

Republican Ascendancy in Southern U.S. House Elections (McKee 2010)

Endorsement by Lawrence C. Dodd

The rise of Republicanism in the American South is one of the stunning developments of post-World War II politics and has received substantial attention from political scientists over the past fifteen to twenty years. But perhaps one of the most remarkable aspects of this development has come with the sudden and unexpected emergence of Republican ascendancy in Southern U. S. House elections in the early 1990s, a topic that has yet to be adequately explored.

For a variety of reasons, political analysts had concluded by the late 1980s that Democratic dominance of Southern House elections would continue indefinitely into the future, sustaining Democratic control of the U.S. House even as the presidency and Senate swung back and forth between parties. This expectation was based, for example, on the greater conservatism of House Democrats in the South (as contrasted with Northern Democrats in the House) and their effective use of casework prowess and institutional power to sustain constituent support. In the face of this near-consensus among political scientists, the early 1990s saw a surge in Republican victories in Southern U.S. House elections. This surge then culminated in 1994 with Republican takeover of the U.S. House, a takeover few political scientists had thought possible.

"Republican Ascendancy" is the first extensive book-length effort to explain these developments through a close and rigorous analysis of the sudden rise of Republican success in Southern U.S. House elections in the early 1990s.

The great contribution of McKee's book is threefold:

- (1) it provides a compelling explanation for the rapid and unexpected surge in Republican success in House elections in the South, linking this development to increasing Republican identification among Southern voters, Republican success in redistricting of House districts (particularly in the early 1990s) in ways that favored the party, and the party's success during the 1990s in recruiting quality candidates -- all coming together in rapid sequence to produce the unexpected surge to Southern ascendancy in House elections;
- (2) it argues convincingly that this surge in Southern ascendancy led to the Republican's equally unexpected success in capturing the U.S. House in 1994 and in sustaining House control in the subsequent decade; and
- (3) it highlights in a thoughtful and comprehensive manner the ways in which the consequent 'southernization' of the Republican party in the U.S. House has complicated the national party's longer-term prospects for consolidating control of national electoral politics.

These contributions are based on Seth's remarkable grasp of Southern Politics, U.S. House politics, and Republican party politics; the extensiveness and quality of the statistical data he has gathered on congressional elections in the South for this period and his masterful analysis of this data; his impressive capacity to link district and state-level developments in the South to the Republicans success in U.S. House elections; and his sensitive effort to look beyond his data and historical explanations and assess the ways in which ongoing developments in the South complicate the trajectory of Republicans there and in the nation at-large.

Taken together, this range of contributions produces a work of substantial and broad-ranging importance.

McKee's book is the most comprehensive and convincing study we have of the sudden emergence of Republican ascendancy in Southern U.S. House elections and as a consequence is thereby the most compelling explanation we have of the rise of Republicans to majority party dominance in the House over most of the past two decades. In the process, the book makes a strong case for the ongoing importance that Southern politics has for the trajectory of our national politics, and also highlights as well the ways in which concerns about national politics necessarily shape Southern politics: thus the desire to control the U.S. House led Southern Republicans to engage in extensive efforts to influence state-level redistricting, which of course has come back to haunt them as with the efforts of Majority Leader DeLay in Texas; similarly, the desire to control the U.S. House has focused their efforts on encouraging quality candidates to run for election to the House rather than remaining engaged in local and state level politics, thereby building a more national focus into local-level Republican politics in the South among potential House candidates.

Seth McKee's success in highlighting the on-going and consequential interplay between Southern politics and national politics is perhaps his greatest contribution and is fully in line with the classic analysis provided by V. O. Key in *Southern Politics*.

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