

# Research on the Political Geography of the South, 1980–2005

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*The American South has undergone tremendous change in the past quarter century. No where is this change more apparent than on the region's political landscape. Today minority voters are participating at all levels in the South's political processes. The region has also continued its movement from the Democratic to Republican parties. Have these changes received adequate attention in the political geography literature? This paper attempts to identify all articles, book chapters and books on the political geography of the South published in the past quarter century. It finds that there has been a significant increase in the rate of published work on the region's changing political landscape, and that these efforts have appeared in a wide array of outlets. The paper concludes by identifying areas in which additional work would be helpful to fully understanding the South's political landscape.*

KEY WORDS: political geography, American South

## INTRODUCTION

The American South has witnessed dramatic demographic, social, economic,

and political change during the past quarter century. In demographic terms, the region has experienced substantial population change due to the in-migration of Hispanics and Asians, most particularly to states such as North Carolina, Georgia and Florida. Socially the region has been the scene of an increased aggressiveness by religious leaders and bodies over issues such as abortion, gay and lesbian rights, and the secular character of the public schools. The traditional issue of race was recently thrust back into the regional and national spotlight due to the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina, and the dramatic film footage of poor and largely African American families trapped at the Louisiana Superdome. Economically the region has simultaneously witnessed an out-migration of thousands of low-skill and low-wage jobs including those associated with textiles along with smaller but significant increases in more highly skilled employment as corporations such as Mercedes, Hyundai and Boeing have moved manufacturing plants to the region.

Arguably no aspect of life in the South has experienced more change than those evident on its political landscape. With very few exceptions, nearly every state in the region is now a consistent supporter of the Republican Party in presidential elections. The region's congressional delegations have increasingly become part of the Republican majority in both the House and the Senate, with much of the GOP's leadership hailing from the South. The majority of remaining Democratic House members from the South represent majority African American districts. At the state level, Republicans occupy a majority of the region's governorships, and dominate an increasing number of state legislatures. In those few states in which Democrats continue to dominate the legislature, such as Alabama, their majorities are comprised of potentially volatile coalitions of moderate to conservative white, and liberal to moderate African American legislators which are subject to schisms on a host of issues from public school funding to the focus of economic development efforts.

#### PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to provide a status report on published research on the political geography of the South during the past quarter century. Have political geographers responded in their research agendas to the tremendous political changes experienced in the region? If so, what topics have received attention and which need added focus? What are the principal outlets for their work? And who are the primary contributors to the literature on the political geography of the South? We provide an overview of what has been done on the political geography

of the region since 1980, and attempt to provide suggestions for topics that have received insufficient attention by geographers generally, and political geographers in particular.

#### METHODS

A central purpose of this effort was to identify all published work pertaining to the political geography of the South from 1980 to the present. The effort began with online searches of the vitas of notable political geographers with established southern focuses to their work. Second, a list of likely journal outlets was used to search all issues during the past quarter century. These journal outlets included the *South-eastern Geographer*, *Political Geography*, the *Professional Geographer*, *Urban Geography* and the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. The references included in all articles, book chapters and books identified were also searched to find additional published works for placement in the bibliography. The preliminary list of publications collected from these efforts was then sent to prominent political geographers, as well as the Political Geography Specialty Group Listserve, seeking additional suggestions for inclusion.

Published items on topics pertinent to the political geography of the South were included based on a host of considerations. For example, items by non-geographers in geography outlets were included, as were items in outlets beyond geography if they were by geographers. Some items were included by authors not generally identifying themselves as political geographers due to the substantial political implications of their work. A moderately broad definition of the South was

Table 1. Journal Outlets for Articles on the Political Geography of the South, 1980–2005.

Publication Outlet	Number of Publications
<i>Southeastern Geographer</i>	17
<i>Political Geography</i>	17
<i>Florida Geographer</i>	8
<i>Professional Geographer</i>	4
<i>Urban Geography</i>	4
<i>Geographical Review</i>	3
<i>Annals, Association of American Geographers</i>	2
<i>Cultural Geographies</i>	2
<i>International Social Science Review</i>	2
<i>Southern Studies</i>	2
<i>North Carolina Geographer</i>	2
Other Journals <sup>a</sup>	14
Books	6
Book Chapters	6
TOTAL	89

<sup>a</sup>Journals with one article each included the *Journal of Cultural Geography*, *Historical Geography*, *GeoJournal*, *Journal of Geography*, *Arkansas Journal of Geography*, *Pennsylvania Geographer*, *Geographical Perspectives*, *Area*, *Hagar: International Social Science Review*, *Canadian Review of American Studies*, *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism*, *American Politics Quarterly*, *Women and Politics*, and the *Western Political Quarterly*.

used as well, with work focusing upon states on the margins of SEDAAG included if it was pertinent to the region as a whole. Thus, we took a moderately broad and inclusive approach in decisions of whether items should be added to the bibliography. That being said, clearly our bibliography is but a subset of the items that might be included by others with even broader definitions of “political geography” or “the South.”

