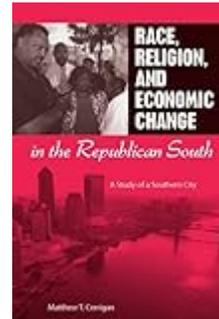




Matthew T. Corrigan. *Race, Religion, and Economic Change in the Republican South: A Case Study of a Southern City.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007. ix + 146 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-3160-6.



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Hladky on Corrigan

Since the end of the Civil War, southern political stances and party affiliations have dramatically shifted. Once known to Democrats as the “solid South,” the post-civil rights movement South has become a Republican stronghold. In *Race, Religion, and Economic Change in the Republican South*, Matthew T. Corrigan adds to the conversation about the regional and political identity of the South by exploring the social and cultural consequences of the rise of the Republican Party. Corrigan chooses his analytic categories—race, religion, and economics—to add nuance to our understanding of the transformation of public policy and the shaping of southern political orientations. Most significantly, Corrigan is able to show that race continues to be the best predictor of party affiliation in the South despite the shift of whites to the Republican Party and blacks to the Democratic Party. At the heart of the project is a concern for understanding how political parties win loyalty by meeting the needs of their constituents.

Most of the specific data for this study comes from

surveys conducted in Jacksonville, Florida. In his first chapter, Corrigan argues that Jacksonville is an ideal case study because trends in political affiliations, race relations, economic change, and religious affiliation mirror those in the South generally. He points specifically to the racial demographics of Jacksonville; its history of racial oppression and struggles for civil rights; and contemporary demographic shifts that have increased the number of African Americans, Republicans, and non-southerners in the city specifically, and the South generally. Then, drawing on his training in political science, Corrigan employs a series of questionnaires and statistics to empirically validate his case study and make projections for the future.

The strength of this text lies in its extensive data collection, which will surely prove useful for future studies, and in Corrigan’s attentiveness to the intersections between politics, religion, economics, and regional cultures. For example, Corrigan engages the important relationships that exist between racially segregated church

attendance and political leanings. Like the rest of the South, and indeed the nation, most churches in the city of Jacksonville are racially segregated. Recognizing this, Corrigan is able to map political segregation onto this phenomenon. Put simply, Democrats attend black churches and Republicans attend white churches. For Corrigan, this phenomenon is not surprising as this trend of racial segregation has profound historical precedents. While blacks and whites may now regularly mingle in Jacksonville workplaces and communities, attention to church attendance illustrates the way that politics in the South continue to have a distinctly racial character. Corrigan quantitatively illustrates the divide between black and white voters over issues like affirmative action, race relations, and labor.

Interestingly, religion is simultaneously a source of political unification between whites and blacks. This is because there are often strong alliances between church-going whites and blacks over a set of politicized social issues, such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and separation of church and state. White and black churchgoers also tend to agree on the importance of political leaders holding moral/religious beliefs and the need for morality in politics. However, Corrigan shows that these shared moral and religious concerns have not yet been able to consolidate white and black voters into one party in significant numbers. Corrigan also finds that blacks and whites often disagree on the centrality of moral and religious issues for political decision making and on which party should lead on moral and social issues.

Concern about so-called moral issues, like preventing gay marriage or making abortion illegal, has not been powerful enough to bring significant numbers of African Americans, who are also concerned with such social issues as poverty and inequality, into the Republican Party. However, these issues have successfully united white Catholics and white evangelicals despite the historically tense relations between the groups. The rise of southern Republicanism has largely been due to the party's increasing comfort with framing issues in moral terms. As Republicans found this strategy to be effective, they have continued to promote religiosity to secure votes. This practice has helped to win popular majorities for the Republican Party in the South and has allowed them to generally ignore other social issues, such as poverty, racial inequities, and fair housing, because the party is mostly white.

In his effort to understand economic changes in the South and their relationship to party affiliation and de-

mographic change, Corrigan focuses on the relationship between the Republican Party with its pro-business policy and the Democratic Party with pro-labor policies. As the South transformed from an agricultural to an industrial economy, antilabor and pro-business laws made the region attractive for businesses looking to expand or develop by taking advantage of low-wage workers and favorable tax codes. By understanding the relationship between business and labor policies and the expansion of the southern economy, Corrigan adds vital information to scholarly understanding of growth and diversity of the economy in the New South. Southern cities, characterized by low taxes and cheap labor, provide an attractive location for business and industry. As a result, the per capita income of white residents is 47 percent higher than that of blacks. Corrigan argues that Democrat success in the South will depend on developing economic strategies that address the pro-business and antiunion tenor of the southern majority.

For the historian, the text does not provide a tremendous amount of historical context for southern politics and is not in conversation with the body of literature considering the rise of evangelicalism, populism, southern honor culture, or gender hierarchy. As a whole, the text is more descriptive than analytical, summarizing the findings of surveys and not straying far from the authority of his extensive statistical data. The lack of historical context leaves Corrigan identifying variables in political decision making that may or may not fully account for the issue. A more glaring omission of this sort is Corrigan's lack of engagement with historical changes that occurred within the Republican and Democratic parties during the period he studies. Throughout the text, Corrigan tends to treat the political parties as static and passive, and there is little appreciation of the matrix of historical changes that shaped the policies of Democrats and Republicans. Furthermore, there is little recognition that Republicans engaged in a conscious effort to court white southerners, accommodating their platforms to issues that would resonate with white southerners. The question is not just how southerners became Republican, but also how Republicans became southern. By the end of *Race, Religion, and Economic Change in the Republican South*, I was less convinced that southerners had experienced dramatic political change than I was convinced that the Republican Party had undergone significant change.

Corrigan's insights into the relationship between racial, religious, political, and economic change are a particularly strong part of this text, and appear to offer a

solid base for making predictions about the future direction of the South. Of course, Corrigan's work must now be viewed in light of the unpredicted economic collapse of late 2008. The new economic environment has inspired increasing suspicion toward deregulation and evidence of the excesses of capitalism, even in the South. For this reason, Corrigan's study may no longer offer predictive trends for understanding the future of the South. Instead, depending on the long-term changes that accom-

pany economic recovery, Corrigan's work may be an important historical document. Scholars who examine the current economic downturn as a possible turning point in American, and southern, attitudes toward unions, regulation, and the ethics of unregulated capitalism will find in *Race, Religion, and Economic Change in the Republican South* an illuminating guide into a unique moment in the history of the American South.

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