

## FRIDAY KEYNOTE ADDRESS

### Don't Look Away from Dixie: Why We Study Southern Politics

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**In 1938, Franklin Delano** Roosevelt announced “it is my conviction that the South presents right now the nation's No. 1 economic problem—the nation's problem, not merely the South's.” Historically, the South is a unique region. It is the only region of the nation that seceded from the Union and was defeated on the battlefield. It faced a Reconstruction that shaped the region's politics for the next century. Arguably, legacies of Reconstruction continue to influence the politics of some areas of the region. Prior to the 1860s, the South was the wealthiest region of the nation, only to face abject poverty until World War II. In the last half century, the South has seen a return of economic prosperity in urban and suburban areas, but many rural areas of the region continue to be plagued by poverty.

The region was a battleground during the 1950s and 1960s during the Civil Rights Movement. Less than 50 years later since Martin Luther King's “I have a dream” speech, the region has elected a number of black candidates to local and state offices, including the U.S. House and

U.S. Senate. In 2008 and 2012, Barack Obama easily won Florida and Virginia and North Carolina in 2008.

Politically speaking, the South has always been a different creature. After the Populist Revolt of the 1890s, the South became noted for being a region so dominated by the Democratic Party that Republicans did not even bother to field candidates for much of the first half of the 20th century. So engrained was this one-partyism that political scientists routinely discussed political trends in terms of “South” and “non-South.” V.O. Key wrote *Southern Politics in State and Nation* during what seemed the height of the one-party South, yet that adherence to the Democratic Party, at least by white Southerners, would soon be shattered by the Civil Rights Movement.

*“To paraphrase, an old car commercial, this ain’t your grandfather’s Dixie. As a result, it is more important than ever to understand the South”*

Despite the focus on the South, misunderstandings about about the region. For that matter, what do we mean by the South? The United States Census Bureau defines the South as the eleven states that seceded and formed the Confederacy in 1861 PLUS Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Oklahoma, West Virginia, and the District of Columbia. While all of these states were slave states (or territory in the case of Oklahoma), Delaware, Maryland, and D.C. do not fit into most definitions of the South. While Kentucky had a star on the Confederate flag, Missouri did as well but only very rarely gets any mention in terms of the South.

But does this discussion of the South matter any longer? While there is no doubt that the South is no longer the isolated region that it once was, things are still different in the region. Race, which historically dominated all of southern politics, is still present but in a different way than 60 years ago. The role of the “Religious Right” largely began in the South before spreading elsewhere. In part, it was a southern Democrat, Jimmy Carter, who helped lead to more focus on religion in politics during his presidential campaign of 1976. More recently, much of the fervor of the Tea Party can be found, to varying degrees, in the region. Political scientists neglect the role of the region in politics at our own peril. Following are some reasons why we study southern politics.

First, the South is the largest geographic region of the nation. Using a twelve-state definition of the region, the 2010 population of the South was over 114 million people, or nearly 36 percent of the nation's population, and the 2012 estimates for the region indicate a population growth rate of 2.6 percent. Within this context, the region has the greatest racial diversity in the entire nation. When most hear of the South and race, our minds tend to think back to the era of the Civil Rights Movement in which white political leaders used all the powers of their offices to thwart efforts to eliminate segregation. During the television coverage of that era, the nation came to think of the South as "a one size fits all" in terms of race. The last three decades have seen an expansion of black elected officeholders in the region at all levels. In most cases, black candidates have run as Democrats, but there are exceptions. Oklahoma elected Republican JC Watts in the 1990s, while Florida elected Allen West and South Carolina elected Tim Scott in 2010. In 2012, Tim Scott became the first black Republican U.S. Senator from a southern state since Reconstruction.

The racial makeup of the region today goes beyond black and white. The South has become a melting pot of racial groups. While a majority of southerners are either ethnically black or white, the last three decades have seen an explosion of other racial groups. The Hispanic population has exploded across the region, and the number of Asians, especially in urban areas, has grown dramatically. Within this context, the region boasts the nation's only two Indian-American governors, Bobby Jindall of Louisiana and Nikki Haley of South Carolina, both of whom are Republican. Meanwhile, Hispanics from both parties represent congressional districts in the region, and Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz are of Hispanic descent.

Racial patterns across the South are quite varied. Collectively, black southerners constitute 21 percent of the region's population. Mississippi has the highest statewide black population at 37.4 percent in 2010, while Oklahoma has the lowest black population at 7.6 percent. Florida has seen the most dramatic decline in terms of its black population, largely due initially to migration of whites into the state, and more recently Hispanics. In 1950, the Sunshine State had a black population of 21.8 percent statewide versus 16.6 percent today. Black southerners have always been unevenly distributed in terms of population. In those Deep South states, which V.O. Key defined as

Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina, white citizens and politicians were the most concerned about preserving the status quo in terms of race. It is in these same states today that we see racial polarization of the electorate between black and white in terms of their partisan preferences.