## FINDINGS

A total of 89 different items published from 1980 through 2005 on the political

geography of the South were identified including six books, six book chapters, and 77 journal articles. Not surprisingly, the two most common outlets for work on the political geography of the South were the *Southeastern Geographer* and *Political Geography* (Table 1). These two journals included 17 articles each, and thus accounted for well over 40% of all journal outlet publications included in the bibliography. Given the active use of *Political Geography* by political scientists as well as political geographers, it seems likely that work on the political geography of the South in this journal has the potential

Table 2. Temporal Distribution of Published Work on the Political Geography of the South, 1980–2005.

Time Period	No. of Published Items	No. of Items/Yr
1980–1984	7	1.4
1985–1989	7	1.4
1990–1994	10	2
1995–1999	22	4.4
2000–2005	43	7.2
1980–2005	89	3.4

to inform research well beyond geography. The *Florida Geographer* published the third largest number of articles at eight, in large part due to the strong cluster of geographers at Florida State University with interests in political geography. *Urban Geography* and the *Professional Geographer* each served as outlets for four articles each, with *Geographical Review* including three articles during the 26 yr study period. It is notable that state level geography journals served as the outlet for a total of twelve articles including the eight noted above in the *Florida Geographer*, two in the *North Carolina Geographer*, and one each in the *Pennsylvania Geographer* and *Arkansas Journal of Geography*. Ten articles were in non-geography journals including two in the *International Social Science Review* and two in *Southern Studies*. While the breadth of outlets for work on the political geography of the South is impressive, there does appear to be an under-representation of articles in outlets such as the *Annals*, *Professional Geographer*, and *Geographical Review*.

The number of published items on the political geography of South increased

during the study period (Table 2). Beginning with 1980, the references were divided into four 5 yr periods and one 6 yr interval (2000–2005). In the 5 yr span between 1980 through 1984, only seven items appeared, a rate of 1.4 per year. This number remained constant at 1.4 items per year between 1985 and 1989, but experienced a substantial increase to 2.0 items per year from 1990 and 1994. In the last two time periods the number of published items on the political geography of the South grew substantially with 21 between 1995 and 1999, and 43 between 2000 and 2005. Thus, the number per year jumped to 4.4 items between 1995 and 1999, and to 7.2 between 2000 and 2005. These data indicate that there has been a dramatic increase in the quantity of political geography publications on the South, arguably an outgrowth of the region's growing influence upon the country's political landscape.

The 89 published items on the political geography of the South were also subdivided by topic to determine the primary emphasis of such work (Table 3). Categories were not considered mutually exclusive of one another, and a single article might well have topical emphases falling in to two or even three categories. Thus, Leib's 2002 article entitled "Separate Times, Shared Spaces: Arthur Ashe, Monument Avenue and the Politics of Richmond, Virginia's Symbolic Landscape" in *Cultural Geographies* pertained to both public memory and race, and was therefore counted in both categories. The largest category of work on the political geography of the South emphasized the region's changing electoral landscape. A total of 45 articles pertained to the region's electoral landscape, redistricting or campaign finance.

*Table 3. Topical Categories of Published Work on the Political Geography of the South, 1980–2005.*

Topical Category	No. of Published Items
Electoral Geography	33
Redistricting	9
Campaign Spending	3
Race/Ethnicity	38
Civil Rights/Civil Rights Movement	13
Confederate Flag/Neo-Confederate Movement	16
Landscape Memorialization/Public Identity	13
Hate Groups	8
Urban Politics	8
Government Structure/Relations	6
Labor	6
Religion	7
Gender	2
Housing/Planning	2

Also, and not surprising, 38 articles included a significant emphasis upon race or ethnicity. Sixteen items pertained to the region's plentiful controversies over the public display of the Confederate battle flag or Neo-Confederate movement, and thirteen included consideration of public memory or identity controversies. Among these are Leib's work on the battle flag and Alderman's work on the naming of streets after Martin Luther King, Jr. Clearly such issues are a growing theme in politically relevant research efforts on the South.

