

*In Pursuit of Power: Southern Blacks & Electoral Politics, 1965-1982.*  
By Steven F. Lawson. Contemporary American History Series. (New  
York: Columbia University Press, 1985. Pp. xix, 391. Tables, notes,  
bibliography, index. \$30.00.)

In his well-received *Black Ballots* (1976), Steven F. Lawson traced the course of federal legal actions to enforce the Fifteenth Amendment from the outlawing of the white primary in 1944 to the passage of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) in 1965. This sequel chronicles the efforts to register and mobilize black voters from 1965 to 1969, largely in Alabama and Mississippi, and the battles over federal legal protection for voting rights workers and those concerning the administration and the three renewals of the VRA from 1970 to 1982. Based on a wide reading in manuscript collections, government reports, secondary literature, printed court opinions, and oral histories, the book does not draw on newspapers, unpublished court records, or very extensive interviews by the author, and it contains no systematic analyses of legislative or electoral behavior. Rather misleadingly titled, it does not examine the campaigns of southern black candidates outside Alabama and Mississippi, or even in those states after 1971, or assess, except in the most general way, the consequences for economic and social policies of the victories of black or black-backed white candidates.

Although everyone from Stokely Carmichael to Ronald Reagan shared a rhetorical commitment to the legitimacy of black suffrage and a recognition of its importance, Lawson's theme of consensus during the Second Reconstruction would not have been sustainable had he devoted more attention to governmental socioeconomic policies that impinged on black welfare. Northern Republicans such as Senator Robert Dole of Kansas and Representative Edward Hutchinson of Michigan played crucial roles in sustaining federal protection of black voting rights; Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Reagan lent (often tepid) support and withstood pressures to veto the VRA; and, by 1982, Senators John Stennis of Mississippi and Strom Thurmond of

South Carolina participated in a curious Dixiecrat reunion by embracing that act. But many of these men (as Lawson and everyone else is well aware) split from their liberal partners in the VRA coalition over other governmental policies. That the consensus over voting rights grew at the same time as that on economic and social programs broke down is a troubling paradox that would mar Lawson's smooth narrative, if he came to grips with it.

One paradox that his account does bring out, but that his chronological narrative mode of exposition allows him to avoid resolving, is that the Johnson and Carter administrations were relatively hesitant about enforcing black voting rights, while the Nixon and Ford regimes, otherwise unsympathetic to black rights, administered the VRA at least as vigorously as the Democrats did. (Except for finally acquiescing in the 1982 VRA renewal, the Reagan Administration has been more consistently racist.) Stressing Democratic officials' concerns with federalism and their fear of offending such powerful senators as James Eastland of Mississippi and Richard Russell of Georgia, Lawson pictures Republican officials as more responsive to northern congressional pressure and to the steady force of liberal career civil servants, especially those in the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department. Why each side caved in to pushes by its natural enemies is difficult to comprehend. In particular, why did the Nixon administration, so publicly concerned with being undermined by the allegedly liberal permanent government, so strikingly expand enforcement of section 5 of the VRA, which required governmental bodies in the deep South to submit any changes in electoral rules to Washington before putting them into effect?

The consensus on the black right to vote and hold office, Lawson asserts, was easier to sustain because black political participation did not redistribute economic or social power from whites to blacks. As evidence for this argument, he refers to the well-known fact that the economic welfare of blacks as a whole has not improved markedly, relative to that of whites, since 1965. But because it does not hold constant other possibly relevant factors, such as shifts in the economic structure away from unskilled and skilled labor jobs and in the age composition of the Afro-American population away from people in their highest-earning years, this is an imprecise counterfactual. Moreover, Lawson never rigorously assesses the effects of black voting on state policy. To what degree could the extended coverage of such federal programs as food stamps, medicaid, and school lunches, and the increasingly nondiscriminatory administration and consequent higher participation rates of blacks in welfare programs be attributed to the rise in black voting? Did the predominantly middle-class black aspirants for offices in local, state, and national governments seek and obtain substantial white support? If so, how did that support affect their responsiveness to their black bases, and how

much did black and integrated administrations differ from those of their predecessors? Did the voting records on economic and social programs of white congresspersons from areas containing fairly high proportions of blacks change as black registration increased after 1965? What explains the uneven growth of backing for the VRA among southern congresspersons after 1965? While it may be that political participation has not increased black well-being very tangibly, one cannot demonstrate that contention, as Lawson implicitly tries to do, without a sustained examination of the effects of and changes in the economic and social programs of governments.

Apparently striving for a coolly objective tone, Lawson organizes his chapters as a series of largely unresolved dualities. Thus, he quite trenchantly outlines the conflicting positions of radical black power advocates and moderate interracial coalitionists within the late-sixties' civil rights movement, of movement proponents of immediate and sustained federal encouragement of black registration and the more cautious and conciliatory approaches of the national government bureaucracy, and of liberals who sought to guard or to enhance the prospects of black candidates and conservatives who challenged such efforts as color-conscious attempts to impose quotas and erode local control. But he rarely tells the reader just what he thinks of each side's arguments. Yet these clashes have factual as well as value-laden aspects. Was the black power position as radical as its proponents sometimes made it sound, or was it a transitory phase toward racially shared influence, useful in jarring unorganized blacks out of their fearful quiescence? Was the bureaucrat's belief in the desirability of cooperation, rather than confrontation with local officials, justified by the ultimate results in the breakdown of racial discrimination in registration and the ease of renewal of the VRA, or not? On a more theoretical level, once blacks were allowed to play, was it not inevitable that their attention would turn to the rules of the game? Was this really a change in goals, as Lawson sometimes implies (p. 222), or merely one of tactics?

Narrowly compassed, constrained by conventional notions of organization and presentation, Lawson's readable book is far from a definitive synthesis on the second chapter of the Second Reconstruction.

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