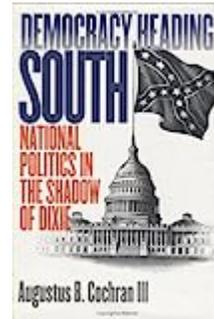




Augustus B. Cochran, III. *Democracy Heading South: National Politics in the Shadow of Dixie.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001. x + 307 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1089-1.



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Published on H-South (January, 2002)

The Probable Future of the Past?

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Augustus Cochran has an ambitious thesis, to examine the “Dixification” of modern American politics. Cochran’s “Dixification” does not involve southerners gaining powerful positions in government, which he sees more as a symptom than a cause of the transformation of American politics. Nor does Cochran argue that the “Dixification” of national politics is a result of the rise of conservatism in the South or anywhere else. Neither is Cochran’s another in a long line of books that seeks to debate the issue of whether America has become “southernized,” or if the South has undergone “Americanization.” What Cochran argues is that American national politics have come to resemble in many ways the political system of the Solid South before 1964, a system that “strangled the aspirations of generations of blacks and whites” (p.2).

By examining current national political trends through the historical lens of Solid South politics, Cochran argues that current national politics have come to reflect the worst of the Solid South: elections that were “empty, issueless affairs at one level and, at another, ma-

niacally focused on a single issue: white supremacy. Corruption ran rampant. Most southerners sat on the sidelines, alternately entertained and appalled by the clownish antics of the ‘colorful characters’ who dominated their politics” (p.3). Though he does not by any means argue that current political structures are a mirror image of pre-1965 southern politics, Cochran issues more of a warning than a thesis that if something does not change, then American politics will more closely resemble the one-party, disfranchised South of the Pre-Civil Rights Era. What Cochran views in modern America is little different, in his view, than the condition that prevailed in the Solid South, namely a decline in the “vigor” of political parties as instruments of popular will, the failure of political parties to “ensure coherence and accountability in national politics (p.2),” a decline in political participation by voters, and an undercurrent of racism that Cochran asserts flows beneath today’s “culture wars.”

In using his comparative model, Cochran takes great pains to clarify that he is not asserting that somehow the South created or fostered the nation’s present political condition. The Solid South to Cochran is a case study

of what happens to political structures “that cannot sustain healthy party competition, nor nurture widespread public participation, nor resist the temptation to exacerbate prejudices and ethnic and racial animosities for electoral advantage rather than solving problems plaguing the polity” (p. 6). In short, what the South was politically before 1965, the nation is now on the brink of becoming.

The first part of Cochran’s book dutifully explores the history of Solid South politics, its idiosyncrasies and peculiarities. Over the span of three chapters, the author relies heavily on V.O. Key’s seminal work, *Southern Politics in State and Nation*. The book is absent of primary sources, so Cochran draws much from the work of others to summarize the era, especially Key, Earl and Merle Black, Dan Carter, and Morgan Kousser. There is nothing new in these summary chapters, though Cochran stresses the dysfunctionality of southern political parties, so much so that he minimizes (though he tangentially addresses) intra-party factionalism and competition.

It should be noted that Cochran seems a bit too attached to the notion of parties as agents and elicitors of political activity. For example, his list of indictments against Southern politics before 1965, and modern American politics as well, includes the lament that party activity and association are declining, thus causing a corresponding decline in the scope of democracy. Recent studies on party identification in the recent South, a region known more for political independence than party affiliation, show that although formal party membership rolls may be in decline, party affiliation by other means has changed little. Also, some not-so-new histories of southern politics reveal that though the South may have been technically a one-party region, intra-party factionalism and competition was at times extreme. Cochran underestimates these works in his summary of the Solid South. One glaring omission in Cochran’s bibliography is Sam Webb’s *Two-Party Politics in the One-Party South*, a work published in 1997 that shows that between 1896 and 1920 in Alabama the Republican Party enjoyed hill country support for their candidates from the presidential level all the way down to county officials. Though Cochran explores state-by-state peculiarities, he gives little merit to Republican Party challenges or intra-party conflict.

If Cochran’s summary of Solid South politics is relatively sound, his comparisons to the current political scene are tenuous. The second half of *Democracy Heading South* summarizes current national politics and makes comparisons and warnings about trends that may imply

devolution of democracy to a condition resembling the one-party Solid South. Among his summary of today’s political system, Cochran includes the Post-Civil Rights Era party realignment, increasing voter dissatisfaction, decreasing voter turnout, and the pervasive influence of money on candidates and elections.

Though Cochran’s is an intriguing look at what he believes could happen in American politics, there are problems with his comparison to Solid South politics. To argue that disfranchisement is even remotely related to voter dissatisfaction is specious. The Solid South system hallmarks of one-party rule, legalized segregation, and voter disfranchisement have no comparison with voter dissatisfaction and the increasingly corruptive influence of big money on party structures and American politics. Poor whites and African-Americans in the period before 1964 and 1965 had no choice because they had no vote. Granted, American politics today does not appear at times to be entirely democratic, with its obsession with big money, the overabundance of one-dimensional candidates who play on the racial and class fears of voters, and the ever-increasing feeling that the common voter has little voice in who gets elected. But people who wish not to vote have at least that choice. Such was not the case in the Solid South.

Cochran also lays much blame on political parties for low voter turnout. Arguing that parties are responsible for getting out their vote and energizing the electorate, he seems to be arguing the cart before the horse. Cochran calls for a more responsible party organization and structure so as to elicit more votes at the polls. In short, he shifts the burden of energizing voters on to the parties and not the voters themselves. It could very well be argued that responsible citizens should not need such motivation. And as one of my US Survey students once noted, not voting can send just as big a message as voting. Plus, Cochran, in his second section, laments decreasing voter turnout over the last two decades. This “decline in democracy” may be more the result of the complacency that settles during prosperous times more than decay in the leadership power of political parties.

This is an interesting book. One that may serve best as a seminar reading list assignment sure to elicit debate among graduate students about Cochran’s summary and explanation of Solid South politics, and his “warning” about the future of American democracy. It is not a good example of solid comparative history. First, one must have a true comparison, which Cochran lacks. And second, one should not compare an era or event in Amer-

ican history with something that *might* happen in the future. The comparisons are tenuous if not altogether weak, and the argument is more lament than thesis. Since Cochran's aim with this work is not to "identify the sources of our current flawed electoral structures but to analyze the probable consequences of such structures" (p.6), his works tells us little new about the South and even less about our current political system.

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Citation: Gordon E. Harvey. Review of Cochran, Augustus B., III, *Democracy Heading South: National Politics in the Shadow of Dixie*. H-South, H-Net Reviews. January, 2002.

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