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Competing Identities in the U.S. South: The role of youth and Southern identities in politics

by

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Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

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Introduction

Young people are often thought of as being more liberal than their elders. This is true to varying degrees nationwide. In the South, however, this seems to be less true. This paper operates on a hypothesis that the growing national trend of liberalism among young Americans is less prevalent and less important in the South, where it is hidden beneath other trends and identities.

The political culture of the South is influenced by a unique past that historically has caused residents to believe strongly in defending their way of life, meaning they have not typically been open to change. That trend seems to continue in the Deep South, where influences have largely remained the same — neither demographics nor politics have changed much and there is a high percentage of native-born residents in those states. In the fringe South, however, younger people seem to be breaking with older people in their voting patterns. This reflects a change in the political culture of those states, where more outside influences have entered in recent years.

In today's highly-connected world, however, one could ask: how do young Deep Southerners manage to remain committed to preserving the same traditional Southern identity and politics as their elders? Are they insulated from liberal influences that have taken hold in the fringe South, or do they simply ignore them because they truly believe in those things? The latter appears to be true. The Deep South is a place where not much changes and people are often around other people who are very much like themselves. Doing things differently is not as easy as it may sound, nor does it seem to interest people there. A regional identity remains strong and unique, meaning Southerners — even young ones — seem to prioritize the continuance of that

identity and the associated way of life when making political decisions.

What is Southern Politics?

The politics of the American South have long been distinctive, perhaps as an artifact of the region's cultural "otherness." The South was, of course, its own country at one time. Those days are long gone, but even so, the South has maintained a unique, storied identity that includes political behaviors that do not appear elsewhere in the U.S. In some parts of the South, those patterns are fading in popularity. In others, however, they remain strong as ever.

Traditionally, Southern politics has been conservative — not only in terms of conservative social values, but in the sense of conserving something from the past. W.J. Cash wrote, "It is probably no exaggeration to say [Southerners] were to become ... the most sentimental people in history."¹ After losing the Civil War and suffering great devastation, many Southerners bought into the Lost Cause movement to soothe their pain. By romanticizing the Old South and elevating its way of life as superior, politicians and other social leaders crafted a mythology that taught Southerners to defend the old norms that defined their unique society. This narrative became an integral part of modern Southern identity. It has socialized postwar generations to continue upholding the noble pillars of a mythical Old South and instilled in them a duty to do so.

Protecting the Old South probably is not the goal of most Southerners when they enter voting booths today. Still, that defensive posture seems to remain in Southern politics — it resists change and seeks to preserve old ways. In the past, it resisted changes made by Northerners; today, it resists liberal ideas and progressivism.

Historically, the South has acted as a fairly homogeneous voting unit. For decades, the

¹ Cash, W. J. (1991). *The Mind of the South* (pg. 127). New York: Vintage Books.

South was dominated by Democrats and was known as the Solid South. The South's loyalty to the Democratic Party can be explained by its rejection of Republicans. Indeed, the South lost the Civil War to the North, which was led by Republican Abraham Lincoln. Slavery was abolished, but the South was not ready to let go of its racially segregated society. As the region's ruling party, Democrats continued supporting such policies. In the process, wealthy white politicians unified South whites, regardless of class, against blacks. Cash called this the proto-Dorian bond.

From the first presidential election since Reconstruction in 1876 until 1948, the South was a solid Democratic voting bloc. In 1948, the South's loyalty to Democrats began to break up when civil rights were made part of the party platform. In protest, some Southern Democrats formed their own party — the Dixiecrats — and ran their own candidate, Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, for president. He carried four Southern states.

The South's association with the Republican Party was further encouraged in 1964, when Republican Barry Goldwater ran against incumbent Democratic President Lyndon B. Johnson. Though he was a Texan, Johnson supported civil rights and the landmark Civil Rights Act passed in 1964, costing him support among Southern voters. Goldwater, on the other hand, attracted Southern votes by saying civil rights were a matter that should be handled by states, not at the federal level. He carried five Deep South states in the election, but Johnson was reelected.

Four years later, Republican Richard Nixon ran against Democrat Hubert Humphrey. Nixon's campaign developed a Southern Strategy that attracted the votes of poor whites who opposed civil rights but still identified as Democrats because of the party's support of social programs. Nixon asserted law and order and being tough on crime, which helped him connect with racially conservative Southerners.

Southerners seemed unable to resist voting for Democrat Jimmy Carter in 1976. He was

their kind of Democrat — a born-again Christian and peanut farmer from Georgia. This revived support of Democrats did not last, however. Carter was challenged in 1980 by Republican Ronald Reagan, who made family values a central part of his campaign. This was a powerful, irresistible message in the South, where religion was an important part of life. During Reagan’s presidency, the Christian Right found a home in the Republican Party and many social issues still debated today came to prominence. More than 30 years later, the Republican platform that Reagan established remains in place and maintains Southern support.



