and communism. "The word from Chapel Hill," he said in one broadcast, "is: Send money and shut up. That is the measure of 'academic freedom' as it is practiced there." Another recurring theme of Helms's editorials was "the harm being done to relations among neighbors of different races by the militant intrusion of outsiders."

As a first-term senator, Helms harnessed his ambitions to former governor of California Ronald Reagan's high-risk challenge to President Gerald R. Ford for the 1976 Republican presidential nomination. The gamble paid off.

Reagan's candidacy was floundering because, as Helms rightly points out in *Here's Where I Stand*, the conservative candidate was listening to "self-declared experts" advising him to "tone down his conservatism and make himself appear more 'mainstream.'" After losing the first five primaries to Ford, Reagan won North Carolina by following Helms's advice to fan the flames of populist resentment engendered by the president's proposal to deed the Panama Canal to Panama. Reagan's primary victory enabled him to carry the fight for the nomination to the convention and, although he narrowly lost, to move to the front of the Republican pack in 1980.

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Helms also came to the rescue of Southern Republicanism after the setback of Carter's victory over Ford in the general election. Carter carried 10 Southern states, partly on the basis of regional pride and partly because, as a born-again Southern Baptist, he won the support of most evangelical Christian voters. Forced to the left as president by the liberal Democrats who dominated Congress, however, Carter alienated his home region and many of his coreligionists. Helms stepped forward to help rouse white evangelicals, who had not been especially active in politics during most of the 20th century, to organize in opposition when the Carter administration proposed to withdraw tax-exempt status from the mostly white Christian schools to which many of them sent their children.

Reagan capitalized on that development, as well as on a stagnant economy and a decline in American power abroad, when he challenged Carter's bid for re-election in 1980. His strong rhetoric opposing abortion and upholding traditional values appealed to white Southern Christians across class lines. Helms again spurred him on. In a chapter called "Hot-Button Issues," Helms lays bare the political issues that mattered most to him, then and since: the liberal media ("men and women who certainly have a smug contempt for American ideals and principles"), the NEA (financing "decadent people" with "a militant disdain for the moral and religious sensibilities of the majority of the American people"), school prayer ("in its place has been enshrined a sort of permissiveness in which the drug culture has flourished, as have pornography, crime, and fornication"), and abortion (a "holocaust, by another name").

Helms's most famous election came in 1990, when he was challenged by the African-American mayor of Charlotte, Harvey Gantt. Trailing in the polls, Helms ran a television ad

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that showed a white hand crumpling a rejection letter from an employer. “You needed that job and you were the best qualified,” the announcer intoned. “But they had to give it to a minority because of a racial quota. Is that really fair? Harvey Gantt says it is.” *In Here’s Where I Stand*, Helms denies that his campaign was “about Mr. Gantt being black; it was always and only about him being a liberal.” But Helms’s own words belie his claim. One of the first things he tells us about Gantt is that he “had taken advantage of a minority preference to gain an available television license” in Charlotte. As a measure of just how successful Helms’s long-term political strategy was, however, he won stronger support from the state’s poorest and least-educated white voters than from any other group.

Like Helms, Lott grew up in a blue-collar family and rode a strong high-school record to college and a professional career. Interestingly, Lott devotes not a single word to academics in *Herding Cats*’s chapter on “The Legacy of Ole Miss.” Instead, he dwells lovingly on membership in Sigma Nu and, through it, as bass-baritone in a vocal quartet he formed and as head cheerleader at Ole Miss football games. Those positions helped wire him into the campus’s leadership network—no small thing at a school that, Lott notes, has traditionally produced all of Mississippi’s governors and other statewide officials.

Lott stayed at Ole Miss for law school, joined Pascagoula’s leading firm, and, after spending four years as Democratic Congressman William Colmer’s administrative assistant, ran as a Republican when Colmer retired in 1972. He won, with Colmer’s support, and concentrated his efforts in the House on “fiscal responsibility and a strong national defense.” As his party’s whip from 1981 to 1988, Lott continued to stress economic issues. His major achievement was to woo enough conservative Democratic support in the Democratically controlled House to pass Reagan’s massive 1981 tax cuts and domestic spending reductions. One favorite tactic was to look up “the names of [their] key contributors and supporters” and rouse those mostly wealthy conservatives to put pressure on their Democratic representatives in Washington.

