

**Some Things Y'all Need to Know:  
Teaching Southern Politics at Home and Abroad**

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## **Some Things Y'all Need to Know: Teaching Southern Politics at Home and Abroad<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

The modern South is a thriving region that is increasingly like the rest of the United States. But that has not always been the case. Indeed, the political history of the American South is one that has been focused on the integration of this historically under-developed region into the remainder of American society, economically (especially in terms of labor markets), politically, judicially, and socially. And, even as the South has become increasingly similar to the rest of the country, it remains an especially important region for the balance of national political power. In this essay, I describe a class I teach on Southern Politics, explaining how I have organized it around topics critical to an understanding of American political development and describe the innovative pedagogical perspective I bring to the class (rooting the course in the labor economics of slavery and the “peculiar institution’s” long-term consequences). I also discuss in some detail the importance of this class for American students as they try to understand America’s development as a nation and the lessons that can be learned by international students from the South’s experiences, providing some qualitative evidence of the course’s impact.

**Keywords: Southern politics, international education, American political development**

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For the past 13 years I have taught courses on Southern politics at universities in both the United States and abroad.<sup>2</sup> Over the years, I have come to see these courses as increasingly important to my students' understanding of the development of American politics. While the politics of the region have, arguably, become less distinctive during the time I have been teaching this course,<sup>3</sup> I believe that it is difficult – maybe impossible – to understand either American political development or contemporary politics without appreciating the crucial place of the South. I have also found that for international students, a course on the politics of the American South can help them appreciate the American experience better and, for many of them, to consider matters of political development current in their own countries. In this essay, I outline my approach to teaching Southern politics, delineate its importance for helping American students comprehend the course of American political development, and then describe its particular benefits for international students in terms of understanding both the American experience and developments in their own countries.

### **An Approach To Understanding and Teaching Southern Politics**

I organize my courses on Southern politics around themes of political development, tracing out changes in Southern economics, race relations, and partisan alignments from the ante-bellum period through the present. The classes are organized into three roughly equal sections: the “old South” (from the ante-bellum period through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century), the transitional

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<sup>2</sup> [Description of the author's appointments in the U.S. and visiting appointments overseas; suppressed here for purposes of anonymity.]

<sup>3</sup> Recent discussions of this theme may be found in Shafer and Johnson (2006) and in the various papers presented at the conference “The End of Southern History?: Integrating the Modern South and the Nation” hosted by Emory University in March 2006. A sample of 37 prominent public and private universities and colleges in the region found that half (n = 18) continue to offer courses focused on Southern politics.

period (from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century through the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965), and the post-civil right period (late 1960s through the present). Since the sections build on each other, echoing themes from earlier in the term, I will devote more space here to describing the first part of the class.

### *The Old South*

My course is different from many other Southern politics classes I am familiar with because I structure much of the early material around the labor economics of slavery.<sup>4</sup> I have students read all or parts of Gavin Wright's (1986) excellent *Old South, New South*. Early in his book (p. 10), Wright makes the observation that his thesis is "an extended essay on the economic consequences of slavery"; in many ways, I shamelessly appropriate this perspective in my class, too, since many of the topics we discuss can be traced back to roots in the slave economy of the ante-bellum South and 20<sup>th</sup> century efforts to unify what had been the quite separate labor markets that resulted from slavery. At the beginning of class each semester, I ask my students to define and describe slavery. After the usual homages to Webster and the predictable comments about how evil slavery was, I push students to focus on the economic facets of the "peculiar institution," and invariably someone will offer the widespread misperception that slavery is "a cheap form of labor."<sup>5</sup> As Wright (1986) makes abundantly clear in the early chapters of his text, this is simply wrong. Since slavery capitalizes labor, making it an inelastic, fixed-cost item,

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<sup>4</sup> Since I believe in the importance of understanding word histories, I begin by telling students that the word "South" derives from the Anglo-Saxon word "suth," for sun. I stress this as a way to highlight that settlement patterns in the United States were driven by early agricultural dynamics and tended to be in latitudinal, east-to-west bands, contributing to early north-south regional differences that also reflected different emigration patterns from England (see Fisher 1991) and that would be exacerbated by the distinctive labor market created by slavery.

<sup>5</sup> This perspective is often shared even by those who should know better: "The slaves were then shipped to the American South and British West Indies colonies, where they were forced to provide the *free* labor to produce more raw cotton..." (Yafa 2005, 124, emphasis added).

slavery tends to make labor more expensive not less. In the ante-bellum South, slaves were valuable commodities (far more valuable than land),<sup>6</sup> and slave owners did their best to keep their value high.<sup>7</sup> The high cost of slave labor helps explain the region's growing dependence on cotton as the mainstay of its economy, since only cotton could consistently return profits high enough to pay for the labor involved.<sup>8</sup> Contrary to the conventional view, prior to the Civil War, the South was a high-wage region in a low-wage country (Wright 1986, chapter two), creating separate regional labor markets that would persist for at least a century.

While this is counter-intuitive to many, it is quite the conventional wisdom among economists and economic historians. In terms of teaching Southern politics, adopting this economic view represents an important pedagogical innovation, since understanding the capitalization of labor inherent in slavery helps explain otherwise inexplicable facets of Southern political development. I focus on three of the significant repercussions beyond the creation of disconnected Northern and Southern labor markets. First, demographically, slavery led to a Southern population that was relatively small and stretched sparsely across the land. The high cost of slave labor not only discouraged immigration, it also led ante-bellum planters to move

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<sup>6</sup> At the outbreak of the Civil War, it is estimated that 44% of total Southern wealth was held in slaves, while only 25% was in real property. This helps explain the economic devastation of the war, in which “at least two-thirds of assessed Southern wealth vanished,” making it one of the most crippling economic reversals in history (Winik 2001, p. 352).

<sup>7</sup> Unlike non-slave states in the North, which encouraged immigration to feed early, low-wage industrialization efforts, Southern states actively discouraged immigration, fearing that this would devalue the worth of existing slave labor. Southern states even prohibited the importation of new slaves from Africa (see, *e.g.*, the Mississippi constitution of 1832, which prohibited the importation of slaves into the state, and the constitution of the Confederate States of America, which outlawed the international slave trade). For more, see Wright (1978).