Figure 1. Map from Richard Morrill’s “The Geography of Cultural Attitudes”²

The South's apparently unique identity continues to play out in the region's politics, setting it apart as a clearly identifiable political bloc. In “The Geography of Cultural Attitudes,”

² Morrill, R. (2014, January 3). The Geography of Cultural Attitudes. *Newgeography.com*. Retrieved March 24, 2014, from <http://www.newgeography.com/content/004120-the-geography-cultural-attitudes>

Richard Morrill uses eight measures — “women’s suffrage and state votes on the ERA (Equal Rights Amendment), the right to die, the legalization of marijuana, gay sex (sodomy laws), same sex marriage, racial intermarriage, contraception, and abortion (current state)” — to assign each American state a score that determines how liberal or conservative it is in terms of social issues. Morrill notes that the Deep South “remains astoundingly monolithic. It is hard to escape the conclusion that to many the Civil War is not over, that race still rules, but also that for less obvious reasons, more fundamentalist religious denominations dominate, while in much of the country, religious adherence has diminished.”

To that end, religion is indeed a strong force in the South. Church attendance is higher in this region than anywhere else. In a 2010 Gallup poll, the four states with highest percentage of people who attend church weekly were Mississippi at 63 percent, Alabama at 58 percent, South Carolina at 56 percent and Louisiana at 56 percent.³

Moreover, many Southerners belong to a region-specific denomination — the Southern Baptist Convention. Between about 20 and 30 percent of residents of Southern states are Southern Baptists.⁴ As far as the South being unique religion-wise, 10 percent or less of Americans have identified as Southern Baptists since the early 1990s. They are a minority, but within the South, they have a significant, vocal presence, unlike anywhere else.

However, Southern Baptists are aging and perhaps going out of style. The average age of

³ Mississippians Go to Church the Most; Vermonters, Least. (2010, February 17). *Gallup*. Retrieved March 24, 2014, from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/125999/mississippians-go-church-most-vermonters-least.aspx>

⁴ Southern Baptist Convention statistics. (n.d.). *adherents.com*. Retrieved March 24, 2014, from http://www.adherents.com/largecom/com_

a Southern Baptist is 49 years old and 23 percent of adherents are retired.⁵ While commitment to this specific denomination may be decreasing, it remains an important force in the South.

Further, it was an important force in the past during the times that shaped and influenced the South's identity, which is in fact carried on by many Southerners.

⁵ Southern Baptist Congregations and Worshippers. (n.d.). *North American Mission Board*. Retrieved March 24, 2014, from <http://www.namb.net/namb1cb1col.aspx?id=8590001121>

Competing Identities

Southern

How unique are Southerners' stances on issues? Throughout history, religion has been a powerful influence in the South. Protestants, namely Southern Baptists, dominate the religious scene in the South and have increasingly become a force in politics. This dates back to and ties in with the Lost Cause era, during which respect for the traditional hierarchy was valued. The way a person presented themselves reflected on their upbringing. In *Still Fighting the Civil War*, David Goldfield writes that "to be a 'good Christian' was as much a behavioral norm as it was a religious statement."⁶ During the chaos following the South's loss of the Civil War, some Southerners worried things would get even worse if they turned their backs to religious traditions, which instilled in them a duty to carry them on via the Lost Cause. The result was a feeling among religious Southerners that they were a chosen people, which reinforced Southern pride and superiority.

This is not the case in the rest of America. The South has high rates of church attendance along with the largest proportion of residents who identify as born-again, evangelical Christians are Southern.⁷ As politics has become more about social issues in recent decades, religion has correspondingly become a stronger force. Perhaps as a result of religion being unique in the South, its politics will remain unique. Of course, there are other places in the U.S. that are Republican-dominated, but that obviously is not a product of the same social and historical

⁶ Goldfield, D. R. (2002). *Still fighting the Civil War: the American South and southern history* (pg. 25). Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.

⁷ Who Has Been Born Again?. (2005, January 18). *Gallup*. Retrieved March 24, 2014, from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/14632/who-has-been-born-again.aspx>

forces. It does, however, mean that the South has someone to join forces with, allowing it to have greater impact on the American political stage. Conservative Southerners are not alone in their opposition to issues such as gay marriage, abortion, gun control, progressive taxation and decreased military spending. These are not uniquely Southern issues, but Southerners certainly have a place in the conversation surrounding them.

This political backdrop seems to be firmly in place in the South. Change could be slowly moving in, though, as a result of two things: how the South is perceived and an increased willingness to break with traditionally Southern politics (mostly by young people and non-Southern natives living in the South). To determine how changes may occur in the future, past changes should be examined.

By the 1960s in many cases in the South, the most prominent politicians were no longer moderates — instead, they were hardline segregationists. The South today faces a similar situation. Through the 1980s and 1990s, moderate politicians in the South such as Dale Bumpers in Arkansas won elections and were relatively popular. Now, however, the face of Southern politics is conservative, marked by figures such as Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal. This polarization, which leaves a large ideological gap in the middle and is heavy on one end, is significant. It indicates that the South is quite homogeneous in that there is an identity shared by enough people that it can effectively influence politics.

America's perception of the South's dominant identity has changed significantly since the mid-20th century. During the civil rights movement, that identity was under attack from the non-South. Politics reflected the dominant white male class's desire to maintain segregation and deny African-Americans various rights, making the South seem un-American and contrary to basic tenets of the American notion of freedom. The South resisted becoming like the rest of the

country and its “otherness” prevailed, for a while at least.

