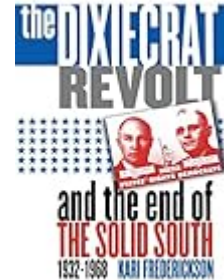


Kari Frederickson. *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South, 1932-1968.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. ix + 311 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4910-1; \$65.00 (library), ISBN 978-0-8078-2594-5.



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In 1994, riding the Contract With America and with a distinctively Southern leadership, the Republican Party won both houses of Congress for the first time since the mid-1950s. Two years earlier and again in 1996 and 2000, a majority of Southern states rejected native-son Democratic presidential contenders. Such a pattern would have been unthinkable as late as 1976; even more so in the late 1940s when Southern dissent within the national Democratic Party first caught fire. In *The Dixiecrat Revolt*, Kari Frederickson charts the emergence of dissent in the Deep South from Franklin Roosevelt's first election. Her focus is chiefly upon the years 1946-1950 and upon factors giving rise to the States Rights Democrats. However, this monograph seeks the Dixiecrats' origins much earlier and follows out the implications for later Southern politics.

Frederickson argues that the Dixiecrat revolt represented a culmination of long-simmering frustrations among Black Belt planter elites and Deep South industrialists with the national Democratic Party. This frustration emerged out of a mixture of issues. For traditional Southern elites, the New Deal disrupted normal patterns of life, social and race relations, and economic power. Disturbing new rights came to labor; a more sympathetic ear for African Americans seemed present in Washington and within the Democratic Party. Med-

dlesome busybodies came to study the South, snap photographs, make judgments, and influence policy. Ever sensitive to slights and threats, these elites increasingly fretted and complained. While planters benefited from price supports brought by the New Deal, they grumbled about their decreased ability to control their workforce. Industrialists bemoaned government efforts to mandate minimum wages and maximum hours. Whites generally worried that government activity might benefit African Americans and erode segregation.

World War II and its immediate aftermath brought even greater upheaval, violence, and renewed national interest in the South's racial climate. Franklin Roosevelt may have launched the New Deal, but he feared the power of Southern congressional leaders within his own party. World War II saw the creation of a federal effort to police employment discrimination, the FEPC. Toothless though it might have been, Southern whites generally saw the commission as a threatening presence, symbolic of new power in the Democratic party for Northern blacks. Whatever benefit African Americans had received from FDR's policies had been largely derivative or symbolic.

A rash of violence came in 1946, on the eve of the first elections since *Smith v. Allwright* and forced Roosevelt's successor, Harry Truman, to action. Many in the South

had greeted Truman's ascent to the vice-presidency with approval, thinking him more conservative than Roosevelt. Whatever his trepidations about Southern power within the party, Truman was not afraid to react forcefully against the violence and question the institution of segregation itself. In the aftermath of the 1946 violence, Truman created a presidential panel to study civil rights, and in late 1947, the panel returned its conclusions.

The President's Committee on Civil Rights proposed antilynching legislation, an end to the poll tax, a permanent FEPC, integration of interstate transportation and of the armed forces. Before both houses of Congress in early 1948, Harry Truman took an election-year gamble and announced his determination to institute these very recommendations through executive order and legislative initiative. Truman's move represented a calculated risk weighing the benefits of the black swing vote in large Northern states against the possible loss of a handful of smaller Southern states. Presidential advisor Clark Clifford starkly informed the president that the South had no place to go, and as it turned out, he was correct. Southern conservatives, however, determined to use their best efforts to make Truman pay.

The Dixiecrat effort was from the beginning an elitist enterprise, and it also faced daunting challenges. Progressive forces had arisen in each Southern state after the war within the one-party system, and they forced Dixiecrat leaders to fight for every preferential ballot positioning and petition signature. States Rights Democrats struggled to put their revolt into a language that would appeal to the average Southern white voter.

A particularly insightful aspect of Frederickson's analysis explores the gendered language used by the rebels to characterize the challenge facing the South from Truman's policies. The South was described as a jilted lover, the national party as an untrue suitor. Dixiecrats worked to portray themselves as "true" Democrats who held to the principles of the party's founders. They described the national party leadership as illegitimate. Revolt leaders found themselves unable to use underlying economic and social concerns to attract voters because of the Dixiecrats' elitist pedigree. Such talk simply would not resonate with the voters. As the campaign dragged on, elements of the movement turned to race baiting that made even movement leaders blush.