<sup>8</sup> For an excellent overview of the growth of the cotton industry in the U.S., see Yafa (2005).

often, since it was usually cheaper to buy new land than to rehabilitate old, exhausted soil.<sup>9</sup> In turn, this led to very limited urbanization in the South<sup>10</sup> and, since short-term residents have little incentive to invest in long-term improvements, a marked regional under-investment in such things as infrastructure and educational facilities. As I remind students, in a democratic system where political power is based (directly or indirectly) on population, high-wage Southern slave labor eventually undermined the region's political position nationally. The first national census in 1790 had shown roughly equal populations above and below the Mason-Dixon line. But the North grew much faster; of the 20 new states to join the union between 1791 and 1861, 12 were free states, while only six joined the CSA (the other two were the border states of Kentucky and Missouri). Wright (1986, p. 32) exaggerates only slightly when he notes that Northerners "filled up the continent at twice the speed" of Southerners.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This point was made by Thomas Jefferson, among others: "it is cheaper for Americans to buy new land than to manure the old" (quoted in Yafa 2005, 130). As I am fond of pointing out to my students, the scene early in *Gone with the Wind* where Gerald O'Hara tells his daughter Scarlett that "land is the only thing in the world worth workin' for, worth fightin' for, worth dyin' for, because it's the only thing that lasts" displays considerable literary license (actually, I generally use blunter language), since the much vaunted Southern attachment to the soil is a distinctively post-Civil War sentiment. In general, during the ante-bellum period, it cost only roughly one-third as much to buy new land as it did to rehabilitate land with fertilizer, meaning that what mattered were moveable slave assets, not immobile real estate assets.

<sup>10</sup> By the end of the Civil War, the prisoner of war camp at Andersonville, GA, had the fifth largest urban concentration in the Confederacy.

<sup>11</sup> It is important to note and I stress to my students that the South's cotton economy and the slave-based labor system that supported it could also be highly profitable, at least for the upper echelons of Southern society (although the extent of profits varied wildly and were almost entirely dependent on volatile international demand). The South's exports of raw cotton far outdistanced total Northern exports before the Civil War and in 1850, Natchez, MS, boasted more millionaires per capita than any place on earth (Yafa 2005, chapters 6 and 7). Southern cotton was such an important element of the world economy that South Carolina Senator James Henry Hammond seemed quite justified in saying in 1858: "What would happen if no cotton were furnished for three years? England would topple headlong and carry the whole civilized world with her, save the South.... No power on earth dares make war on cotton" (quoted in Yafa 2005, 145; for figures outlining Britain's dependence on Southern cotton, see also page 165.).

After a relatively brief treatment of the ante-bellum period, the class turns to consider political and social developments in the wake of the Civil War. Following Wright (1986) I structure much of this discussion on the thesis that with the abolition of slavery, economic and political elites in the South were transformed “from laborlords to landlords.” Informed by Key’s (1984 [1949]) classic treatment of the “black belt whites” who exercised disproportionate power in the region, the class considers how much of the “planter caste” survived the Civil War, developing a share-cropping system to “tie labor to the land” in the absence of the more coercive system of slavery.<sup>12</sup> As labor became a variable-cost item, the economy also began to diversify, with nascent industries like mining, textiles, and timber developing in different parts of the region. But a key difference is that after the Civil War and with the end of slavery, the South had become a low-wage region, since now the region’s business and political elites had an interest in hiring low-wage workers rather than in renting out the services of high-wage slaves. This regional shift was concomitant with an opposite development in the North where, as the industrial revolution blossomed in the decades after the war, manufacturing shifted from low-wage, low value added sectors to relatively high-wage, high value added production.<sup>13</sup>

With the end of Reconstruction in 1877 (more about this in a moment) and the return to power of the so-called Redeemer governments of traditional regional elites, Southern states and

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<sup>12</sup> This is another place where I emphasize the innovative political economy focus of the course. Most treatments of sharecropping concentrate on its inarguably negative consequences. What I show students is that it developed because it had features that made it highly attractive to both “croppers” and land owners. As a family-based system, it allowed poor families to stay together in ways that are not always possible in developing economies while simultaneously “tying labor to the land” and minimizing “monitoring costs” for landowners, who could rely on family economic needs to encourage diligent work (see Wright, pp. 84ff).

<sup>13</sup> By 1900, only 35 years after Appomatox, the United States had become the leading manufacturing power in the world, responsible for fully one-quarter of total world industrial output. In Wright’s words, the South “emerged in the 1870s as a low-wage region in a high-wage country, a consideration that shaped its economic future for another century” (1986, p. 50).

localities went to extraordinary efforts to cement this new low-wage economy into place, continuing the region's under-investment in both human and physical capital. Stressing the so-called "myth of Reconstruction" that portrayed the immediate post-war years as a period of unmatched wretchedness,<sup>14</sup> the Redeemer governments stressed regional white solidarity as necessary to prevent the reintroduction of Federal troops. The elite black belt whites who led the South were fully aware that the political, social, and economic system they created had real appeal even to poorer whites in the region and helped undermine any embryonic class-based solidarity among poor whites and poor blacks. The Jim Crow racial caste system provided psychological benefits to poor whites who, regardless of how destitute they were, could feel superior to all blacks (see Lipsitz 1998; Roediger 1999). And the low wage economy with its excess of low-skill black workers with limited employment opportunities provided many white families with tangible compensation in the form of readily affordable domestic help.<sup>15</sup> Drawing upon Key (1984 [1949]) and more recent work by Black and Black (1987), I also outline for students the extraordinary efforts Southern elites undertook between 1890 and 1905 to legally disfranchise not only blacks but a large majority of poor whites, too, effectively thwarting any possible bi-racial political coalition of the "have nots."<sup>16</sup> This permits not only a colorful description of the numerous and clever "devices" employed in the South to limit voting (*e.g.* the

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<sup>14</sup> I again pick on *Gone with the Wind*, contrasting Scarlett O'Hara's famous exhortation "as God is my witness, I'll never be hungry again" with the reality that the South's treatment was extraordinarily mild by historical standards.