Even after civil rights era reforms took effect, the Southern identity that had been associated with segregation did not die out. It is important to note that the identity itself was not about segregation; rather, segregation was something supported by many of the people who identified as traditionally Southern, which has cultural and political facets. In politics, the Southern identity took on another form with Nixon’s aforementioned “rule of law” attitude and other efforts that appealed to Southerners and racist tendencies. This continued during Reagan’s presidency, when the conversation shifted from law and order to topics such as welfare queens.

American politics increasingly involved social issues in the 1970s and 1980s as culture wars broke out. When issues such as abortion, the Equal Rights Amendment and the separation of church and state came to prominence, the largely conservative South took notice and became involved in these national conversations. At the same time, America was undergoing Southernization, according to John Egerton, author of *The Americanization of Dixie: the Southernization of America*.

During the 1970s, the South urbanized, giving rise to a business climate that attracted outside interests. This also gave the region a chance to show it was not a repository of everything bad about America. Southern politicians shifted their focus away from preserving a separate South but maintained connected with one another through a shared conservative ideology that appealed to others in the U.S. Despite this progress, American culture increasingly embraced and capitalized on Southern stereotypes for commercial purposes.⁸

By this point, Southerners had a place in national conversations concerning both politics

⁸ Egerton, J. (1974). *The Americanization of Dixie: the Southernization of America*. (1st ed.). New York: Harper's Magazine Press.

and culture. Starting with Jimmy Carter in 1976, then Bill Clinton of Arkansas in 1992 and George W. Bush of Texas in 2000, there was a new trend of Southerners occupying the Oval Office. Carter was the first person from the Deep South to be elected president. Symbolically, it was becoming less and less reasonable to regard Southerners as inferior. Larry L. King's 1976 *Esquire* article describes the effects of Carter's election: "O! Southern boys around the world ... lurched to their collective feet ... and with wet eyes huskily proclaimed: 'We ain't trash no more.'"⁹

Culturally speaking, the Southern identity finally became part of mainstream America, particularly through portrayals of the region in media. For example, *Southern Living* magazine, which launched in 1966, achieved such popularity that Time, Inc. purchased it in 1985. *Oxford American*, the self-described "Southern magazine of good writing," began in 1989. A perhaps more significant benchmark was the 1980 movie *Urban Cowboy*, which starred John Travolta. Set in Texas, much of the movie takes place at country singer Mickey Gilley's honky tonk, whose mechanical bull attracted hordes of patrons, and is set to a soundtrack of country hits of the day. Such publications and movies often portray the South as somewhat backward, but celebrate it as a sort of novelty with traditional charm.

Southerners are not alone in liking these celebrations. The aforementioned *Southern Living* magazine is today America's largest regional lifestyle publication. Even if the South continues to be regarded as "other," it at least is being regarded as a unique part of the U.S. — not a regional misfit that resisted exterior influences and once made the news for incidents such as the National Guard forcibly desegregating Little Rock Central High School in 1957.

⁹ King, L. (1976, November). *We Ain't Trash No More: How Jimmy Carter Led the Rednecks from the Wilderness*. *Esquire*, 88.

However, there are certain Southern cultural hallmarks that appear to appeal to Southerners exclusively. For example, 22 percent of self-described Southerners view the Confederate flag positively, but only 4 percent of non-Southerners have that same view.¹⁰ A possible explanation is that for a person grounded in Southern traditions and customs, the flag represents a way of life more so than racism or other things that come to mind with the Confederacy.

For that reason, it is perhaps unsurprising that Confederate flags often appear in the stands at NASCAR races.



Figure 2. Confederate flag at a NASCAR race.¹¹

Daniel Pierce describes NASCAR as “the most Southern sport on Earth” in his article by the same name, pointing to NASCAR officials' intolerance of unions and the cultural origins of

¹⁰ Civil War at 150: Still Relevant, Still Divisive. (2011, April 8). *Pew Research Center for the People and the Press* RSS. Retrieved March 24, 2014, from <http://www.people-press.org/2011/04/08/civil-war-at-150-still-relevant-still-divisive/>

¹¹ NASCAR & the Civil War. (2012, February 26). *First Fallen: the Life and Times of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth*. Retrieved March 24, 2014, from <http://elmerellsworth.blogspot.com/2012/02/nascar-civil-war.html>

the sport.¹² In “NASCAR and the Southernization of America,” Joshua Newman and Michael Giardina write that NASCAR is an outward representation of how “the South actively stands for something.”¹³ Things like NASCAR seem to bring out in fans a traditional identity with influences from yesteryear. Such influences have consistently been frowned upon by the rest of America, which could give Southerners all the more reason to embrace them — it makes them unique, which gives them meaning and purpose as a clearly different subset of Americans.

American politics today are deeply divided and polarized. As such, the South can be said to be both celebrated and under attack, depending on the issue in question. Politically, the South is not under attack alone as was the case in the past — conservative Southerners are able to ally with and garner support from other conservatives nationwide.

This is an interesting situation for young people in the South. In short, they must decide which side of history they stand on: will they continue to identify as Southern? If the identity is lost, this could mean a remarkable shift in Southern politics. The values and norms implicit in Southern identity would no longer have such a great influence on political behavior.

