

A BOOK REVIEW: SOUTHERN POLITICS IN THE 1990S

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If there's anything I like reading about more than American democracy, religion, or sports, it's "southern politics"—which can best be appreciated as a mixture of democracy, religion, and sports.

We in the South tend to pack a lot of populism, moralism, agony, and ecstasy into our regionalized brand of politics. While we don't always produce a winner, and we don't make good losers, we sure play the game to the fullest. And we put on a pretty good show—regardless of whether it's Goat Hill, the Iron Bowl, or church politics.

I guess that's what I like about Southern Politics in the 1990s (Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1999). I have participated in politics as a public official and political scientist for the past three decades, and I can attest that Editor Alexander P. Lamis and his contributors have captured the full contemporary drama of our southern political game.

GENERAL THEME: The general theme or focus of Southern Politics in the 1990s is the phenomenon of Republican growth in this region during the closing years of the twentieth century—particularly “how did it happen?” and “where will it lead?” Lamis traces the Republican surge back through the previous few decades; and he concludes that a competitive two-party system now brings the South the means—given intelligent and imaginative leaders—for coping with its problems:

“While we await the South's impending full political reintegration into the Union, the region has already accomplished a remarkable feat in the 1990s: By installing a fully functioning, mature system of two-party competition, the South has advanced the cause of democracy for all its citizens.” (p. 405)

Just as importantly, Lamis and his team place contemporary southern developments within a context of national politics:

“The great value of the realignment framework offered here is that it allows one to understand how the South has gradually over these recent decades rejoined the national political mainstream.” (p. 404)

SPECIFIC QUALITIES: Southern Politics in the 1990s is a professional publication (as LSU Press books usually are), with competent scholarship and enough boring gray typography to satisfy any academician. But this book has several specific qualities that I find attractive and noteworthy:

- First is its completeness as a book on southern politics. It starts with V.O. Key, Jr., the godfather of regional study whose Southern Politics in State and Nation decades ago set the standard for everything that will ever be written about the subject. Fortunately, this is not just a copycat rendition of that 1949 classic. Lamis is an acknowledged academic expert; and from the opening chapter to the conclusion (including sections on all eleven states of the Old Confederacy), this book covers southern politics with comprehensive, insightful, and original analysis.
- Second is its contemporaneity. Lamis focuses on the 1990s (not the 1960s, as do too many southern politics scholars). For example, in references to Alabama, you'll find Richard Shelby, Fob James, Guy Hunt, Don Siegelman, and Jim Folsom, Jr., mentioned more often than George Wallace. If you want to know what's going on throughout the South, now, this is a good place to start.
- Third, this book is very readable. Lamis purposefully has created a dynamic portrait of the people, personalities and political issues (not simply history, dates, and data) that make southern politics what it is during this period of change. Furthermore, he has selected a combination of knowledgeable political scientists and working journalists to cover each southern state.
- In the case of Alabama, for example, he paired veteran analyst Patrick Cotter of the University of Alabama and Southern Opinion Research with former Anniston Star and current Birmingham News reporter Tom Gordon (for a chapter entitled "The GOP Rises in the Heart of Dixie"). The result is an account that is both interesting and factual. Among their observations: "While the current competitiveness of Alabama's electoral politics is obvious...whether the state will remain politically balanced is far from certain...One fact likely to be particularly important in the future is the relative ability of the parties to recruit electable candidates...Finally, the relative ability of the parties to govern will be a crucial factor" (pp. 247-248).
- Lastly, and admittedly this may be a minor point, this book is loaded with footnotes (about 750 of them) and it is fully indexed (with about 1,500 citations); this is a strong point for those of us who like to "skim" or "thumb through" a publication before reading it in depth.

RECOMMENDATION:

Southern Politics in the 1990s compares favorably with the best work on our regional political system. Aside from its dull typography (spread over 400 pages of text) and \$39.95 price tag (hardcover), it is a treat and a valuable resource. This publication is an important contribution to American history and politics; and I recommend it to both scholars and non-scholars who are interested in the South.