<sup>15</sup> I relate for students my own experiences growing up in the South during the 1960s. Although my family was definitely in the lower range of the lower middle class, my parents were always able to hire black maids and yard workers.

<sup>16</sup> This is often something of a revelation to the Southern white students I teach. Accustomed to looking at regional history through the roseate lenses of Southern myth-making, they struggle with the realization that many of *their* recent forbears were denied a right they take for granted.

eight-box law, cumulative polls taxes, “understanding” tests), but also a reminder to students that for most of American history the prevailing understanding of federalism made voting rights a state matter not a federal one.

During this section of the class, I also challenge students’ historical understanding of the South as a place of limited government with a political culture that is friendly to business. Although students sometimes resist connecting all the dots, I explain that Jim Crow segregation required a large and intrusive government presence in the lives of citizens, and that the “Old South” was a region that actively discouraged business growth, especially since outside capital investment was seen as a threat to regional racial policies. In regard to the former, I expose students to the so-called “black codes,” which limited the rights of black citizens in many parts of the South (and, indeed, in other parts of the country as well). Most impressive on my students (many of whom are ardent supporters of gun rights) is the fact that “black codes” often severely constrained gun ownership by blacks. In regard to the latter, I remind my students – all of whom have grown up in an era during which Southern states have aggressively recruited businesses – that before World War II Southern states severely constrained what their localities could do to attract capital investment and that until the 1960s corporate taxes in the region were as much as 85% *above* the national average (see Wright 1986, chapter 8).

One issue that invariably arises in my Southern politics classes is why the North did not do more to change the South after the Civil War, particularly in regard to protecting recently emancipated black citizens. Answering this question is complicated and involves debunking some pervasive myths about Northern racial attitudes. But answering it is important to understanding the course of American political history ... and, in my view, is one of the pedagogical virtues of the course. The fact of the matter is that for the century after the Civil

War, the North was only sporadically interested in conditions in the South. At the heart of the matter, I think, is the reality that relatively few whites on either side of the Mason-Dixon line believed in racial equality. While many Northerners (although probably not a majority) opposed slavery and favored emancipation, their attitudes were usually based on economic considerations rather than moral ones, since there was a prevailing view in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that slave labor and free labor could not easily coexist (see Sandel 1996 for an excellent overview). But it is a tragic mistake to equate belief in emancipation with a belief in racial equality. Indeed there is voluminous evidence that Abraham Lincoln – and the Party of Lincoln – had at best ambivalent attitudes regarding issues of racial equality. Regarding Lincoln, I quote at length from his fourth debate with Stephen Douglas,<sup>17</sup> note his support for the Illinois state constitution (which forbade black immigration into the state and inter-racial marriage), his support for Illinois’s “black codes” and the Fugitive Slave Act, and his backing of efforts to relocate black Americans to Africa or the Caribbean.<sup>18</sup> Other GOP leaders held similar attitudes.<sup>19</sup> Even Lincoln’s

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<sup>17</sup> “I will say then that I am not, nor ever have been in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races, -- that I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors out of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will for ever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.”

<sup>18</sup> A recent PBS documentary on “Reconstruction: The Second Civil War” summarizes well the attitude of abolitionists to Lincoln by quoting Wendell Phillips: “a first rate second-rate man.”

<sup>19</sup> For example, consider Senator Lyman Trumbull of Illinois (“We the Republican party are the white man’s party. We are for free white men, and for making white labor respectable and honorable, which it can never be when negro slave labor is brought into competition with it”), Lincoln’s Secretary of State William Seward (who considered blacks “a foreign and feeble element like the Indians, incapable of assimilation”), Lincoln’s successor Andrew Johnson (“This is a white man’s country. And as long as I’m president, it will be a white man’s government”), Theodore Roosevelt (the 15<sup>th</sup> amendment was “a mistake,” “very unjust and bad policy”; and blacks were “altogether inferior to whites,” “two hundred thousand years behind”), and Calvin Coolidge (“Biological laws show us that Nordics deteriorate when mixed with other races”).

Emancipation Proclamation was, in actuality, much less than it met the eye, since it offered freedom only to those slaves beyond the reach of Union military control; in those areas where such an emancipation could have been enforced, slavery continued until the ratification of the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment.<sup>20</sup> While it is a widely held misperception (by omission if not commission) that racial mistreatment was limited to the South and that the North was a land peopled by egalitarian citizens, that is simply untrue.<sup>21</sup> At the time of the Civil War, there was widespread black male suffrage only in five New England states; New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and other Northern states permitted few if any black adult males to vote.<sup>22</sup> I belabor these points to help my students understand why there was not more Northern pressure to “reconstruct” the South after the Civil War and why it took another century before the national government fully commits to this course of action.<sup>23</sup>

### *Transition of Southern Politics*

In a second part of the course, we address the economic, social, and political forces that began to transform the Old South during the early and middle decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As earlier with slavery, I stress the political economics that under-girded these changes, particularly

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<sup>20</sup> “As the *London Spectator* mocked: ‘The principle is not that a human being cannot justly own another, but that he cannot own him unless he is loyal to the United States’” (Winik 2001, p. 248).

<sup>21</sup> In this regard, I remind students that *Brown v Board* was a case from Kansas.

<sup>22</sup> A number of Northern states also severely constricted the voting rights of other racial and ethnic minorities, most notably Asian immigrants in California.