In fringe South states like North Carolina and Virginia, young people seem to be breaking with traditional Southern politics along with voting preferences of older people. In the Deep South, however, young people and older people have voted in very similar patterns in recent elections. Fringe South states have smaller native populations — people who have lived in the same state their entire life — than the Deep South, which could certainly affect the degree of pervasiveness of the Southern identity and its instillation in young people. Further, this could

¹² Pierce, D. (2001). The Most Southern Sport on Earth: NASCAR and the Unions. *Southern Cultures*, 7(2), 8-33.

¹³ Newman, J., & Giardina, M. (2008). NASCAR and the Southernization of America: Spectatorship, Subjectivity, and the Confederation of Identity. *Cultural Studies & Critical Methodologies*, 8(4), 479-506.

mean young people are more likely to vote differently than older people. If such patterns emerge and continue, red Southern states could turn blue.

In other places, however, the lack of difference among young people indicates continuity of influences on politics. The most powerful influence is arguably a Southern identity that people are more likely to be attached to if they are native residents — and this is the case in the Deep South, which has the highest proportion of natives in the U.S. Again, it is important to note that identifying as Southern does not mean someone is politically crusading (or voting) for “Southern” issues or promoting secession — rather, that identity tends to imply conservatism, which today usually results in support of the Republican Party.

Newman and Giardina also write in the NASCAR article that “this imaginary South — as an accumulation of physical, social, and cultural spaces — has been transformed into a highly commercialized, deeply politicized space of identity and identification, one that is inextricably linked to a broader neoconservative ideology that currently saturates the North American popular political sphere” (pg. 481). By imaginary South, they mean one created by media. This ties into what may be described as a conservative, hyper-American identity that is, in many areas, congruent with traditional Southern identity. “As this imaginary, emergent South has expanded and become reified through the multi-platform, hyper-mediated dealings of Hollywood film houses, Fox News Channel, Comedy Central, the popular diatribes of conservative writers, and other popular media machinations, it has brought with it new pedagogies of ‘what it means to be a Southerner.’”

In other words, the South seems to be allowing non-Southerners to define what being Southern means. This has an important implication: although the South is increasingly defined to the general American public by the non-South, the South actively seeks to remain clearly unlike

the non-South. However, this may not necessarily be a result of Southern identity. Instead, it is more likely that Southerners, as political conservatives, simply wish their states to remain different from northern states, where more residents identify as liberal.

Young

To examine this issue more closely, it should be determined what influences young people's political participation. Young people do seem to care about politics, especially because issues that are "hot" with older voters affect them. Their voices just are not always heard, according to Kelly Nuxoll in "Election Year: How Can Youth Walk the Walk?" In 2008, young people were heavily involved in primaries. Nuxoll also points out that a "heightened political climate" such as a presidential election year makes it more likely for young people to talk with one another about politics as well as develop and offer their own insight about campaigns and candidates. Further, Nuxoll discusses a survey conducted by MTV's Rock the Vote campaign whose results illuminate the significance of young people's participation in elections:

"In a recent survey, Rock the Vote found the four most important issues to young people were, in order, jobs and the economy; health insurance; the Iraq war; and the cost of education. Although these issues roughly correspond to the priorities of the public at large, they are particularly meaningful to young people. Most will be graduating from school and seeking work during the next president's administration. Many will not have health insurance; right now over 13 million young people are not covered. Young people make up the bulk of the U.S. military fighting forces, and they are overwhelmingly affected by tuition rates and access to student loans."

Others, however, argue that the importance of the youth vote is hyped. Tom Edmonds points out in "Time to Rock the Youth Vote Myth" that youth voting is encouraged today — it is no longer an expression against the establishment like it was in the 1960s. Still, voting remains a higher priority for older people, Edmonds says, because early November offers young people distractions such as college exams and football games. Young people also are not as widely committed to the Democratic Party as popular belief suggests. On Super Tuesday 2008, the state with the highest youth turnout was Utah, where young people voted overwhelmingly for

Republican Mitt Romney. Even so, Edmonds notes that increased youth voting could be disastrous for Republicans. Many young Deep Southerners vote for and identify as Republicans, however, so why do they seem unaffected by influences that persuade other young people to vote Democrat?

In an article that ran opposite Edmonds' in *Campaigns & Elections* magazine, Kathleen Barr argues that young people's vote does in fact matter. In 2004, the number of young people who voted increased significantly. In 2008, youth participation remained high across regions and parties in primaries and caucuses. Though Edmonds downplays the significance of this increase, writing that other age groups voted in higher numbers as well, it is important to consider the implications of this trend continuing. Barr does point out, however, that young voters alone cannot decide an election because "anyone who says any single slice of the electorate is going to decide a nationwide election alone is blowing smoke."

That may be true, but should "young people" be classified as one "single slice?" They identify with other demographic subsets, too — they don't all belong to one party, and they can identify as Southern or non-Southern, for example. Additionally, Barr writes that older people are still more likely to take the time to vote because they probably are not "away at college and moving yearly" like young people. For the South, that could mean that older, traditional-voting Southerners still have a bigger effect than young people, no matter how they vote.

