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978-1-316-61092-3 — Republican Party Politics and the
American South, 1865–1968
Boris Heersink, Jeffery A. Jenkins
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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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Contents

<i>List of Tables</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>List of Figures</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
1 Introduction	1
2 The Republican Party and the South: Some Preliminaries	18
PART I THE SOUTH AND NATIONAL REPUBLICAN PARTY POLITICS, 1865–1968	
3 The Rise and Fall of a Republican South, 1865–1877	66
4 The Attempt to Rebuild the Republican Party in the South, 1877–1896	101
5 The System of 1896 and Republicanism in the South, 1897–1932	133
6 Toward a Modern Southern Strategy, 1933–1968	163
PART II SOUTHERN REPUBLICAN PARTY POLITICS AT THE STATE LEVEL	
7 Virginia, Texas, North Carolina, and Alabama	214
8 Arkansas, Louisiana, Florida, and Tennessee	255
9 South Carolina, Georgia, and Mississippi	296
10 Conclusion: The Relevance of the South in the Republican Party	334
<i>Index</i>	347

Black and white photos appear between pages 193 and 209

Tables

2.1	Racial division of Southern GOP convention delegates, 1868–1952	<i>page</i> 34
2.2	Percentage of Southern GOP national convention delegates that were black by state, 1868–1952	37
2.3	Disfranchisement provisions in the South, by state and year	43
2.4	Estimating Republican electoral support in the South, 1872–1956	45
2.5	Estimating GOP presidential vote in the South by region, 1872–1956	48
A2.1	Southern Republican National Convention delegates by state, 1856–1968	60
A2.2	Estimating Republican electoral support in the South by region, 1872–1956	61
3.1	Dates of Southern constitutional conventions	80
3.2	Demographics of Southern constitutional conventions	80
3.3	Percentage of Republican seats in Southern state legislatures, 1867–1877	84
3.4	Percentage of Republican vote in Southern gubernatorial elections, 1867–1877	86
3.5	Return to Democratic home rule (“Redemption”) in the South, 1867–1877	87
3.6	Percentage of Republican seats in the US Congress, 40th–45th Congresses	88
3.7	Percentage of black legislators in Southern state legislatures, 1868–1877	97
3.8	Black members of the US Congress during Reconstruction	99
4.1	Party control of House, Senate, and presidency, 1877–1897	102

4.2	Republican vote percentage in presidential elections in the South, 1876–1896	103
4.3	Rules Committee vote to maintain delegate apportionment rules, 1884 GOP Convention	116
4.4	Balloting at the 1892 Republican Convention, by region	127
5.1	Occupation of Republican activists supporting Taft in 1912, divided by region	144
5.2	Senate roll call on Judge Parker’s nomination, 71st Congress	160
6.1	Republican National Convention balloting in the South, 1940	168
6.2	National and Southern approval ratings of Dwight Eisenhower	175
6.3	RNC campaign division expenditures, 1962	179
6.4	1964 Republican National Convention votes, by region	181
6.5	1968 Republican National Convention votes, by region	186
7.1	Descriptive Republican Party success in Virginia, 1865–1968	215
7.2	Descriptive Republican Party success in Texas, 1865–1968	225
7.3	Descriptive Republican Party success in North Carolina, 1865–1968	234
7.4	Descriptive Republican Party success in Alabama, 1865–1968	244
8.1	Descriptive Republican Party success in Arkansas, 1865–1968	256
8.2	Descriptive Republican Party success in Louisiana, 1865–1968	265
8.3	Descriptive Republican Party success in Florida, 1865–1968	277
8.4	Descriptive Republican Party success in Tennessee, 1865–1968	287
9.1	Descriptive Republican Party success in South Carolina, 1865–1968	297
9.2	Descriptive Republican Party success in Georgia, 1865–1968	306
9.3	Descriptive Republican Party success in Mississippi, 1865–1968	321
10.1	Republican presidents’ Southern strategies, 1868–1968	338

Figures

2.1	Republican presidential, congressional, and gubernatorial vote in the South, 1868–2016	<i>page</i> 21
2.2	Republican federal and state composite indices in the South, 1868–2016	22
2.3	GOP presidential vote by region, 1868–1968	29
2.4	Southern share of delegates to Republican National Conventions, 1856–1968	29
2.5	Percentage of Southern GOP delegates without racial identification, 1868–1952	35
2.6	Percentage of Southern GOP convention delegates that were black, 1868–1952	36
2.7	Percentage of Southern GOP convention delegates that were black by state, 1868–1952	38
2.8	Average marginal effects of Whiteness Index (Lagged) on GOP presidential vote	45
2.9	Predicted GOP presidential vote by level of Whiteness Index (Lagged)	46
2.10	Average marginal effects of Whiteness Index (Lagged) on GOP presidential vote, Outer South versus Deep South	49
2.11	Predicted GOP presidential vote by level of Whiteness Index (Lagged), Outer South	49
2.12	Predicted GOP presidential vote by level of Whiteness Index (Lagged), Deep South	50
A2.1	GOP presidential vote by region, 1868–2016	54
A2.2	Average marginal effects of Whiteness Index (Lagged) on GOP congressional vote	55
A2.3	Predicted GOP congressional vote by level of Whiteness Index (Lagged)	55
		ix