The final analysis of the bibliography examined the authors of the 89 works identified. Entries were made for all items including all co-authors. Thus, Ingalls, Webster, and Leib (1997) was counted as a citation for all three contributors to the article. In total, 19 different individuals

appeared as authors two or more times in the bibliography, with seven appearing at least five times (Table 4). These seven included G. Webster (Alabama), J. Leib (Florida State), J. Ingalls (UNC-Charlotte), D. Alderman (East Carolina), J.C. Archer (Nebraska), F. Shelley (Oklahoma), and R. Webster (Alabama). All but three of the authors with two or more authorships are geographers, and most have connections to the region through employment or education. Among the small group of non-geographers is political scientist Ted Arrington at UNC-Charlotte who has a history of collaborative efforts with Gerald Ingalls, also at Charlotte. Both Edward Sebesta and Benito Giordano have actively co-authored work with Euan Hague at DePaul University. Two of the authors do not hold academic positions, including

Table 4. Authors of Published Work on the Political Geography of the South, 1980–2005.

Author	No. of Published Items
G. Webster	24
J. Leib	12
J. Ingalls	7
D. Alderman	6
J.C. Archer	5
F. Shelley	5
R. Webster	5
T. Arrington	4
J. Heppen	4
E. Hague	4
D. Jansson	3
B. Wilson	3
T. Moore	3
O. Dwyer	3
E. Sebesta	3
B. Warf	3
J. Dittmer	2
B. Giordano	2
L. Knopp	2

Toby Moore at the Commission on Federal Election Reform and Edward Sebesta, an independent academic doing work on hate groups.

#### DISCUSSION

The foregoing discussion indicates that there is a growing output of research on the political geography of the South. Although between 1980 and 1989, an average of 1.4 items per year appeared on the political geography of the South, between 1995 and 2005 this average jumped to 5.9 items per year. Thus, the quantity of published work on the topic

appears both healthy and increasing. Second, and not surprisingly, the *Southeastern Geographer* and *Political Geography* are the dominant outlets for the publication of work on the political geography of the South. Given the increasingly recognized quality of the *Southeastern Geographer* and the now well-established prestige of *Political Geography*, the dominance of these two journals should be interpreted positively. But it is also notable that comparatively few articles were identified on the political geography of the South in the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, the *Professional Geographer*, or *Geographical Review* during the past quarter century. Arguably, a broader dissemination of research on the region's political geography would also reach a broader audience.

Research on the political geography of the South is dominated by a comparatively small number of subjects. First, over half of all publications on the region's political geography pertain to elections, redistricting or campaign spending. Given the region's partisan transition, this emphasis comes with little surprise. A second topical focus involves race and ethnicity. While in a few cases race and ethnicity are the central focus, in many other articles they constitute a secondary though critical explanatory theme in the items examined. Thus, race is a critical explanatory emphasis in Leib's work on the controversies over the public display of the Confederate battle flag, or Alderman's work on naming streets after Martin Luther King, Jr. There also appears a substantial and growing interest in such work on public memory/landscape memorialization that can build solid connections between political and cultural geographers.

## RESEARCH AGENDA SUGGESTIONS

There are a number of areas that political geographers should find valuable for additional or continuing efforts.

1) Work on the electoral geography of the South should continue, but with a renewed emphasis upon separating contextual influences from compositional factors. Such efforts underscore a need for quantitative sophistication.<sup>1</sup> This literature should also extend beyond state and regional voting patterns, to the geographic patterns behind state legislative actions and their spatial effects.

2) Two compositional factors seem important to study further. First, clearly race continues to be a major, if not the major, fault line in southern politics. But the power of religion appears on the increase, and has arguably been given too little attention given its role in shaping the southern political landscape.

3) Very few studies have appeared on the efficacy of governmental structures in the South. For example, work on the city-county mergers in Kentucky and Florida seems well suited for geographic investigation. Additionally, few if any political geographers have examined the role of Councils of Government or Interstate Compacts, both likely destined to have growing importance in the region as it further urbanizes and is affected by globalization.

4) The politics of industrial recruitment between states in the South has received scant attention by political geographers. Are southern state and local governments competing against one another too feverishly for far too little?

5) Gender issues and their effect upon southern political patterns have received insufficient attention in the political ge-

ography literature. For example, why are women so under-represented in the region as elected officials?

6) Finally, elements of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) were due to expire in 2007. A spirited debate over some of the VRA's sections emerged including its "Preclearance" provisions (Section 5). Though the VRA was extended for another 25 yr in July 2006, political geographers are well-positioned to undertake studies examining the geography of results from the VRA during the past half-century, and most particularly since the last renewal in 1982. Such inquiries should not only consider the Act's political effects, but further how these political effects in turn affected the region's socioeconomic and cultural landscapes.

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## NOTE

1. See John O'Loughlin's (2003) "Spatial Analysis in Political Geography." In *A companion to political geography*, eds. John Agnew, Katharyne Mitchell and Gerard Toal, 30–46. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.

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