Whatever the case may be, it should be asked what it means to identify as "youth." Who is included? For the purposes of this writing, young people will refer to people 18 to 29 years of age because that is the division made by CNN exit polls. How powerful is this identity, and what happens with it collides with others? In the introduction to *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media*, David Buckingham writes that "contemporary youth cultures are increasingly diverse and

fragmented, and that they are best seen, not as a matter of self-contained ‘subcultures’ but in a more fluid way, as ‘scenes’ or ‘lifestyles’ to which young people may be only temporarily attached” (pg. 5).

Buckingham says one of the most influential factors on what groups a young person identifies with is his or her social status (pg. 7), which makes sense because social status directly affects how a person grows up and quality of life they have — what kind of education they receive, what kind of neighborhood they live in, whether they eat enough healthy foods and many other things. Other important factors to consider that can also affect such areas of life include race, gender, disabilities and religion. Identity is powerful, Buckingham writes, because people with a common identity “have struggled to resist oppressive accounts of their identities constructed by others who hold power over them, and claimed the right to self-determination” (pg. 7). It is arguable that people on the lower end of the 18- to 29-year-old spectrum have not yet begun constructing others' identities; rather, they still conform to the identities they grew up around or are exploring for the first time other identities as they go to college or begin work in the real world.

On pages 7 and 8, Buckingham also presents an interesting dilemma: “... Such alliances can founder on the almost infinite factions and subdivisions that can emerge: does ‘race’ override gender, for example, and who has the right to say that it does? Furthermore, different forms of power can operate within groups as well as between them: for example, women may unite to resist male oppression, but middle-class women will have access to other ways of exercising social power that are not available to their working-class counterparts.” Such tensions highlight the fact that youth, just like everyone else, identify with multiple groups and sometimes, they conflict.

In the 2004 election, for example, the Southern identify seemed to conflict with the youth identity. This election marked a significant break with traditional patterns, for which young people could be responsible, writes Tobi Walker in “Make Them Pay Attention to Us.” Besides voting in large numbers, young people nationwide “broke from their elders’ political preferences. Historically, young voters have always chosen the winner of the popular vote, and their party identification has been fairly equally divided between Democrats, Republicans, and Independents. ... Young people age eighteen to twenty-four were 13 points more likely to vote for Kerry, and those age twenty- five to twenty-nine were 3 percentage points more likely to vote for Kerry.”

This, of course, was not the case in the Deep South, where Bush proved more popular, even among young voters. Still, Walker makes a significant point: today’s generation of young people care about local issues and support them by volunteering and fundraising. While this could make some young people more likely to take the next step in civic engagement — vote — Walker also notes that “younger citizens are also far less likely to talk about current events with family and friends, read a newspaper, or follow politics and government.” This could be one reason why young Deep Southerners are not part of the above-mentioned group that is breaking with traditions.

Voter registration by age in 2012¹⁴

Age	Percent registered to vote
18 to 24	58.5
25 to 34	66.4
35 to 44	69.9
45 to 54	73.5
55 to 64	76.6
65 to 74	78.1
75 or older	76.6

Young people in Deep South states like Alabama and Mississippi, however, seem to buck this trend. Though these are not party registration figures, 2008 presidential election exit poll data suggest that identification as Republican among young people is stronger in the South than the non-South. The following figures are taken from CNN's 2008 exit polls.

Alabama

Age	Obama (D)	McCain (R)
18-24	51%	49%
25-29	49%	48%
30-39	43%	56%
40-49	36%	63%
50-64	38%	62%
64 or older	22%	78%

Mississippi

Age	Obama (D)	McCain (R)
18-24	54%	45%
25-29	58%	42%
30-39	46%	54%
40-49	42%	58%
50-64	41%	58%
64 or older	N/A	N/A

¹⁴ Voting Statistics. (n.d.). *Statistic Brain*. Retrieved March 24, 2014, from <http://www.statisticbrain.com/voting-statistics/>

Pennsylvania

Age	Obama (D)	McCain (R)
18-24	66%	34%
25-29	64%	36%
30-39	54%	45%
40-49	50%	49%
50-64	57%	42%
64 or older	49%	50%

Ohio

Age	Obama (D)	McCain (R)
18-24	61%	38%
25-29	61%	33%
30-39	54%	45%
40-49	48%	50%
50-64	54%	45%
64 or older	44%	55%

Changing Influences

Demographics and percent native-born population

In “Overlapping Identities in the American South,” Christopher Cooper and H. Gibbs Knotts explore the interaction of four identities people have in North Carolina: Appalachian, Southern, North Carolinian and American. They find that people identify as Americans first, followed by North Carolinians, Southerners and Appalachians. Cooper and Knotts refer to Willis Goudy’s “Community Attachment in a Rural Region” (1990), which found that age is positively correlated with regional identity. They write that “a person who has lived in the region for a small proportion of their life ... has a .39 probability of strongly identifying as a North Carolinian, compared to a .73 probability for a person who has lived in the region virtually their entire life.” They also find that liberals have a .68 probability of strongly identifying as American first while conservatives — which are politically dominant in the South — have a .86 probability. Cooper and Knotts articulate the role of identity as follows:

“Research indicates that national identity influences opinions toward cultural minorities and policy preferences on ethnic issues (Citrin, Reingold, & Green, 1990). In addition, Appalachian regional identity affects opinions on zoning and land use planning policies (Cooper, Knotts, & Livingston, 2010).”