Though numerous others provided the labor, money and time creating the States Rights Democrats, those who receive the most attention are the movement's talking heads – South Carolina governor Strom Thurmond

and Mississippi governor Fielding Wright. Thurmond, the Dixiecrats' presidential nominee, had emerged as a business-minded, progressive force in South Carolina politics. He had recognized the link between racial politics and economic backwardness. He worked to open the state up to investment, liberalize state election laws, and make improvements in education.

Thurmond, however, like other once moderate and liberal Southern politicians (Faubus and Wallace to name two) found himself caught between his politics and the rising tide of racial tension after World War II. Arguing that whatever needed improving in race relations was a state matter, he echoed contemporaries, arguing that the South must put its own house in order to avoid federal intervention. From the beginning, within the Dixiecrat forces, Thurmond represented a moderate voice. Indeed, he coyly avoided commitment to the Dixiecrat ticket until the last minute.

The Dixiecrats' vice-presidential candidate, Fielding Wright, appears from Frederickson's rendering a most unlikely candidate for national office. Wright had been to the manor born in the Mississippi Delta, disliked politics and politicians, but entered public service nonetheless. He was quiet, competent, and deeply conservative. In the Mississippi legislature, he fought against state spending, including efforts to guarantee free textbooks to the state's schoolchildren. As an attorney, he represented oil interests within the state and developed links across the South through his involvement in the industry. Wright had organized Mississippians against the Truman civil rights measures from an early date, and he willingly accepted the insurgents' vice-presidential nomination. Wright never warmed up to campaigning, and indeed throughout the 1948 race, did all he could to avoid too much direct contact with voters.

States Rights stalwarts never had any illusion that Thurmond would capture the presidency in 1948. But, to what purpose had reactionary politicians bolted the Democratic party? What were their post-1948 aspirations? Were they to remain a putative political party, a full-fledged one, or recede into a lobbying organization? What of other white Southerners, how would their politics be changed by the Dixiecrat revolt? These questions proved contentious and difficult to answer. Frederickson reserves nearly a third of her volume for an examination of what happened after the un-victory party was over.

Even while campaigning, Dixiecrats debated whether their goal was simply to lodge a protest vote, or to receive enough electoral votes to force the 1948 election

into the House of Representatives. This quickly became a pointless debate as the movement confronted the same restrictive ballot access procedures that had long nurtured white elite dominance of Southern politics. State party machinery fell easily to the Dixiecrats in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and South Carolina, but efforts to replace the national party's Truman-Bartley ticket with Thurmond-Wright ended up in court. Other states with more vibrant intraparty competition, personality politics, fewer African Americans, and more demonstrably changed demographics made it difficult for the Dixiecrats even to get on the ballot. Ultimately, the States Rights Democrats made it to the ballot in all eleven states of the old Confederacy, plus Kentucky. This was no small achievement, but one with uncertain significance.

The Dixiecrats won where they had taken over the party machinery. They managed variable showings elsewhere—20.3 percent in Georgia to 9.3 percent in Texas to 1.3 percent in Kentucky. Disagreement about campaign strategy soon became disagreement about the proper direction of the movement afterward. Some wished to establish a permanent party, and others wished to maintain a shadow party. Thurmond early on distanced himself from his failed run for the presidency, depriving the movement of the one politician solidly identified with the bolt. The movement evolved into a lobbying organization, the National States' Rights Committee, which floundered along with ever more radical and racist leadership until its quiet demise in the summer of 1952.

Movement leaders looked anxiously to the 1950 elections to test their effect on Southern politics. The results of the year's contests were mixed. George Smathers, with tacit Dixiecrat backing, defeated liberal Senator Claude Pepper in Florida. Frank Porter Graham, a racial moderate, fell to Willis Smith in a North Carolina U.S. Senate race. James Byrnes won the governorship of South Carolina with backing from Dixiecrats, but Strom Thurmond himself failed to defeat Olin Johnson for the U.S. Senate in a nasty, racially charged race. Indeed, loyalist and moderate Democrats could look to the 1950 elections with some reassurance that the Dixiecrat impulse lacked legs despite these high-profile races.