One of the most significant stories of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century is the return of black citizens to the South. After an exodus of blacks from the South in the early 20th century, the last 10-15 years have seen a reversal of that trend. Today, approximately 57 percent of the nation's black population resides in the South, up from 53 percent in the 1970s. So far, most of that migration has been to southern urban areas. With most of the migration going to Texas, Georgia, Florida, and North Carolina, this migration has the potential to transform states that are currently controlled by Republicans. However, one is always advised to proceed with caution because it is not always the case migration instantly equates to those individuals registered to vote and taking part in elections.

Race and ethnicity have become more complex in recent decades. In the 1970s, the number of Hispanics was very small in southern states, outside of Florida and Texas. The 1980s saw the beginnings of a Hispanic influx that was largely contained in its earliest years to rural areas where migrant agricultural workers would travel through the region. By the 1990s though, the number of Hispanics began to increase in industries like poultry processing and construction. Increasingly, the number of "Mexican" restaurants in the South began to increase dramatically to the point that one is hard-pressed not to find such restaurants in most rural towns around the region today.

Demographically, Texas has the largest number of residents of Hispanic origin at 38.2 percent of its population. Second to Texas in this category, Florida has a Hispanic population of 23.2 percent. While these two states always get the most attention in any discussion of Hispanic populations, the last decade has seen a dramatic growth of Hispanics in other states. Between 2000-2011, the Pew Research Center found that the fastest-growing Hispanic populations were to be found in Alabama, South Carolina, Tennessee, Arkansas, and North Carolina. While Hispanic immigration seems to be ebbing in recent years, Hispanics Southerners have and will play a role in the region's politics.

Nor is migration into the region limited to Hispanic populations. The last 50 years have seen a mass influx of people into the region from other parts of the nation. In sum, the total population of the South was roughly 55.1 million in 1960. In 2010, that number stood at 114.5 million, an increase of 106 percent. The only other region to come close to that rate of growth is the West. In the decade from 2000-2010, the South grew by 14 percent, an increase greater than any other region of the nation. While the West was relatively close behind at 13 percent growth, the Midwest grew at a rate of only 4 percent, and the Northeast grew by only 3 percent. Quite simply, the nation's population is moving south and west.

Overall, the South's population has been growing as a result of migration from all regions of the country. From the 1960s-1980s, most of this migration was coming from the Northeast, but since the late 1980s there has been a wave of migration from both the Midwest and West. This migration is continuing as we speak. Based on data from the American Community Survey, the Census Bureau estimates that the South as a whole has seen an average of 436,000 new residents from other regions of the nation between 2009-2012. Nor is this population shift limited solely to new residents to the region. Within the South, the Census Bureau estimates that an average of 1.3 million residents have moved within the South over the last four years.

This population shift is by no means evenly distributed. In fact, some states are growing quite dramatically in population, while other states are contracting. Between 2009-2012, the top three states in net population growth, after subtracting out immigration from the state, were Texas, Florida, and North Carolina. Coming in fourth was South Carolina whose population along the coast is dramatic but often overlooked by outside political observers. The top three states in terms of net population loss were Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama.

What of the political implications of this mass migration? South Carolina serves as one example of how we must understand these demographic shifts to have a full understanding of the politics of a state. The Palmetto State is divided into three distinct geographic and political regions: the Lowcountry, the Midlands, and the Upstate. Of the three regions, the coast and the Upstate are the fastest growing. Along the coast, Charleston, Myrtle Beach, and Hilton Head have seen

a population explosion since the 1990s that shows no signs of abating in the near future. Part of this growth has come from jobs like the recent construction of the Boeing plant in North Charleston. However, much of the growth has come from retirees from other areas of the nation, primarily the Northeast and the Midwest. In the Upstate, both Greenville and York County, a suburb of Charlotte, have seen dramatic growth largely due to economic reasons over the last two decades. This population increase yielded the state an additional congressional seat after the 2010 Census.

However, not all is well in the state in terms of population. Sandwiched between the Lowcountry and Upstate is the Midlands. While Columbia and suburban Lexington County, along with Aiken County, a suburb of Augusta, Georgia have been growing, the region's rural counties have seen a massive decline in population (and economic prosperity) due to the widespread mechanization of agriculture over the last 50 years. While South Carolina was one of the most rural states of the Union in the 1930s, it now features a population in which 2/3 live in the state's urban and suburban areas.