David Jansson points out in “Internal Orientalism in America” that the South has long been a counterpoint to the American values of modernity and progress. It is an “internal other” at odds with the rest of the country. There is overlap between American and Southern identities, however, that causes many Southerners to have a dual attachment. In examining W.J. Cash’s *The Mind of the South*, Jansson notes that individualist white Southerners “would seem to fit comfortably into the American archetype” of rugged individualism. These two forms of

individualism, however, derive from different sources. “Rather than an embodiment of intellectual drive and expressive action, for Cash individualism signifies a simplicity and lack of sophistication that grows out of the sheltered plantation society.” Jansson interprets Cash as saying this causes the South to possess traits not found elsewhere in America, such as romanticism, mythicism and emotion. Together, such traits form an “ancestral straightjacket,” he writes, that keep the region stuck in the past. Jansson seems unsure if the South will ever escape that straightjacket:

“This is a task for which the mythical American is supremely fit; leading other peoples ‘out of the darkness of prejudice and into the light of a new day beyond history’ (Clayton, 1991, p. 2) is part of the job description for Americans. It is this exalted American identity that awaits the South once it breaks free from its historical chains. However, to the extent that this vision of America depends upon and is constructed through an othering of the South, that achievement may always be just out of reach.”

Being a native Southerner probably means a greater sense of Southern identity. Cultural and political identities are intertwined more in the South than the non-South. Why? The South once had to use politics to fight for its identity in the Civil War, Reconstruction and civil rights era. The South’s dominant identity is also a political identity. If the South does in fact have a unique way of life, politics was the way the South defended, and arguably continues to defend, it.

Going back to the exit poll data presented earlier, it should be asked: do young people in the South retain the political “otherness” of their elders and why? Data-wise, that seems to be the case. But what influences their vote choice, and are those influences different than those at work on young people elsewhere in the nation? One explanation could lie in the fact that regional identity is stronger in the South, where there are more native-born residents.

Percent native-born population vs. vote choice vs. party registration^{15 16}

State	Percent native-born population	2012 election result	Percent registered Democrat	Percent registered Republican
Louisiana	78.8	Romney	48.5	39.1
Mississippi	71.9	Romney	45.1	44
Alabama	70	Romney	43.9	44.7
Georgia	55.2	Romney	45.4	41.8
South Carolina	58.6	Romney	43.5	43.4
North Carolina	58.5	Romney	49.2	38.5
Virginia	49.9	Obama	47.5	38.5
Tennessee	61.0	Romney	45.7	40.7
Arkansas	61.3	Romney	49.1	36.6

For reference, these are the five states with the lowest native-born populations. None are in the South.

State	Percent native-born population
Nevada	24.3
Florida	35.2
D.C.	37.3
Arizona	37.7
Alaska	39.0

If a person grows up immersed in a fairly monolithic political culture as opposed to one with more outside influences (ex. the fringe South), they are more likely to carry on the norms of that culture. Further, Southern identity seems to trump all other identities, according to David Goldfield in *Still Fighting the Civil War*. He writes of a Southern ethnicity, suggesting that being Southern is far more than just an identity — rather, it implies that group of people is naturally different than all others. Being Southern and acting as such is perhaps inescapable.

¹⁵ You're Not From Around Here, Are You?. (2013, May 16). *Larry J Sabatos Crystal Ball*. Retrieved March 24, 2014, from <http://www.centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/articles/youre-not-from-around-here-are-you/>

¹⁶ State of the States: Political Party Affiliation. (2009, January 28). *Gallup*. Retrieved March 24, 2014, from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/114016/state-states-political-party-affiliation.aspx#2>

Technology and connectedness

Or does that inescapability remain true in today's world that is defined by constantly evolving technology? The emergence of national media with the invention of radio in the early 20th century helped end regional isolation in that people came to know and care about events happening in other parts of the U.S. Further, people in different areas of the country were connected in being fans of the same radio dramas and comedies.

People today are more connected with one another than at any other time in history. For young people growing up and becoming adults in such a world, it is possible that they are less likely to primarily identify with a regional identity. Media expose consumers to people, cities and ways of life from around the world, meaning the traditional Southern identity is not the only identity young people living there know of. Moreover, social networking sites that are popular with young people enable them to easily interact with and learn from people whose lives and beliefs are different from theirs. Perhaps most important is that for many young people, their online presence is a huge part of their life — it is how they represent themselves and what they stand for. They are aware their audience is global and highly diverse.

Liberalism among young people

While about half of millennials identify as political independents, they tend to vote Democratic, according to a March 2014 Pew Research Center study.¹⁷ The study notes “millennials today are still the only generation in which liberals are not significantly outnumbered by conservatives.” It will be interesting in coming years to see how permanent this effect is and if the South will eventually go along with it. Young people, meanwhile, are turning the nation more Democratic. In the Deep South at least, it seems young people do not follow this trend. Given that the South to a degree ensures the Republican Party's national success, it is important to know what direction up-and-coming Southern voters may turn.