<sup>23</sup> I also remind students that North-South relations after the Civil War were much influenced by other developments both domestically and internationally. It is not coincidental that the “Compromise of 1877” that ended Reconstruction (and which was known as the “Great Betrayal” among Southern blacks) came during the depression of the mid-1870s, when thousands of businesses went bankrupt, a million people became unemployed, and Northern citizens and politicians had more immediate concerns than race relations in the South. Similarly, efforts to legally disfranchise black and poor whites in the South during the 1890s were overshadowed by calls for national unity leading up to the Spanish-American War and the beginning of the American empire.

the Great Migration of poor white and (especially) black Southerners triggered by World Wars I and II. Cut off from their traditional sources of European immigrant labor, Northern businesses began to recruit Southerners to fill empty factory jobs, luring literally millions of Southerners to the North. The implications of the Great Migration are immense and, I think, underappreciated. First, the emigration of excess Southern labor fundamentally changed the nature of the Southern economy, weaning it from its post-Civil War low-wage, low-value-added traditions; this forced the mechanization of both Southern industry and agriculture, and began integrating the nation's regional economies into a national one. Second, the Great Migration had an educational impact, as Northerners began to learn more about conditions in the South, both social and economic. Fears that Southern conditions could retard Northern economic development and pull Northern wages down were among the factors that led to New Deal economic policies that were aimed squarely at improving the economic situation in the South<sup>24</sup> ... in the process revolutionizing the role of government in America.<sup>25</sup> Third, the immigration of blacks into the North changed the nature of politics in the United States, not only by contributing to New Deal Democratic majorities in previously solidly Republican states, but also by eventually bringing public attention and political pressure to bear on racial conditions in the South. In conjunction with other factors (such as America's rise to geo-political dominance after the Second World War and its 45-year cold war with the Soviet Union, during which Southern racial policies undermined the efforts of successive presidential administrations to "win the hearts and minds" of potential

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<sup>24</sup> See Wright (1986), chapter seven.

<sup>25</sup> Although many of my conservative students resist acknowledging this, I try to show them that the modern South is, in many ways, a creation of federal economic development programs that began in the New Deal and that resuscitated the moribund Southern economy. In addition to the minimum wage, we discuss the regional impact of Social Security, military spending during and after WWII, and crop subsidies for farmers that began with the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA).

allies in the Third World),<sup>26</sup> the Great Migration laid the groundwork for the federal pressure that would be brought to bear on the South during the Second Reconstruction of the civil rights period.

During this section of the course on the transition of Southern politics, we also overview the civil rights movement and changes in Southern partisan politics as the GOP grew in the region from the 1950s onward. In my treatment of the civil rights movement, I focus on what I call the first three “generations” of civil rights leaders: the lawyers of the NAACP’s Legal Defense Fund (LDF), the preachers of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the student activists of groups like the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE).<sup>27</sup> Trying to give students a more nuanced view of the movement, warts and all, I discuss the groups’ strategies<sup>28</sup> and compromises,<sup>29</sup> their successes<sup>30</sup> and failures,<sup>31</sup> their cooperation and the friction among them.<sup>32</sup> I conclude this

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<sup>26</sup> Other factors I stress include ratification of the 16<sup>th</sup> Amendment (which eventually gave the federal government considerably more tax revenues with which to pressure state compliance), the adoption of the Budget Act of 1920 (which expanded White House control of budgetary matters, making it easier for future presidents to focus national resources on problems they identified), and the inexorable growth of interstate commerce (which, since *Gibbons v Ogden*, had been broadly interpreted by the Supreme Court to be subject to federal regulation).

<sup>27</sup> The fourth “generation,” black Southern officials elected in the wake of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, I cover later in the course.

<sup>28</sup> For example, the SCLC’s shift from “non-violent persuasion” to “non-violent confrontation” as it faced the necessity to generate more media coverage, raise funds, and to respond to the emergence of more aggressive groups such as SNCC and CORE.

<sup>29</sup> For example, the LDF’s initial willingness to accept separate educational facilities at the elementary and secondary levels, and its focus on “equalization suits” to raise the standards of these segregated schools.

<sup>30</sup> The successes I stress include the LDF’s legal victories in *Smith v Allwright* (a 1944 case that ruled the Southern practice of “whites-only” primary elections to be unconstitutional), the graduate school desegregation cases from the 1930s through 1950, and *Brown v. Board I*; the SCLC campaigns in Birmingham and Selma; the sit-ins organized by SNCC; and CORE’s “freedom rides” to enforce integration of interstate transportation facilities.

section on the civil rights movement with an overview of the Civil Rights Act (CRA) of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act (VRA) of 1965, placing both in context,<sup>33</sup> and discussing both their accomplishments and limitations.<sup>34</sup> I discuss with students how the passage of these two landmarks bills marked, in some ways at least, the high water mark of the civil rights movement and how developments unfolding at the same time (*e.g.*, the demise of the Johnson administration in the wreckage of its Vietnam policy, growing Republican strength in the South as the GOP re-formed itself in the wake of the 1964 elections, the emergence of a black power movement that was much more threatening to white America, and the outbreak of a series of race riots beginning in the summer of 1965) distracted attention from civil rights and undermined support in the broader public. Trying to put these matters into theoretical perspective for students, I also argue that to a certain extent the CRA and VRA represented *comparatively* easy victories. By this I mean that they were largely in the American grain of respecting and extending civil liberties, protecting citizens *from* government-imposed, *de jure* segregation along the outer color line. As the civil rights movement progressed, however, it increasingly involved not protections *from* government, but protections to be guaranteed *by* government, about which

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<sup>31</sup> The failures I stress include the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown II* (which permitted the South to delay full desegregation for almost two decades) and the SCLC's 1961 "Albany campaign" (which led to its shift from "non-violent persuasion" to "non-violent confrontation").

<sup>32</sup> I draw largely upon Taylor Branch's excellent trilogy on the civil rights era (Branch 1989, 1999, 2006) as I try to de-mythologize the movement, stressing that these groups reflected the diversity of the black population ... that their leaders had egos, that they drew their memberships from different age groups and professions, that there were significant internal disputes about the best strategies and tactics.

<sup>33</sup> For instance, I stress to students that the CRA cannot be fully appreciated without an understanding of both the growth of interstate commerce in the U.S. and the judiciary's shift away from the doctrine of substantive due process, both of which permitted greater government regulation of what had been considered private contractual matters.

