Republican Party Politics and the American South, 1865–1968

In *Republican Party Politics and the American South, 1865–1968*, Heersink and Jenkins examine how National Convention politics allowed the South to remain important to the Republican Party after Reconstruction, and trace how Republican organizations in the South changed from biracial coalitions to mostly all-white ones over time. Little research exists on the GOP in the South after Reconstruction and before the 1960s. *Republican Party Politics and the American South, 1865–1968* helps fill this knowledge gap. Using data on the race of Republican convention delegates from 1868 to 1952, the authors explore how the “whitening” of the Republican Party affected its vote totals in the South. Once states passed laws to disenfranchise blacks during the Jim Crow era, the Republican Party in the South performed better electorally the whiter it became. These results are important for understanding how the GOP emerged as a competitive, and ultimately dominant, electoral party in the late twentieth-century South.

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Preface

This book tells the story of the Republican Party in the South from Reconstruction through the late 1960s. The history of the Grand Old Party (GOP) in the South during Reconstruction is fairly well known, as is its reemergence in the region during the Barry Goldwater and Richard Nixon presidential campaigns in 1964 and 1968. What is not well known, however, is the period in between: what did the GOP in the South look like between the end of Reconstruction and before the modern “Southern Strategy”? A common assumption is that the Republican Party in the South all but disappeared after the demise of Reconstruction and that it only reemerged when the national Democratic Party went all in on civil rights in the mid-1960s, while the national Republican Party (led by Goldwater) largely rejected civil rights.1 Certainly, the Southern GOP achieved little electoral success in the region in this period. Yet, the Republican Party remained in existence in every state of the ex-Confederacy.

Why was this? The principal reason is that even while the South became largely a one-party, Democratic system, the eleven states of the ex-Confederacy still retained significant representation at the Republican National Convention every four years. Indeed, for much of the post-Reconstruction era, the South controlled around 25 percent of GOP convention delegates. Thus, Southern states were in a position to wield influence at the convention and have a meaningful hand in picking the Republican presidential nominee. Southern party representatives had such influence despite the fact that between 1880 and 1916 – or for ten consecutive presidential elections – Republican presidential nominees received exactly zero Electoral College votes from the eleven Southern states. It was this basic puzzle that got us interested in the topic.

of GOP politics in the South during this period: why would a party continue to provide sizable convention representation—and thus, influence on crucial intra-party decisions—to a set of states that it knew were almost certain to provide no benefit on election day?

In answering this question—in the article “Southern Delegates and Republican National Convention Politics, 1880–1928,” published in Studies in American Political Development in 2015—we noted that Republican Party leaders struggled mightily for more than a decade to keep a Southern GOP electorally viable after Reconstruction. Only with the failed Federal Elections Bill in 1890—which was intended to protect suffrage in the ex-Confederacy—and the emergence of state laws to disenfranchise blacks in the South in the 1890s did national Republican leaders largely give up on a serious Southern wing of the party. Thus, for a time, providing Southern states with GOP convention representation was reasonable—based on hopes of a Southern Republican comeback. Additionally, with the rise of Jim Crow, arguments were also made that eliminating Southern representation would grossly harm black Americans, as such representation was the only remaining political participation that they could enjoy.

By the 1890s, however, national Republicans began to conceive of the Southern states as a set of “rotten boroughs,” in which delegates could be bought and sold prior to (and during) the convention. Candidates for the Republican nomination could promise Southern party leaders a wealth of executive patronage (which they could then distribute or sell) in exchange for their delegations’ votes. While some Republicans railed against this naked vote-buying arrangement, enough national GOP politicians wanted to keep the Southern states and their considerable delegate totals in play so that they might use them to build a base of nomination support. Thus, for decades, Republican leaders—including presidents and presidential candidates—prevented any real reforms from occurring.

But in laying out these politics, we discovered that we were only scratching the surface. The Republican Party’s activities in the post-Reconstruction South were not well known, and there was considerable variation in the GOP across the various states of the ex-Confederacy. Most importantly, factional battles defined the Southern Republican Party during the post-Reconstruction years, as the Black-and-Tans (black and white Republicans who represented the “party establishment”) faced off against the Lily-Whites (white supremacist Republicans who sought to expel blacks from the party). These factional battles occurred in every state, with the promise of executive patronage as the prize. But little was known of them. For example, Michael K. Fauntroy argues that the Lily-White movement was “one of the darkest and under-examined eras” of

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Republican Party history. Indeed, with the notable exception of work by Hanes Walton, Jr., almost no political science research has investigated the conflict between the Black-and-Tans and Lily-Whites. And no systematic data exists to determine which faction was winning or losing in a state at any given time. Thus, we determined that a book was necessary to fully explore these intra-GOP factional battles and data needed to be gathered to determine factional strength.

We describe our data-gathering process in Chapter 2. In short, we rely upon historical census information – and ancillary sources – to code the racial composition of a state’s GOP convention delegation in every presidential election year from 1868 through 1952. We explore how different states went Lily-White at different times and incorporate these data in a statistical analysis to determine how the “whitening” of the Southern GOP by state affected the party’s electoral vote totals. We find that as a state Republican Party became whiter in the post-disenfranchisement period, its vote totals increased significantly. We ascribe this whitening as a necessary condition in keeping with the Lily-White argument at the time: that in the Jim Crow South, when the electorate was almost exclusively white, the Republican Party could only hope to become electorally viable by becoming a Lily-White party. That is, Southern whites would only vote for a “respectable” party – where respectability was directly connected to its whiteness. Much more had to happen before the GOP become electorally competitive – and then dominant – in the second half of the twentieth century. But becoming a Lily-White party was a crucial first step. The remainder of the book fills out the narrative details around these quantitative findings. We describe the national politics of the GOP and the South in Chapters 3–6, and provide in-depth case studies of local GOP politics in all eleven Southern states in Chapters 7–9.

We owe a number of people thanks for their help and support in writing this book. In collecting the delegate data, we were assisted by several research assistants: Anthony Sparacino and Jennifer Simons at the University of Virginia, and Nico Napolio and Jordan Carr Peterson at the University of Southern California. We also received useful data from Daniel Galvin and Scott James. Along the way, we presented portions of our research at various conferences over the years: the Midwest Political Association meetings (2014, 2015, 2016, 2017), the Southern Political Science Association meetings (2016, 2017, 2018, 2019), and the American Political Science Association meetings (2016). In so doing, we received helpful feedback from a number of people including John Aldrich, Jeff Grynaviski, Kris Kanthak, Ellie Powell, Daniel Schlozman, and Ryan Williamson. Comments from Anthony Fowler, Sean Gailmard, Thomas Gray, and John Sides, while we were designing the argument and

5 Michael K. Fauntroy, Republicans and the Black Vote (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2007), 164.
statistical model at the heart of Chapter 2, helped us clarify our thinking. Additionally, in January 2019, David Bateman, Eric Schickler, and Charles Stewart met with us for a day at the University of Southern California to give the full book manuscript a comprehensive review. Bateman, Schickler, and Stewart were their usual selves—tough but fair—and their comments helped us make the book considerably better. Finally, during the time in which we were writing (and revising), Robert Dreesen, our editor at Cambridge University Press, was both patient and supportive.

While this book is now done, we find ourselves still drawn to Republican Party politics in the post-Reconstruction South. A book can answer many questions, of course, but not all of them. Many interesting inquiries remain, and we (with the help of new co-authors) intend to pursue at least some of them in the future. So the “Southern project,” as we have often referred to our joint work in the past, remains ongoing. We thank our respective families, friends, and pets for supporting us through the writing of this book, and for sticking with us through what comes next.