According to a 2013 survey of opinions on social issues by Louisiana State University's Public Policy Research Lab¹⁸, young people in Louisiana are much more likely than people age 65 or older to support gay marriage and the legalization of marijuana. These figures suggest young people may indeed turn things around in Deep South states like Louisiana. However, exit polls from recent presidential elections indicate young voters in those states continue to make choices very similar to their elders.

¹⁷ Millennials in Adulthood. (2014, March 7). *Pew Research Centers Social Demographic Trends Project*. Retrieved March 23, 2014, from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/03/07/millennials-in-adulthood/>

¹⁸ Goidel, K., Davis, B., Climek, M., & Brou, L. (2013). *By the Numbers: 2013 Louisiana Survey: Social Issues*. *The Public Policy Research Lab*. Retrieved March 24, 2014, from <https://sites01.lsu.edu/wp/pprl/files/2012/07/LA-Survey-2013-Social-Issues.pdf>

Voting trends

In 2008 presidential exit polls in many states, young people did not vote like older people. In North Carolina, only 26 percent of voters between 18 to 29 years old voted for Republican John McCain, while 56 percent of those over age 65 voted for McCain. In Deep South states like Alabama, about half of young people voted for McCain.

Four years earlier in 2004, 43 percent of voters between 18 to 29 years old voted for Republican George W. Bush, and 57 percent ages 60 and older voted for Bush. In Alabama, 57 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds voted for Bush. Because those percentages are much closer for 2004 than 2008, it seems something happening between those two elections that caused young people in fringe South states like North Carolina to break up with the Republican Party. The unpopularity of the War in Iraq and Bush's presidency could be to blame, particularly because young people are the ones who have to go to war, as mentioned earlier in the Nuxoll article. Also, when Barack Obama ran in 2008, young people had the chance to vote for a more relatable candidate, age-wise at least — Obama was 47 years old at the time while McCain was 72. In the Deep South, lower support for Obama could be explained by his platform being highly incompatible with their traditional Southern views. Allegiance to those views despite Obama's age and relatability probably means continuity of a traditional Southern identity in those places.

While Obama did win the majority 18-29 vote in many Southern states, those percentages are lower in the Deep South than in the fringe South.

Exit polls from CNN:

State	2004 election result, ages 18-29	2004 election result, ages 65+	2008 election result, ages 18-29	2008 election result, ages 65+
Louisiana	Bush, 53%	Bush, 66%	McCain, 49%	McCain, 69%
Mississippi	Kerry, 63%	Bush, 75%	Obama, 56%	N/A
Alabama	Bush, 57%	Bush, 72%	Obama, 50%	McCain, 78%
Georgia	Bush, 52%	Bush, 67%	McCain, 51%	McCain, 54%
South Carolina	Bush, 51%	Bush, 63%	Obama, 55%	McCain, 66%
North Carolina	Kerry, 56%	Bush, 55%	Obama, 79%	McCain, 56%
Virginia	Kerry, 54%	Kerry, 51%	Obama, 60%	McCain, 53%
Tennessee	Bush, 53%	Kerry, 50%	Obama, 55%	Obama, 59%
Arkansas	Kerry, 51%	Kerry, 54%	Tie, 49% each	McCain, 65%

State	2008 election result, ages 18-29, white	2008 election result, ages 18-29, African-American
Louisiana	McCain, 81%	Obama, 94%
Mississippi	McCain, 81%	Obama, 99%
Alabama	McCain, 84%	Obama, 96%
Georgia	McCain, 79%	Obama, 98%
South Carolina	McCain, 74%	N/A
North Carolina	Obama, 56%	Obama, 100%
Virginia	McCain, 56%	Obama, 90%
Tennessee	McCain, 53%	N/A
Arkansas	McCain, 65%	N/A

When 2008 exit poll data is broken down further by race, one can see that Republican support is much stronger among young white people in the Deep South. The Southern political culture has historically been dominated by whites, and African-Americans and other minorities tend to vote more solidly for Democrats, so it makes sense to break the data down this way. Support for Republicans among young white people indicates continuance of traditionally Southern voting patterns, which suggests there is also continuance of the identity that informs those patterns. Additionally, the lower levels of support among 18- to 29-year-olds in North Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia speak to the fact that there are probably non-Southern

influences at work in those states, seeing that even young white people there are breaking with the usual patterns.

Because Louisiana and Georgia saw a majority vote for McCain in 2008, those states can be compared to the top two states that went for Obama — North Carolina and Virginia. The fact that nearly 80 percent of young North Carolinians voted for the Democratic candidate in 2008 when just four years earlier that percentage was 56 percent is significant. What changed? For one thing, North Carolina's population grew by 18.5 percent between 2000 and 2010, whereas Louisiana's grew by just 1.4 percent.¹⁹ One of the fastest-growing metropolitan areas of the U.S. is Raleigh-Cary, North Carolina. Between 2000 and 2010, the number of black North Carolina residents grew by nearly 18 percent, and Latinos and Hispanics by 111 percent.²⁰ Meanwhile in Louisiana, the black population remained basically stagnant; the proportion of Latino and Hispanic residents grew by about 79 percent, which is still sizable but less than what occurred in North Carolina. Further, the population between ages 5 and 17 in North Carolina grew by nearly 16 percent; in Louisiana, that slice of the population shrunk by about 11 percent.²¹