A2.4	Average marginal effects of Whiteness Index (Lagged) on GOP governor vote	56
A2.5	Predicted GOP governor vote by level of Whiteness Index (Lagged)	57
A2.6	Average marginal effects of Whiteness Index (Lagged) on GOP composite vote	58
A2.7	Predicted GOP composite vote by level of Whiteness Index (Lagged)	59
3.1	Percentage of Southern US House seats controlled by the GOP, 40th–45th (1867–1879) Congresses	92
3.2	Percentage of Southern GOP convention delegates that were black, 1868–1876	98
4.1	Southern percentage of delegates at Republican National Convention and Republican popular vote, 1880–1896	104
4.2	Percentage of Southern GOP convention delegates that were black, 1880–1896	105
5.1	Percentage of Southern GOP convention delegates that were black, 1897–1932	134
5.2	Southern percentage of delegates at Republican National Convention and Republican popular vote, 1900–1932	148
6.1	Southern percentage of delegates at Republican National Convention and Republican popular vote, 1936–1968	164
6.2	Percentage of Southern GOP convention delegates that were black, 1933–1952	165
6.3	Number of Southern states won by Republican presidential candidates, 1952–2016	187
6.4	Percentage of US House and Senate seats in the South held by Republicans, 1952–2016	188
6.5	Number of Southern governorships held by Republicans, 1952–2016	189
6.6	Percentage of state House and Senate seats in the South held by Republicans, 1952–2016	190
7.1	Republican Party strength at the federal and state level in Virginia, 1868–2012	216
7.2	Percentage of GOP convention delegates from Virginia that were black, 1868–1952	217
7.3	Percentage of GOP convention delegates from Texas that were black, 1868–1952	225
7.4	Republican Party strength at the federal and state levels in Texas, 1868–2012	226
7.5	Percentage of GOP convention delegates from North Carolina that were black, 1868–1952	233
7.6	Republican Party strength at the federal and state levels in North Carolina, 1868–2012	234

<i>List of Figures</i>	xi
7.7 Republican Party strength at the federal and state levels in Alabama, 1868–2012	244
7.8 Percentage of GOP convention delegates from Alabama that were black, 1868–1952	245
8.1 Republican Party strength at the federal and state levels in Arkansas, 1868–2012	256
8.2 Percentage of GOP convention delegates from Arkansas that were black, 1868–1952	257
8.3 Republican Party strength at the federal and state levels in Louisiana, 1868–2012	266
8.4 Percentage of GOP convention delegates from Louisiana that were black, 1868–1952	267
8.5 Republican Party strength at the federal and state levels in Florida, 1868–2012	277
8.6 Percentage of GOP convention delegates from Florida that were black, 1868–1952	278
8.7 Republican Party strength at the federal and state levels in Tennessee, 1868–2012	287
8.8 Percentage of GOP convention delegates from Tennessee that were black, 1868–1952	288
9.1 Republican Party strength at the federal and state levels in South Carolina, 1868–2012	297
9.2 Percentage of GOP convention delegates from South Carolina that were black, 1868–1952	298
9.3 Republican Party strength at the federal and state levels in Georgia, 1868–2012	307
9.4 Percentage of GOP convention delegates from Georgia that were black, 1868–1952	308
9.5 Percentage of GOP convention delegates from Mississippi that were black, 1868–1952	320
9.6 Republican Party strength at the federal and state levels in Mississippi, 1868–2012	321

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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

¹ For a summary of this conventional view, see Eric Schickler, *Racial Realignment: The Transformation of American Liberalism, 1932–1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 1–3.

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,”² 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

² Boris Heersink and Jeffery A. Jenkins, “Southern Delegates and Republican National Convention Politics, 1880–1928,” *Studies in American Political Development* 29 (2015): 68–88.

Preface

xv

Republican Party history.³ Indeed, with the notable exception of work by Hanes Walton, Jr.,⁴ 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 Grynviski, 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

³ Michael K. Fauntroy, *Republicans and the Black Vote* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2007), 164.

⁴ Hanes Walton, Jr., *Black Republicans: The Politics of Black and Tans* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1975).

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.