<sup>34</sup> For instance, I stress to students that as originally written, the VRA outlawed vote denial and would have to be amended and interpreted to deal with vote dilution.

the American political tradition has always been more ambivalent. To help illuminate this for my students, I stress that Americans have traditionally been far more comfortable with policies that treat citizens as individuals (such as voting rights) than with policies that explicitly treat them as members of a class (such as affirmative action).<sup>35</sup>

I conclude this overview of the transition of Southern politics by examining changes in the partisan balance of power in the region from the New Deal onwards. We begin considering decisions in the Truman administration to integrate the armed forces, the Democratic party's decision in 1948 to endorse a civil rights plank in its platform, and the Dixiecrat revolt that year. We consider the effect of Dwight Eisenhower's campaigns (he is the first GOP presidential candidate ever to campaign extensively in the South, famously visiting the South on his first campaign swing in 1952, eventually campaigning in every Southern state except Mississippi, rising when *Dixie* is played) and his success in Rim South states in both 1952 and 1956, success that Richard Nixon largely replicates in 1960. We discuss the sea changes that are visible in both parties by the early 1960s, with the national Democratic party fully embracing civil rights, and the national Republican party fully abandoning the "Lincoln strategy" and reconstituting itself as a sun-belt party based on white support in the South and Southwest.<sup>36</sup> The implications of this are fully visible in 1964, when Barry Goldwater – who called the CRA a "dictatorship over

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<sup>35</sup> To provide students with human faces to put on this issue, I describe how my own parents' attitudes evolved from the late 1940s (when they would have described themselves as liberal on racial matters) to the early 1970s when (faced with busing, perceptions of a deterioration in their standard of living, higher taxes, affirmative actions, and the like) they supported the third-party insurgency of George Wallace.

<sup>36</sup> This involved changes in the regional Republican party in the South as well. Previously the "party of Lincoln" had held strong appeal for Southern blacks, even after the New Deal. By 1964, however, for the first time since the Civil War, there was not a single Southern black delegate the GOP convention. As importantly, the limited Southern Republican party had been, principally, a patronage organization whose members were intent on keeping its rolls limited to ensure less competition for those positions. This had to change for the GOP to become electorally competitive in the region.

American business ... to appease the Negro bloc vote” – swept the Deep South states, garnering 71% of the white vote, but lost the Rim South states where Eisenhower and Nixon had done well. While Goldwater’s national showing was a short-term disaster for the GOP, I try to show students how subsequent Republican candidates (particularly Nixon and Ronald Reagan) used the insights first articulated in 1964, constructing campaigns that appealed to both Rim and Deep South whites. I also point out that Lyndon Johnson’s success in Rim South states was possible because of his ability to put together a potent bi-racial coalition of a sizable minority of white voters and a large majority of black voters, a pattern that would be theme of Democratic success in the post-civil rights era South.

### *The New South*

The last third of the semester is devoted to a summary of politics in the New South. We consider a number of topics here, beginning with an overview of presidential politics, illuminating how the South has been a key battleground for winning the White House (more on this below). We also consider how – and why – GOP gains downticket and in terms of partisan identification lagged behind its regional success at the presidential level. These issues present me with opportunities to introduce students to various theories of partisanship, partisan change, and voting behavior, as we discuss such topics as realignment, dealignment, disparate public expectations of different levels and branches of government, party organization, and the mobilization of previously rather apolitical fundamentalist and evangelical white Christians (Black and Black 2002). I place these topics in sharper perspective for my students by helping them understand how these regional developments led to a GOP that became competitive – if not dominant – in presidential, congressional, and state-level politics in virtually every Southern

state by the 1990s. I end the semester devoting two weeks to the election of black officials in the South and the representation of black interests. We assess the impact of the VRA and its amendments;<sup>37</sup> the creation of majority-minority legislative districts, and the social, judicial, and academic debates that have surrounded such “racial redistricting”; and the effect of black electoral success in the New South on the descriptive, symbolic, and substantive representation of black interests.

### **The Vital South: Teaching Southern Politics to American Students**

When I teach Southern politics classes in the United States, many of my students are themselves Southern, which lightens my burden in terms of justifying why they should care about the course. Southerners have historically been very regionally aware, conscious that there is something different about the South,<sup>38</sup> and they appreciate the opportunity to explore their political history, even when my interpretations challenge the conventional wisdom that they have received. Non-Southern students sometimes take more convincing. I attempt to do so by demonstrating how central the South has been to American political development. In a prescient book published just before Bill Clinton’s election in 1992, Earl and Merle Black argued that the South is “vital” to both parties’ hopes for winning the White House. This is certainly true. As I stress to students, no Democratic presidential candidate has *ever* become president carrying

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<sup>37</sup> I usually assign all or parts of Davidson and Grofman’s (1994) excellent work *Quiet Revolution in the South*.

<sup>38</sup> Consider, among other things, the number of Southern universities that have programs devoted to regional studies, including the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi, the Center for the Study of the American South at the University of North Carolina, the Blair D. Blair Center of Southern Politics and Society at the University of Arkansas, and the Institute for Southern Studies at the University of South Carolina. Consider also that of all the regional political science associations in the United States, only the Southern Political Science Association devotes a section to the politics of its home region. For an insightful and humorous treatment of Southerners’ self-consciousness of their regional identity, see Reed (1994).

fewer than four Southern states (the number carried by Clinton in both 1992 and 1996); and, since the New Deal, the same is true for Republicans.<sup>39</sup>

But I emphasize that the South's importance is not limited to modern presidential elections. In fact, I tell students that in my mind it is virtually impossible to understand the development of American politics without understanding the vital role the South has played since the earliest days of the republic.<sup>40</sup> Early in the semester, I delineate for students the major contributions that Southerners have made to the U.S. since the founding, including: four of the first six presidents; important subsequent presidents such as Andrew Jackson and Lyndon Johnson;<sup>41</sup> five of the last eight presidents; the principal author of the Declaration of Independence; the principal architects of the Bill of Rights; the most important contributions to the *Federalist Papers*; the longest serving chief justice and his concept of judicial review; the development of the mass two-party system; generations of important congressional leaders (from James Madison, to John C. Calhoun, to Sam Ervin, to Newt Gingrich); the nation's principal civil rights leaders; important political strategists such as the late Lee Atwater and Karl Rove ... and the list could go on. Likewise, I emphasize that some of the more dubious things associated with the South (such as nullification and secession) are not distinctly Southern, but were either practiced or advocated by states from New England to the Pacific Northwest. More than this, however, I underscore that the South has been at the very center of the major developments and

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<sup>39</sup> With a population of roughly 84 million people, the South is home to some 30% of total U. S. population. Any candidate who sweeps the South picks up 57% of the Electoral College votes needed to win the presidency, meaning he needs less than one third of the Electoral College votes from the remainder of the country.