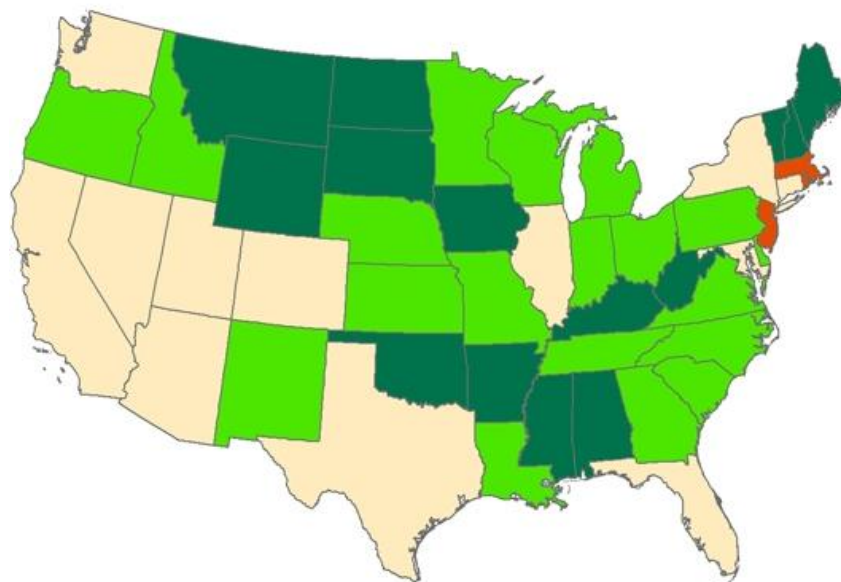
In Louisiana and Georgia, not much seemed to change between 2000 and 2010, vote- or demographic-wise. Republican support among 18- to 29-year-olds remained solid. Why do some states seem to be better at maintaining a Southern political identity while others let go? Percent native-born population, described earlier, could be one reason. A related explanation is demographic changes. Minority groups are more likely to vote for Democrats. Two Deep South states are more than 50 percent rural, and others are more rural than the U.S. average.

¹⁹ Population Distribution and Change: 2000 to 2010. (n.d.). *Census.gov*. Retrieved March 24, 2014, from <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-01.pdf>

²⁰ Population of North Carolina. (n.d.). *Census Viewer*. Retrieved March 24, 2014, from <http://censusviewer.com/state/NC>

²¹ Population of Louisiana. (n.d.). *Census Viewer*. Retrieved March 24, 2014, from <http://censusviewer.com/state/LA>

Conventional wisdom is that rural areas do not change as fast as urban areas, where people from outside the area often move in for work or travel, bringing new or different ideas with them. In the Deep South, which is more rural and where the traditionally politically dominant white demographic is remaining stable in numbers, change is simply less likely to happen. It also means there are more people around to keep alive a traditional Southern identity and instill its value in up-and-coming generations. It helps that conservative Southerners are able to ally with those from other areas of the U.S. on political issues — they have a place on the national stage and a voice that is heard. Because they fit into the country in that way, this could also explain even conservative Southerners' strong support of “traditional American” values.



Map shows percent of residents in each state living in rural areas or "urban clusters" of between 2,500 and 50,000.



This map shows how rural each of the lower 48 states is.²²

²² How Rural Are the States?. (2012, April 3). *Daily Yonder | Keep It Rural*. Retrieved March 24, 2014, from <http://www.dailyyonder.com/how-rural-are-states/2012/04/02/3847>

Conclusion

Why does it matter if young Southerners maintain or let go of the identity associated with their region? To Democrats, letting go would be ideal because it would offer a chance to regain support in the South. To Republicans, maintaining the identity would be preferred because it embraces many of the same traditional values espoused by conservative politicians. To some Southerners, it may be important to preserve cultural uniqueness and the resulting political uniqueness and power. The fringe South may already be “lost,” but this does not appear to be true in the Deep South, where outside influences seem to be less potent.

Just as Southerners in the past used politics as a tool to assert themselves as unique, different, better — whatever — young people now can use politics to change the course or keep the past alive. Knowing how important the youth vote is, Americans should care. But these young people will grow up one day. Will they preserve and pass on an environment in the South where their children have same old identity, or not? In the Deep South at least, the answer seems to be yes. However, the younger generation appears to be ushering non-Southern politics into the South in some places. Given demographic and other population changes as well as shifts in opinions on social issues, this trend may gain traction across a greater swath of the South and manifest itself more fully in the coming decades.

The larger and perhaps more interesting issue, however, is that the Deep South seems immune to trends taking place among young people throughout the U.S. This speaks to the strength of Southern culture, at least among white voters. The fact that Southern identity trumps others when it comes to making vote choices is significant. The fact that the Deep South seems to be unique in this — in retaining a unique political culture, even among young people — is

even more significant. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly why this is the case, but stable demographics, the support of traditional Southernness from religion and the extent to which Southern customs are embedded in life in the Deep South could help explain it.

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