With 1952 looming, the States' Rights leadership dithered about what to do in that race. When Truman dropped from contention for the Democratic nomination in March, coherent Dixiecrat potential disappeared as well. Many, if not most, Dixiecrats followed closely or participated in efforts to draft Dwight Eisenhower as the Republican nominee. In the election, three Southern

governors with varying levels of Dixiecrat ties—Byrnes, Louisiana's Robert Kennon and Texas's Allan Shivers supported Ike. This proved to be the first truly effective Southern bolt from the Democratic party since 1928.

The failure of the Dixiecrats to create a durable conservative alternative to the Democratic party directly proceeded from its elitism. Running alongside this problem was the general perception among Southern whites that the benefits of the New Deal and Fair Deal far outweighed the apparent threat of Truman's civil rights stance. Implied in this is a possibility that once whites generally felt themselves more economically secure and the integrationist menace more real, they might smile upon a more conservative politics. This appears to have been what happened in the years since. The Dixiecrats "precipitated the weakening" (p. 238) of the national party's power in the Deep South according to Frederickson. They also "initiated a national discussion" about problems of ever-larger federal bureaucracies and dangers to "local control" (p. 238). Specifically, Frederickson cites Thurmond's long and ongoing political career as testament to the Dixiecrats' significance as voices crying in the wilderness.

Frederickson leaves some questions hanging in need of answers. One of the most obvious involves Strom Thurmond. The reader never finds out what motivated him—not his ideology, but rather his strategy or career plan—to make such a risky move. Perhaps his ambition to run for Senate in 1950 required him to make the stand he did in 1948, but then why back away from the States Rights organization in 1949? Other important matters need examination just beneath the surface of the narrative. Frederickson wrestles with the charge much bandied in 1948 that the Dixiecrats were under "corporate control," and argues that any large transfusion of cash "was not reflected in their campaign efforts" (p. 168-169). She too willingly buys Thurmond's assertions to the contrary and the movement's "shoestring budget" to dismiss the idea (p. 169). The amount of money, whether or not Thurmond had the expensive accoutrements of a real campaign, does not matter. What matters is the purpose—the political motivations of the donors.

Southern dissent against the New Deal from the right chiefly, but also ironically in Huey Long's case, from the left, had been helped by quiet, modest corporate support in cash and just under political radar. Conservative forces hostile to the Roosevelt administration gleefully helped foment trouble in the Democratic party, and certainly had no problem dropping a little money into

the fray. Texas oil money (Significantly, big oil was still headquartered elsewhere.) had financed the Texas Regular effort that was itself part of a larger, national effort within the party to scuttle FDR's reelection, the American Democratic National Committee.

Again from the frame of reference of Texas, most of the principals in the Texas Regular coup attempt had been active in 1936 and 1940 efforts to destabilize the Democratic party. Some of these people's money, if not their votes and public statements, found their way into Dixiecrat coffers for the same purpose. H.R. Cullen, who receives passing mention in *The Dixiecrat Revolt*, stands as an example. Moreover, in the 1950 elections, oil interests in Texas (perhaps elsewhere in the South as well?) slipped cash into significant races nationally as well as regionally in hopes of tipping Congress in favor of state ownership of the Tidelands. Some of it went into races Frederickson profiles behind candidates either supportive of or sympathetic toward Dixiecrat concerns—

challengers to Claude Pepper, Lister Hill, and John Sparkman.

These difficulties do not diminish Frederickson's research and analysis. They simply testify to the size of the story of Southern political evolution. *The Dixiecrat Revolt* is a readable and insightful piece of the picture of political change in the South in the last half of the twentieth century. The author's grasp of the workings of the state party machinery, especially in Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi and South Carolina is strong. Her overall understanding of the nature of one-party politics demonstrates an ability to see the threads in the whole cloth. Describing the intricate linking of one issue to another but always back into the main weave of race, Frederickson clearly shows an understanding of the habits of thought of the actors in her story. When, at last, some historical synthesis of this complicated political evolution is written, this volume will be an important piece of that larger understanding.

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