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Misunderstanding Racism in the Rise of Reagan and Republicans

There has been a fierce debate in recent weeks over racism's role in Ronald Reagan's political legacy and, by extension, the rise of the Republican Party.

The argument goes that Democrats lost their majority, above all other reasons, because they would not appease white racists, particularly in the South. Had George McGovern supported tepidly bigoted policies, by this logic, he may have defeated Richard Nixon.

History does matter. Considering the reasons behind the rise of Reagan and the Republican majority is vital to Democrats, as they attempt to create a sustainable coalition of their own.

Racism was certainly a factor in the GOP's ascension, and a significant one in the South. But it was not the "central" factor for Republicans, as *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman [contended](#) was "undeniable."

Krugman, along with others, revived this long-standing debate. A few weeks ago he [argued](#) that Reagan's Mississippi "states rights" speech in August of 1980, not far from where three civil-rights workers were infamously murdered in 1964, epitomized Reagan's reliance on Richard Nixon's "southern strategy." Krugman later used Republicans' appeal to white men as his proof.

It is worth noting, firstly, that if Reagan used a "southern strategy" it was also popular in the North.

Several 1980 Election Day exit polls by the networks -- which have their flaws, but are significantly more accurate than the small sample sizes of the American National Election Studies data often cited in academia -- demonstrates that Reagan won 66 percent of Southern white men in 1980. But he also won 60 percent of non-southern white men. Among white women that year, Reagan won 58 percent in the South and 52 percent in the non-South.

By 2004 Republicans continued narrowly winning non-southern white women, 51 to 49 percent. Non-southern white men, however, continued to vote heavily for Republicans by 58 to 41 percent. Of course, the [white male gap](#) is far larger in the South, where Democrats also lose white women by wide margins.

Now this could mean non-southern whites are simply milder bigots. But the evidence paints another picture.

"I think what a lot of white southerners saw [by the 1970s] is that black folks aren't so bad, but liberals are," as Harvard political philosopher Harvey Mansfield put it, conveying the conservative perspective.

The so-called racially motivated "southern flip" has come to be such conventional wisdom that even our smartest analysts take it as gospel. But as with most conventional wisdom the truth is more complicated.

As I write in [The Neglected Voter](#):

"The military is most visible and most respected in the South. Southerners register the highest levels of life satisfaction, fully 60 percent, compared to 43 percent of nonsoutherners, which explains their cultural apprehension about reform. The South has the lowest level of unionization in the nation. It has the highest level of gun ownership: 46 percent of southerners compared to 40 percent nationally; among white men, 62 percent own guns in the South compared to 52 percent outside the South. Not surprisingly, the South also has the highest level of church attendance, and ultimately it was the South's Protestant religiosity that was responsible for the first significant Republican southern inroads under Herbert Hoover. Seven out of ten of the largest megachurches in America are located in the South or Midwest, while nearly half of all social conservatives live in the South."

None of this means that racism did not play a considerable role in the rise of the modern Republican Party. But the Hoover point is worth a closer look. Republicans' first large gains in Dixie since Reconstruction were not in 1968, nor were they even in 1948 when Democrats took up the civil rights mantle.

Twenty years earlier, when both parties mostly ignored the plight of blacks, Republicans won half the South. The 1928 Democratic nominee Al Smith was a Catholic running in the Protestant South. But it was more than that. Smith was against Prohibition. The GOP successfully painted him as a big city politician who had little culturally in common with the Southern everyman.

In short, the first significant Republican success in the South was based on an entirely non-racial culturally populist appeal.

But by the Sixties racism shifted our political tectonics, explaining whites' swing from Democrats to Republicans in the Deep

South. It was in this time that Reagan first took the national political stage with an impassioned [speech](#) on Barry Goldwater's behalf. The conservative appeal would be repeated into Reagan's run for the presidency in 1980.

Reagan biographer Lou Cannon reported on that race as it unfolded. He recently [challenged](#) Krugman's argument. Cannon recounts an evocative story from Reagan's college days. When an Illinois hotel refused to offer a room to two football teammates who were black, Reagan brought them home to his parents for the night.

Yet Barry Goldwater was also not personally racist. Nevertheless, his vote against civil rights legislation and use of "states rights" (a political euphemism for a segregated South in the Sixties) had severely racist implications.

Now Reagan was no segregationist. As Cannon and *Times'* columnist [David Brooks argue](#), piecemealing together racially loaded rhetoric does make for a racially loaded campaign.

Ultimately, we know from exit polling and good reporting that Reagan defeated Jimmy Carter over issues of policy and character. Carter's "malaise speech," his inability to manage issues from the energy to the hostage crisis, stood in stark contrast to Reagan's optimism, his clear principles, his promise to reassert America's role in the world and strengthen its military.

Reagan also tapped into an emerging counter to the counter culture. He embraced a nascent social conservative movement that was turning on Carter.

In 1976, Carter said he was "born again" (a term that resonates most with social conservatives, in the South, and southern white women particularly). By the next election many conservative Christians believed Carter had not stood with them on issues from abortion to the Cold War. So they stood against him, as Jerry Falwell told me in an interview months before his death.

Why Yesterday Should Concern Democrats Today

A quarter century after Carter vs. Reagan we are still wrestling with the same debate. The lessons we read from this dispute influence how we interpret the present presidential race. We currently are witnessing echoes of the 1980 contest.

Many liberals have been admittedly confounded by Rudy Giuliani's appeal to some social conservatives. The political world buzzed when Pat Robertson, an evangelist and contemporary of Falwell, endorsed Giuliani.

Robertson said he backed Giuliani because he believed the fight against terrorism was the issue of our times. Robertson and Falwell backed Reagan, who was against abortion but also divorced and no regular churchgoer, to a large degree because national security was a foremost concern in those Cold War days as well.

It is impossible with election polling to precisely separate how issues of war and peace, or cultural values, or racism mingle in the mind of a voter. But we do know what came up most in the 1980 campaign - the Cold War, the role of government, the debate over the social fabric of our nation, and competing visions of the nation.

All of this complicates Krugman's [argument](#) that "backlash" played a "central role" in "the rise of the modern conservative movement." Few fair-minded analysts will argue today that "backlash" did not play a considerable role.

But there is a difference between arguing an elephant fundamentally supports itself on one leg instead of relying on all four.

If Republicans capacity to win five of the last seven presidential elections was largely due to a racist appeal to whites than the logic goes: as we whites become less racist Republicans are in trouble. But we also know that white racism in 2004 was a shadow of the racism of 1968. Republicans still won both contests.

Some liberals, for far too long, have been consoling themselves over the loss of the FDR coalition by arguing they fought the good fight and by consequence inevitably lost their majority -- it was fated in this vein of thought, therefore "A" for effort. But that conclusion has not helped liberals win back their majority.

A dispassionate look at why the GOP won from Nixon to Reagan to George W. Bush sometimes reveals the race card. But it also brings forth issues of "law and order," national security, insufficiently addressed middle and working class economic insecurity, cultural populism, and character politics.

America lived these issues with stunning similarities over the decades. The Democratic nominee of '68 was painted as "wishy washy" like the nominee of '04 was painted as a "flip flopper."

There is a quote I favor by historian H. W. Brands: "The purpose of history is not to make people happy, it is to make them wiser."

While Democrats were on the right side of the greatest social movement in American history, that of civil rights, the lessons of history do not always ease the "conscience of a liberal." But those other lessons of how Democrats also lost the FDR coalition will surely help liberals win the illusive majority they have sought for a quarter century.

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