

## The GOP's 'Southern Strategy'

The New Deal coalition cobbled together by Franklin D. Roosevelt in response to the Great Depression propelled the Democrats to victory in all but two of the nine presidential elections from 1932 to 1964.

“The Republicans were the party of the Northeast, of business, of the white middle-class Protestants, while the Democrats enjoyed a clear majority among the working class, organized labor, Catholics, and the South” at all political levels, wrote pollster Everett Carl Ladd Jr.

The high water mark for Democrats came in 1964, when Johnson won the largest share of the popular presidential vote in modern times, and the party took two-thirds of the House and Senate seats. But hidden by that victory were the seeds of GOP growth and the birth of the modern conservative movement.

The GOP standard-bearer, Arizona Sen. Barry M. Goldwater, opposed the 1964 Civil Rights Act, helping to bring five Southern states into the GOP column. The South had been solidly Democratic since the Civil War, but Goldwater's conservatism—and his regional appeal—began to shift the Republican centers of gravity for the party's traditional homes in the Midwest and Northeast to the South and West.

“The civil rights Movement was bound to destroy the New Deal coalition, because it depended on the South,” says Princeton historian Wilentz.

About a third of the South's House districts broke with tradition and elected Republicans in 1966, in part due to a backlash against Johnson's liberal Great Society agenda, which included a major rewrite of immigration law, the creation of Medicare and passage of both the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts. All told, Republicans picked up 47 House seats, three Senate seats and eight governorships—including the election of Reagan as governor of California.

“If Goldwater had only brought Southern whites into the Republican coalition, he would not have proved to be a transformative figure,” wrote two authors associated with *The Economist*. “But he also linked conservatism to a very different region—the booming West.”

In 1968—a tumultuous year punctuated by street rioting following the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.—Richard M. Nixon built on Goldwater's inroads by pursuing his “Southern strategy”—exploiting white voters' fears of the growing political power and demands of African-Americans.

The Democrats share of the presidential vote plummeted from a record 61 percent in 1964 to 43 percent in 1968, with third-party candidate George Wallace appealing even more directly to voter anxiety than Nixon. In his 1969 book *The Emerging Republican Majority*, Nixon aide Kevin Phillips wrote, “This repudiation visited upon the Democratic Party for its ambitious social programming and inability to handle urban and Negro revolutions was comparable to that given conservative Republicanism in 1932 for its failures to cope with the economic crisis of the Depression.”

The newfound Republican strength in the South—combined with rising support in the Mountain West and Plains states—gave the GOP what for a long time looked like a “lock” on the Electoral College. Republicans won five of the six next presidential elections from 1968 to 1988, losing only the post-Watergate contest of 1976.

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