<sup>40</sup> For Southern students, I emphasize that the opposite is also true, that the development of the modern South cannot be comprehended without understanding the fact that the region is part of a larger, stronger federal system in which the national government has played a more dynamic role in last 70 years.

<sup>41</sup> If you included so-called "hyphenated" Southerners, the list could also include Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson.

debates that have defined the United States over the past 230 years: during the founding era, the debate over how to count slaves for the purposes of representation and taxation; from Alexander Hamilton's 1791 "Report on Manufactures" through the decades before the Civil War, the debate over tariffs that protected nascent Northern industries while hindering the Southern agricultural economy;<sup>42</sup> in the decades immediately preceding the Civil War, the bitter debate over the extension of slavery west and the balance of power that entailed between slave and free states; during the New Deal, the focus of Keynesian economic policies to bolster consumption and curb over-production in the South;<sup>43</sup> during the civil right era, the nation's commitment to living up to the language of the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment and using federal power to end state-sanctioned discrimination; and, in recent decades, the electoral growth of a sunbelt-based Republican party capable of controlling both the White House and the halls of Congress. Summarizing for my students, I tell them that the political history of the United States can be nicely encapsulated by understanding how descriptions of America that used to end with the caveat "*except for in the South*" now have to conclude "*especially in the South.*"

To lighten the mood in the class, I also point out that the South is, simply, an interesting place to examine, both for the contrasts it embraces and for the characters who have filled its political annals. The contrasts are marked, and as often humorous as they are tragic. The South is a region of great patriotism (the seal of the CSA featured George Washington), that was the seat of one of the great rebellions in world history. It is a region that is notoriously conservative

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<sup>42</sup> It is largely forgotten in this era of increasingly global free trade, but in the 1800s American tariffs were substantial: cotton products from India were taxed at a rate of 83.5% when they were imported into the U.S. (Yafa 2005, 107).

<sup>43</sup> Walter Lippmann termed the Fair Labor Standards Act, which established the first national minimum wage, as "in truth a sectional bill disguised as humanitarian reform" (quoted in Wright 1986, pp. 222-223). On efforts to curb "nightwork" in the South and AAA policies to limit the cotton surplus, see Wright (1986, chapter seven).

on moral and religious dimensions, but it is now home to the nation's third-largest gambling industry, has some of the highest divorce rates in the nation,<sup>44</sup> and is a place where *Desperate Housewives* is the most popular television series. It is a region in which there were over 2,500 lynchings of blacks between 1890 and 1930; but it is also a region where Southern leaders have an almost fetishistic attachment to constitutional and legal niceties.<sup>45</sup> It is a place famous for the strength of its "steel magnolias," yet whose states refused to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment.<sup>46</sup> And, of course, the list of colorful Southern politicians is virtually endless.<sup>47</sup> I fully agree with Key (1984 [1949]) that historically much of this "color" resulted from the "politics of personality" that emerged in the issue-less vacuum of one-party politics in the Old South. Still, from a pedagogical perspective, such personalities can rivet student attention and leaven the class's drier, theoretical sections. Descriptions of historical figures such as "Pitchfork Ben" Tillman, John Vardaman, "Big Jim" Folsom, "Ma and Pa" Ferguson, George "The Fighting Judge" Wallace, and Huey Long give students a taste of the rich flavor of Southern politics, and provide something of a better perspective from which to consider more

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<sup>44</sup> Five of the 11 states with highest divorce rates are Southern; only two Southern states (South Carolina and Louisiana) are below the national average.

<sup>45</sup> This is Confederate President Jefferson Davis referring to the North in a speech in Jackson, MS, in late 1862: "They have destroyed the freedom of the press; they have seized upon and imprisoned members of state legislatures and of municipal councils, who are suspected of sympathy with the South; men have been carried off into captivity in distant states without indictment, without a knowledge of the accusations brought against them, in utter defiance of all rights guaranteed by the institutions under which they live. These people, when separated from the South, and left entirely to themselves, have in six months demonstrated their utter incapacity for self government."

<sup>46</sup> Among Southern states, only Tennessee and Texas ratified the ERA, and Tennessee later voted to rescind its action.

<sup>47</sup> Half in seriousness and half in jest, I call my students' attention to Chandler's (1977) interesting book *The Natural Superiority of Southern Politicians*.

contemporary colorful and roguish regional politicians such as Strom Thurmond, Edwin Edwards, David Duke, and even Bill Clinton.

While I have never undertaken a thorough and systematic assessment of the impact of the course, my clear impressions are that American students find the course unusually informative and enlightening. It is the course on which I routinely receive the highest student evaluations, with students volunteering that it is one of the most influential college courses they have taken. Indeed, an overview of course evaluations for the past five years shows that on average 20 percent of Southern politics students volunteered such a comment, far exceeding my experience with any other course. As one student from the spring 2000 semester put it, “[n]ever have I taken a course that impacted my perspectives on politics in America more than this one.” That is a reasonably common reaction to the course, with students often noting that the regional focus helped provide them with a framework to understand such disparate developments as the end of Reconstruction, Keynesian economics, and the necessity for a national Voting Rights Act. A number of Southern students have told me over the years how much the course has helped them place their home region into perspective, understanding the core economic and political bases of its comparative under-development, lower investments in education, poorer infrastructure, and racially polarized politics. Southern white students are particularly affected by the course’s focus on the economics and consequences of slavery. While at first they evince some relief at the seemingly “cold-blooded” economic focus, over time they have to face the long-term, real, tangible consequences of the “peculiar institution” that they themselves continue to experience in real, tangible ways.<sup>48</sup> Likewise, non-Southern students I have taught have indicated that the

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<sup>48</sup> It is also worth noting that early in the class I disabuse students of the notion --- often still expressed by many Southern whites --- that the Civil War was about states rights rather than slavery. If that were true, I ask them, how can they explain the fact that the Confederate constitution explicitly made the protection of slavery a *national* issue and forbade the states from outlawing it?

course gave them a better understanding of and appreciation for the South's unusual economic, social, and political development. A common reaction from non-Southern students is that the course helps them understand the motivations of Southerners historically and appreciate better the Sunbelt's role in contemporary American politics.

