

The coming of competition

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ALEXANDER P. LAMIS

The Two-Party South

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In his classic *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (1949), V. O. Key, Jr, charged that the no-party polity that was then beginning to effect a gradual metamorphosis in the American South tended to produce demagogic, irresponsible and reactionary politicians and to splinter the restricted electorate into evanescent groupings of local court-house cliques and their dependants and followers. Because it discouraged competition between state-wide parties, he argued, the southern political system inhibited the "natural" emergence of class divisions in politics and therefore enabled the privileged to block nearly every attempt by those sympathetic to the poor of either race to employ politics to lessen socioeconomic inequalities.

By the 1980s, blacks have long since rejoined the electorate, federal action has abolished legal segregation, voting participation by both races matches northern rates and, on the state and national, if not local level, two-party competition is about as strong as elsewhere in the nation. Alexander Lamis's is the latest and best in a series of books and articles that attempt to update Key, to analyse current electoral coalitions, and to predict the future direction of southern politics.

Key's grand theme, that the chief common element of the region's politics was political fragmentation, required him to devote chapters to each of the eleven ex-Confederate states. The wood being chaotic, the only order was to be found in observing individual trees. Lamis justifies spending eleven of his fifteen chapters on state-by-state narratives of election campaigns for governor and senator from 1964 to 1982 by contending that the strategies of individual politicians, rather than more widespread changes in the socioeconomic structure or autonomous variations in the opin-

ions of the voters, primarily determined the success of both parties and of their various factions. Yet he never actually examines the political effects of, for instance, post-Second World War urbanization, industrialization, the decline in the percentage of those living on farms, regional population shifts and economic growth, and he unaccountably fails to trace the evolution of public opinion over the period, the details of which are readily accessible in national surveys.

Within his narrowed focus, Lamis skilfully edits a newsreel of electoral struggles, using evidence from newspaper articles, the extensive scholarly literature, public and private polls on specific contests throughout the period and on the South as a whole for 1980-82, and simple but instructive examinations of aggregate voting data. The basic strategy of the Republicans, in his view, was to offer economic and racial policies attractive to upper-status white southerners, to appeal to the region's white have-nots almost entirely on the basis of racism, and to identify their partisan opponents with northern integrationists who were insufficiently devoted to defending the nation abroad and fundamentalist Protestant morality at home. Democrats usually countered with deliberate ambiguity, sometimes spiced with "populist" attacks on the gentry and increasingly open appeals to blacks, and, in Texas, to Mexican-Americans. During the "post-civil rights era" after 1970, when the white South conceded that the age of publicly sanctioned racial discrimination was over, political racism abated, but did not disappear. Shrewd campaigns by moderate Democratic politicians built on a base of black loyalty to the national Democratic Party and attracted former working-class backers of George Wallace and older traditional white Democrats to cut short the Republican upsurge. Despite Reagan's sweep of ten out of the eleven southern states in 1980 and all eleven in 1984, Lamis emphasizes that the Democrats still hold a majority of the major state-level offices and over 80 per cent of the state legislative seats in the South.

Party competition did not, as Key perhaps

supposed it would, immediately diminish the importance of often colourful individuals. Strom Thurmond's switch to the Republicans speeded the development of organized contests in South Carolina, while George Wallace's opportunism inhibited it in Alabama. Jesse Helms's ability to tap right-wing donors floated North Carolina Republicans on a sea of out-of-state money. Forthright liberal Democrats, especially Virginia's Henry Howell, polarized the party and the electorate and typically lost, while such Democratic moderates as Jimmy Carter, John West of South Carolina, and Lloyd Bentsen of Texas, blandly straddling much of the political spectrum, were usually victorious. The proportion of the electors who identified with neither party multiplied in the South, as in the rest of the country, providing a floating and determinative vote. Slick media campaigns and stunts like Lawton Chiles's 1,000-mile walk across Florida may have replaced barbecues and court-house harangues, but the politics of personality still flourishes.

Yet, paradoxically, the New Deal realignment has also finally arrived in the South, a half-century late and at a time when it has apparently collapsed outside the region. Survey responses that Lamis highlights show that, in the 1980 presidential election, the relation between class and vote preference among whites was quite strong in the South - there was a 37 per cent gap in support for Reagan between those in the lowest and highest of Lamis's three income groups - while it was virtually non-existent (a 1 per cent difference) elsewhere in the country. Despite this contrast, southern Carter supporters were markedly more conservative than their northern counterparts not only on such non-economic issues as increased military spending, abortion, prayer in the schools and race, but also on a classic New Deal programme, of government-guaranteed jobs. Lamis does not attempt to account for these apparent anomalies, which may be due in part to the fact that Carter attracted unusually broad support in his native region.

Lamis tentatively and hopefully predicts that

truly redistributive Democratic politicians may be able to use the existing class split between the parties in the South to oust the currently dominant mugwumps and fulfil the populist dream of government not only supported by but also responsive to the lower orders. It is a hope I share, yet support for that prophecy and for the contention that the new régimes would differ materially from those of the temporizers is undermined by inadequacies in Lamis's book. Without multivariate analysis, we cannot determine, for instance, the extent to which the class cleavage merely reflects the fact that the old, who are generally poorer than those under sixty, were much more likely to identify with the Democrats in 1980. Lacking information from previous surveys, we cannot be sure whether the current age-party relation reflects the transient impact of a moribund cohort, a gloss that would encourage southern Republicans, or a permanent condition, a continuously replenished pensioner class that would almost inevitably gravitate to the Democrats as the party of relatively generous social programmes. Without an excursion into political sociology, we cannot safely predict how strong future support for populist policies will be in the areas of the southern economy and society that are likely to expand. Since Lamis concentrates on what southern politicians say, rather than on what they do, we cannot even be sure that the trimmers have lived down to their promises. Southern politicians have long hidden conservative purposes under populist garb - why not the reverse?

A generation after Key's death, the party competition that he so desired has finally arrived in the South, and many of his predictions about its consequences seem to have proved true. Lamis's book is a worthy successor to Key's - as far as it goes.

Seventeenth-Century New England, edited by David Grayson Allen and David D. Hall, contains ten papers originally delivered at a conference held by the Colonial Society of Massachusetts on June 18 and 19, 1982 (340pp. Colonial Society of Massachusetts/Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia. \$30).