

Southern Nation: Congress and White Supremacy after Reconstruction

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Review

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Bateman, James A., Ira Katznelson, and John S. Lapinski *Southern Nation: Congress and White Supremacy after Reconstruction*. Princeton University Press. 2018. ISBN 9780691126494, \$35.00 pp. 488

In *Southern Nation: Congress and White Supremacy after Reconstruction*, three generations of political scientists or political historians offer a rewarding reexamination of a critical half-century of the history of race and policymaking in the South and the nation. Ira Katznelson, the author of *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (2013), was the dissertation advisor to John S. Lapinski, author of *The Substance of Representation: Congress, Lawmaking, and American Political Development* (2013), and he in turn was the graduate advisor to James A. Bateman, author of *Disenfranchising Democracy: Constructing a Mass Electorate in the United States, the United Kingdom, and France* (2018). To this project they bring their prodigious and complementary strengths, as they examine the mechanics of Congress, of how—and which—legislation got pushed through or thwarted.

The authors' definition of the South includes not only the eleven states of the former Confederacy or the ten (that is, excepting Tennessee) that were subject to Congressional Reconstruction. Rather, they include, too, the other five states that supported slavery during the Civil War, plus Oklahoma when it came onstream, thus all seventeen states that mandated a fully articulated system of racial segregation together with a panoply of measures designed to restrict the electorate and, in particular, suppress black participation in politics, whether as officeholders or as voters. Members of both houses of Congress who represented their social fragments of their home states—and who presumed to represent the rest—between the 1880s and the 1920s embodied an overriding objective of deflecting interference from outside with their version of “home rule.” They would rule at home. If they could derive additional

benefits from federal policymaking, they would do so. How they did so shifted across the years between the end of Reconstruction and the eve of the New Deal.

Successive cohorts of southern senators and congressmen navigated varying contexts through the five-plus decades from 1877 to 1933. Into the 1890s, they could not yet be confident of federal noninterference in the emerging post-slavery social and political order. Their lack of certitude reflected the possibility that Congress or the Supreme Court might act in support of black electoral power. It stemmed, too, from the fact that, in every session of Congress from 1870 to 1901, with the exception of a single two-year period, at least one African American represented at least one southern state. After that, none did or ever could as long as the regime depicted in this book continued in power.

For the first decade and more of the twentieth century, Republicans controlled the presidency, but in 1913 Woodrow Wilson—a Virginia-born and Georgia-reared Democrat— took up residence in the White House. In the 1920s one Republican or another once again filled the nation’s highest office, but by then white southern members of Congress had made the world over, more or less, in their own image. During the New Deal, too, and beyond, they would demonstrate tremendous sway over policymaking.

Across the years, southern delegates usually held the balance of power in both houses, with the Senate the final bulwark against interference with the southern states’ Jim Crow regime back home. In the Senate, the sixteen southern states (seventeen after Oklahoma statehood in 1907) always held more than a third of all seats, so the other senators would have had to mount more than a three-to-one majority to override the region’s demands on the rules of race, and the issue mattered far more to legislators from the South than it did to those from elsewhere. In the House of Representatives, the old three-fifths formula under slavery had in effect been replaced with five-fifths, and white southerners voted virtually the entire additional representation as well as their own.

Congressional rules enhanced the South’s power in national governance. One-party states, where elections were rarely competitive, tended to send congressmen and senators to term after term, so they built up seniority and thus dominated committee

chairmanships. Operations at the committee level compounded those on floor votes to heighten white southern control of the political process.

The nation's system of land-grant colleges constituted one of a myriad of policy areas that demonstrated the operations of the Jim Crow regime in Congress. Building on the original 1862 Morrill Land-Grant College Act, the 1890 Morrill Act offered a substantial increase of funding to each state, as did the Nelson Amendment of 1906, but only on condition that black citizens share in the benefits. Each of the segregated states therefore came to have two land-grant institutions, divided by race, what would become known as the "colleges of 1862" and the "colleges of 1890." The federal funds passed through the states, whose legislatures often appropriated supplementary state funds exclusively to the white schools. Further federal legislation in the 1910s carried little if any condition of equitable sharing of benefits. State elites looked after the details of implementing all such measures and distributing their benefits. Equal protection of the laws?

In short, the southern states functioned in both houses of Congress as rotten boroughs with slim electorates, representative of mere fragments of the local population. In political terms, each state presented itself as a white enclave, whatever its racial makeup. For decade after decade, policy outputs at the national level, as well as within the states, reflected the Jim Crow South's political system and priorities.

What might a sequel volume look like? The structure and system in place persisted, to a great extent, for many more years. In 1933, Harry F. Byrd Sr. entered the Senate from Virginia; he left in 1965. During those three decades, he and his southern colleagues contested threats over such matters as keeping the poll tax as a condition of voting, so as to retain their positions relatively unchallenged, and Massive Resistance, at least in most of the former Confederacy, as a regional response to *Brown v. Board of Education*.

At about the time that Byrd departed the Senate, the 1964 Twenty-fourth Amendment regarding poll taxes in federal elections, followed by the Voting Rights Act of 1965, greatly expanded and diversified the electorates in all seventeen southern states. A new epoch commenced, with greater turnover in both houses of Congress and—a good indicator of partial transformation—the return of African Americans from

some southern states to the House of Representatives.

But the outlines of the American political world entering the 1960s still looked a lot like that of the 1920s. The three authors of this outstanding study have contributed mightily to excavating the manner in which former secessionists and their political progeny (reinforced by delegations from the Border South) managed to gain enormous control over the nation they had once tried so hard to leave. Through their oversized power and single-minded policies, they left a virtually ineradicable imprint, not only in their home region but elsewhere in the nation as well.

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