### **Southern Exceptionalism is Not So Exceptional: Teaching Southern Politics Abroad**

Garnering and retaining the interest of international students is a different and more difficult task. Even for students in American Studies programs, a narrow focus on an American region can strain their attention; and local color is notoriously difficult to market in translation. But, in the international programs in which I have taught, visiting faculty are given opportunities in which to explicitly "sell" their classes, describing them for students, explaining their importance and relevance. When I do so, I generally make several points for potential students.

First, to ease the natural concerns that international students are likely to have, I attempt to show them that they are already familiar with the South and Southern politics, even if they do not always recognize it. I stress that a number of the Americans they are familiar with are, in fact, Southerners. I do this across several a range of areas, not just in the political arena. In terms of historical figures, I point out that such iconographic Americans as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Woodrow Wilson, George Washington Carver, Booker T. Washington, and Martin Luther King, Jr. hailed from the South. In the arts, I stress that many of the America's most prominent writers (from Faulkner to Grisham) and entertainers (from Elvis to Britney) are Southern, as are its most original contributions in terms of artistic genres (such as blues and country music). And, of course, I remind them that many – perhaps most – of the prominent American politicians from the last several generations have been Southern (a short list

would include Lyndon Johnson, Jimmy Carter, the Bush family, Bill Clinton, Al Gore, Newt Gingrich, Tom Delay, and Bill Frist). Tying these observations to the arguments I make for American students, I emphasize that it is very difficult to understand the United States, especially American politics, without grasping the South's importance both historically and currently.

Second, I accentuate the fact that the story of the South's economic and political development is one that has lessons for many other contemporary societies, especially emerging democracies. In making this argument, I acknowledge that the American South is still very much a "work in progress," a region that for all of its numerous attractions has long denied and delayed to many of its citizens the full "blessings of liberty" guaranteed by the Constitution. This tone resonates well with many of the international students I have taught over the years.

Although the vast majority of them are fascinated by the U. S. (else why would they be in American Studies programs), they can be as much repelled as attracted by the casual confidence of American culture and the blasé arrogance of Americans who tend to discount the often tortured history of American political development, stressing only its successes and more noble features. Focusing on the South necessitates that you address many discomfiting aspects of American society ... racism and other legacies of slavery, under-development and regional disparities within a wealthy nation, a lingering insularity in an otherwise outward-looking country, the disadvantages inherent in a federal system. As John Kingdon (1998) has argued persuasively, America is "unusual," if not *sui generis*. Taken as a whole, America has had a most abnormally fortunate process of political development. Its development has been on the whole well-ordered and stable; it has never experienced the humiliation of foreign military occupation; and, since it largely lacks a feudal past (Hartz 1991 [1955]), has seldom known the despotism of local tyrants. That is, in a word, unlike the experiences of the rest of the world. In

this regard, Southern political history – with its semi-feudal aristocracy, its “lost cause” memories of military defeat and occupation, the colonial nature of its economy (Wright 1986, especially chapter six), and the wrenching character of the modernization process largely forced upon from outside – is much more similar to the international norm.<sup>49</sup> When focusing on the South, it is difficult to be smug about the American experience; I think that the modesty this forces upon my classes on Southern politics encourages students to be more receptive to learning about America and really thinking about what lessons it might hold for them.<sup>50</sup>

One thing I have learned in my two decades of teaching international students is that their real interests often lie in their home cultures. Like Alexis de Tocqueville, whose eye was always on France even as he dissected America, they are often looking for insights that they can apply closer to home. In this regard, Southern politics is an especially illuminating subject, since so many of the topics that lie at the core of the South’s political development are very relevant to the recent or on-going situations in many developing democracies. I stress a good number of these themes, drawing comparisons as appropriate to the situation on the ground in the country where I am teaching. A short list of the most prominent of these topics would include:

1. the status of historically disadvantaged racial/ethnic minorities (Whether it’s the Roma in Eastern Europe, indigenous peoples in the Americas, or the Muslim Uighers in China, most emerging democracies have on-going issues with one or more such groups. A thorough and honest discussion of America’s civil rights movement, its

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<sup>49</sup> Ironically, the very features that have made the Southern experience so exceptional relative to the rest of the United States make it much more relevant to the rest of the world.

<sup>50</sup> The political economy focus of the course also appeals to many international students, who come to the course with better backgrounds in economic principles than in American history or culture. The economic perspective makes the course different from many of the other American Studies courses they encounter in their programs of study, too. Indeed, a perusal of American Studies syllabi (see, *e.g.*, those provided in Rowe 2000) demonstrates that the pedagogy in the American Studies field is almost completely uninformed by the literature, perspectives, and methods of economists.

successes and failures, the policies that have worked and those that have failed, has real resonance for international students and offers insights they can apply to their own societies.)

2. the transition from a low-wage, colonial economy to a high-wage economy integrated into the international labor market (The story of the South's economic transition is one that international students can easily appreciate. As these students watch their own societies struggling with the modernization process, they can take heart from the South's experience. In the South, as in most societies, economic modernization came with a cost – traditional practices were up-ended, traditional power arrangements re-arranged, economic inequality increased at least in the short run [see Wright 1986, especially chapter six]. And yet, in the long term, for everything lost, something was also gained in terms of the overall quality of life of most Southerners.)
3. traditional underinvestment in education (Driven by the belief that educated people would have the skills and the incentives to leave the region, Southern states traditionally feared they would be unable to recoup much of their investment costs in education and, therefore, spent relatively little. Emerging nations continue to struggle with this very real fear, which – in the long term if not in the short – contributes to the type of “brain drain” that they can ill afford. Southern efforts to deal with problem [*e.g.*, the establishment of Research Triangle in North Carolina] can be nicely compared to recent efforts in places such as China to dramatically ratchet up investments in higher education [see Mohrman 2003]. )