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Elected to the Senate in 1988 against a Democrat who tried to brand him (in Lott’s phrase) “as an over-dressed elitist—a country-club Republican,” Lott networked his new colleagues with Sigma Nu aplomb, forging a brother-pledge style of coalition that included young GOP conservatives like Phil Gramm of Texas and John Ashcroft of

Missouri with “some of the ‘old bulls,’ like Jesse Helms [and] Strom Thurmond.” In 1994 they chose him as Senate GOP whip; two years later, when the GOP’s Senate leader, Bob Dole, resigned to run for president, Lott was easily elected to take his place.

Although Lott was insider to Helms’s outsider and emphasized mainstream economic conservatism rather than Helms-style cultural conservatism, both men were strong supporters of President Bush. (Helms awards Bush his ultimate accolade: “I know Ronald Reagan would be proud of this man.”) The president’s tax cuts and strongly pro-business tax and regulatory policies gladdened Lott’s heart, as well as those of the South’s white business and professional classes. To Helms’s delight and that of working-class and rural white Southerners, Bush also identified himself and his party as the chief defenders of traditional social values, both by what he upheld (religious faith, flag-waving patriotism, marriage between a man and a woman, restrictions on abortion) and what he opposed (gay marriage, sexual permissiveness, gun control).

As the Democratic pollster Stanley Greenberg points out, Republicans “don’t say, ‘Vote for us because we’re making progress.’ They say, ‘Vote for our worldview.’” Therein lies a source of enduring Republican strength in the South and, increasingly, in the other red states. Voters who support a party because they share its values are much less likely to abandon it than voters whose support is based on how well things are going in the economy or the world.

Republicans pride themselves on the progress they have made in the South by stressing conservative economic policies and Christian values. Appeals based on race, they like to think, are a thing of the past. After all, no one figured out more quickly than Thurmond what it meant in the late 1960s when Southern blacks became enfranchised: “It means you can’t win any longer just by cussin’ the niggers,” Bass and Thompson quote him telling an aide. Thurmond hired the first African-American staff member of any Southern senator, became a champion in Washington of his state’s traditionally black colleges, and voted for the King holiday and the Voting Rights Act of 1982. Even Helms makes much in his memoirs of his recent crusade to end AIDS in Africa, an effort in which he and U2’s Bono have been famous if unlikely bedfellows.

But race as a defining element of Southern politics won’t stay under the Republican rug any more than it did when the South was solidly Democratic. The first and last chapters of Lott’s book deal with the incident for which he always will be most remembered, his remarks at Strom Thurmond’s 100th birthday party on December 5, 2002. Harking back to the 1948 election, in which Thurmond made his national debut as the candidate of the segregationist Dixiecrats, Lott said, “Mississippians voted for him. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn’t have had all these problems over the years either.”

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In *Herding Cats*, Lott explains his remark in terms of personal compassion (Thurmond “slipped easily into bouts of depression. I often rushed over to lighten his mood”) and historical ignorance (“I was only 7 when Strom was barnstorming the South”). Besides, Lott writes, “he was already 87 years old when I came to the Senate in 1989, and by then he was fully committed to the minorities in his native South Carolina.” Few others had any trouble remembering Thurmond’s crusading segregationist past, and some pointed out that Lott had lavished nearly identical praise on Thurmond’s 1948 candidacy in a speech he gave in 1980, long before Thurmond needed any special cheering up.

In the firestorm that followed Lott’s thoughtless remarks, the story of Thurmond’s racist past was retold in the present, Lott’s friend Bush cut him loose, and by the end of the month, Lott had been replaced as Senate majority leader by Bill Frist. As far as Lott is concerned, the whole thing was personal—the president “blasted me . . . in a tone that

was booming and nasty,” and Frist engaged in “a personal betrayal.” Lott could not very well claim to be a victim of prejudice against Southerners, of course—Bush is a Texan and Frist a Tennessean.

“In its grand outlines,” wrote the political scientist V.O. Key in his classic 1949 book *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, “the politics of the South revolves around the position of the Negro.” To be sure, African-Americans now can vote in the South, and many have been elected to local office, especially in the region’s increasingly black cities. But one thing hasn’t changed: The South’s dominant political party, Democratic in Key’s time, Republican now, is essentially all white.

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