In part, due to the population trends within the state, South Carolina, like most of the region, has shifted from a solidly Democratic state in the 1950s to a solidly Republican state in the early 21st century. The Republicans in South Carolina have the overwhelming support of white voters in both urban and rural areas, while the Democratic base is among rural black voters. Adding to the complexity, non-native residents of the state tend to be Republican though largely on economic issues more so than social issues of native white South Carolinians. While the Republicans have a sizeable majority in the state currently, the party has to be careful not to alienate its base that is not native to the state or region. For political scientists, our failure to account for these broader demographic trends can lead to erroneous political observations.

A second reason to study southern politics is that it has implications for control of the U.S. House. With the South's increase in population has come increased representation in the U.S. House of Representatives. In 1980, 114 congressmen hailed from the region. After the 2010 Census, 143 congressmen represent the twelve-state region. Over the last three decades, the southern proportion of House members has risen from 26 percent in 1980 to 32 percent in 2013. A further examination reveals

the partisan shift that has occurred. In the 1980s, white Southern Democrats made up the “Boll Weevil” coalition that provided crucial votes to Ronald Reagan’s economic initiatives. By the 1990s though, the Boll Weevils had faded from existence partially due to retirements, but also due to a partisan transformation that took hold in the region. After the 1980 elections, Democrats held 74 seats (65 percent) in the South. In 2013, Democrats hold only 39 seats (27 percent). Of those 39 seats, 16 were held by black Democrats compared with only two black Democrats in 1980. Among the five Deep South states, John Barrow is the only white Democrat representing a congressional district.

With Republicans in firm control of the state legislatures in the region, congressional districts are drawn in such a way that it is unlikely, if not implausible, that Democrats will be able to pick up many seats beyond what they have now until at least 2022. As an illustration, in May 2013, voters in the 1st Congressional District of South Carolina elected former Governor Mark Sanford to return to Congress, where he had served in the 1990s. Despite the personal controversy surrounding Sanford, he easily defeated his Democratic opponent Elizabeth Colbert-Busch by almost nine percentage points. This has broader implications as well. Some of the most vocal Republican congressmen during the October 2013 government shutdown were representing deep-red districts in the South. In effect, these congressmen were representing their constituents’ views and also heading off any challenges to themselves from candidates to their right.

Thirdly, the South continues to grow in power in the Electoral College. As the region’s population has increased, so has its influence in the selection of president. Most of the attention in this regard has focused on the fate of Republican presidential nominees, but, in fact, it has consequences for the Democrats as well. In 1980, the South had 138 electoral votes. Since 2012, the region boasts 169 electoral votes. In other words, 31 percent of the College is to be found in the twelve-state region. Put another way, if a nominee can win all 169 southern electoral votes, they need win only the remaining 28% of non-southern electoral votes. This continues a trend highlighted by Earl and Merle Black in *The Vital South*. The important note to make though is that the region’s share has continued in the past two decades.

While Republicans beginning with Richard Nixon generally had an overwhelming advantage in terms of winning the South entirely and cruising to 270 electoral votes, the way has become more narrow in recent decades. George W. Bush would not have won the presidency without winning the South as a bloc. Even though Obama would have defeated Romney even if he had lost Florida and Virginia, it is conceivable that the region comes into play and helps decide the new president in 2016 without Obama on the Democratic ticket.

Fourth, we should study the South because it is a wonderful case study in realignment. Quite simply, it was impossible to get elected in most areas of the South as a Republican prior to the 1960s. Since the 1990s, it is practically impossible to get elected as a Democrat in many areas of the South. The region has seen a transformation from the absolute dominance of the Democrats at mid-20th century to comfortable Republican control of state government in most southern states today. As mentioned earlier, most southern states feature racial polarization, and race certainly had a large role in the early movement towards the Republican Party in the 1960s and 1970s. However, economics have also played a role as highlighted by Byron Shafer and Richard Johnston in *The End of Southern Exceptionalism*. The challenge for both parties is how to reach out beyond their current party bases. For the Democrats, they must reach out to white voters in order to make a political comeback in the region. To do so, they might take a page from the recent past in which Democrats were able to forge biracial coalitions. They must nominate candidates who are not seen as too liberal on the issues, nor too closely attached to the national party—hardly an easy task.

Republicans run the risk of being the party of angry white voters. While the Tea Party was invaluable for the GOP in 2010, tensions have been present since then between “establishment” Republicans and the Tea Party. While some of the issue stance on issues like abortion and gay marriage taken by Republicans are popular with social conservatives, especially older ones, they run the risk of alienating younger voters who are increasingly disenchanted with both parties. Republicans would also do well to avoid issues that alienate an ever-increasing Hispanic voter base that is not firmly in either the Democratic or Republican camp.

In closing, it is still important to study southern politics to have an understanding of the political forces that are driving a growing and



dynamic region. The South's economic and population growth shows no signs of slowing down in the foreseeable future, and the region's political power will continue to rise. To paraphrase, an old car commercial, this ain't your grandfather's Dixie. As a result, it is more important than ever to understand the South.