4. issues of surplus labor and the internal migration this causes, especially to cities as the agricultural sector mechanizes and there are pressures to “clear the land” (The story of the Great Migration that cleared the rural Southern landscape of excess labor during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is one that rings familiar to students in many regions of the world. From Latin America, to Eastern Europe, to East Asia, societies across the globe are dealing with mass migrations of peasants out of the countryside and into the cities in search of better lives. Increasingly mechanized and efficient agricultural sectors have less need for raw manpower; and societies increasingly organized along market principles have less desire and ability to control the movements of their citizens. Again, the lessons of America’s experiences with the repercussions of such migrations can be instructive.)
5. the advantages and disadvantages of a federal system (A recurrent theme in American politics is the tradeoffs involved in a federal system. Federalism offers the advantages of sub-national laboratories in which to test new policies and the ability to tailor government to local conditions. But, as the political history of the South demonstrates, federalism can also be used as cover to justify and protect inexcusably inequitable conditions. As emerging democracies struggle with reforms to systems that have historically been overly centralized [my favorite example is that the whole of China, which stretches for some 5,000 kilometers east to west, operates on “Beijing time”], the Southern example serves as a useful corrective to the view that local is always better.)
6. the importance of an independent judiciary that can guarantee greater respect for the individual (The role of the federal judiciary in changing the South, especially in

dismantling the region's systematic, *de jure* segregation, clearly has implications for the rule of law in other societies. In discussing the activities of the federal judiciary in cases from *Guinn and Beal v. U.S.*<sup>51</sup> to *Smith v Allwright*, to *Brown v Board*, to *Heart of Atlanta Motel v U.S.* and *South Carolina v Katzenbach*,<sup>52</sup> to *Shaw v Reno*,<sup>53</sup> I stress the importance of a separate judiciary to the protection of individual rights, especially in the face of majority political pressure. While I do not over-emphasize the independence of American courts,<sup>54</sup> I do outline how and why judges are *more* removed from the daily hurly-burly of partisan political considerations and, therefore, *better* positioned than most government officials to weigh matters of fundamental individual rights and liberties. In countries like China and the newly-re-established democracies in central and eastern Europe, which are currently engaged in their own initial experiments with judicial review,<sup>55</sup> this topic has considerable student interest.) and

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<sup>51</sup> This is the 1915 case in which the Supreme Court first struck down a Southern “device” intended to limit voting rights to blacks. The Court ruled unconstitutional use of the “grandfather clause” (in the case at bar in Oklahoma), which exempted any male whose father or grandfather had been eligible to vote as of 1866 from having to meet other qualifications or being subject to any further “devices” (such as reading and writing tests). Of course, although racially neutral on its face, since no blacks had been eligible to vote in region before the adoption of the 15<sup>th</sup> amendment, this effectively applied only to whites.

<sup>52</sup> These are the two Supreme Court decisions that upheld the constitutionality of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, respectively.

<sup>53</sup> *Shaw* is one of the exemplary cases addressing the constitutionality of “majority minority districts” designed to increase the election of minority legislative officeholders.

<sup>54</sup> Indeed, I try to impress upon my students in both the U. S. and abroad the complicated nature of the federal judicial system and how the appointment process (especially at the lower levels, where matters of senatorial courtesy can weigh heavily) can result in judges who are quite sympathetic to the current political majority.

<sup>55</sup> For instance, on the increasing Chinese interest in judicial independence, see Hung (2004) and Yardley (2005).

7. the difficulties of cultivating a vibrant democracy in a one-party state (Many developing nations face either the recent legacy or the on-going reality of one-party rule. Students in such societies can well relate to Key's (1984 [1949]) stinging critique of the limited democracy in the Old South. They understand --- and often still live in the shadow of --- the type of issueless, personality-driven politics that naturally thrives in societies lacking a plausible alternative to serve as the loyal opposition and to represent the interests of the "have-nots" and the "have-littles." The story of how this changed in the South --- with a growing middle class [driven by higher wages and the educational opportunities provided by the G. I. Bill], enhanced media, changing attitudes on race, and the enfranchisement of blacks --- offers lessons, both positive and negative, for students considering the futures of their own developing democracies.)

These topics are not only critical to understanding the South and the history of Southern political development, but they help keep the interest of international students, permit them to consider important aspects of American political development in comparative perspective, and invite them to consider what lessons their societies may learn from the experiences of this important American region.

As with American students, evidence of the course's success is largely impressionistic and qualitative, but to my mind compelling. My experience has been that international students often enter the class with lingering skepticism about the region's interest or utility to them, but leave the semester with a better understanding of American politics and political development.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> One former international student quipped to me that, as an avid fan of *The West Wing*, after taking my class she can now understand the jokes on the show about Southern politics and politicians.

One of my former Chinese students told me that the class gave her a much better grasp on the dynamics of American conservatism, its roots, development, and political importance; she noted that an unanticipated result of the class for her was an enhanced understanding of the neo-conservative attitudes of the Bush administration, which can be difficult for Chinese to comprehend. Somewhat in contrast, another former Chinese student and an ardent convert to the virtues of a market economy told me that he had never fully appreciated the importance of Keynesian economic theory until my review of the impact of New Deal policies on Southern economic growth. I have also found that many of my international students are eager to draw fruitful analogies between the South's experiences and their own. For instance, I have had Chinese students ask me what V. O. Key would have to say about the Chinese Communist party, Hungarian students draw comparisons between the Northern economy's effect on the South and the EU's effect on its new member states, and various international students compare their own possible emigration decisions to the Great Migration. While international students might not develop a noticeable Southern drawl, they indicate that the class gives them a useful window onto the American experience, addressing issues that help them make better sense of the United States and to think more critically about their own experiences.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

No class that I teach, in either the U.S. or abroad, is as popular as my course on Southern politics. Its value added is high because it not only addresses many of the signally important topics in American political development, but I think it changes the way in which students – both domestic and international – look at America. For Southern students, it helps them make sense of their home region, especially as they come to understand the political economics of slavery

and how “the peculiar institution” contributed to types of regional under-development that are still obvious (although fading) today. For non-Southern American students, this course helps them achieve a more theoretically-grounded understanding of how important the South has been to the historical development of the American political system and why it remains so “vital” important today. For international students, a course focusing on the South offers them a more accessible and less threatening window onto the American experience, featuring a perspective that emphasizes the numerous similarities between the South and many contemporary emerging democracies. Overall, while the South is certainly becoming a much less distinctive region in the United States, both economically and politically, courses on Southern politics continue to feature important lessons for interested students around the globe.

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