

**New South:
Racial Justice, Political Organizing, and Reimagining the American Battleground**

by
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I have adhered to the honor code on this assignment.

Table of Contents

<i>Patricia</i>	2
Chapter 1: Introduction	5
<i>Jerry, Delia, Liz, & Diann</i>	19
Chapter 2: Trajectory of Southern Politics	21
<i>Speedy, Harrison, & I</i>	36
Chapter 3: The South Got Something to Say	39
<i>Curtis</i>	59
Chapter 4: Relational Organizing and Pushing Power Down	62
<i>Jane & the rest of us</i>	78
Chapter 5: Visions of a New South	80
Bibliography	102

Patricia

Nana likes to sleep with her windows open. She watches from behind me as I lift the lodged windowpane from its chipped, white-painted resting place, exposing cobwebs and dead moths from long ago's winter. Her weary fingers tremble to aching when she tries separating the two on her own, and so I lift the panes throughout the house during my visits. She cannot carry heavy things anymore. She doesn't leave the house much anymore.

When I drive in, rolling through the dissolving dirt road leading me, Nana meets me on the front porch: one palm tucked deeply in the softer spot above her hip, the other kept firm above her thinning eyebrows. She wears shorts. In the wrinkling Georgia heat, we all do. Blue varicose veins run down her calves like a willow's streams. Unloading my bags, I ask how she knew it was me arriving, as opposed to anyone else. Nana chose a home high up on a North Georgia peak, where she could raise up a garden, see routine redbirds, and feel the turning of the leaves. She tells me that people only come down her driveway for a reason.

When I visit, Nana cares for me as though I were young still. Breakfast is always white rice with butter and sugar. She replays the six o'clock news, calling me down to point out well-dressed anchors, saying that they are what she imagines for me. I nod her off. She is insecure about the home, pointing out messes where there are none, and offhandedly defends her collections of less concerning things: newspaper clippings, statuettes, and her Baptist trinkets. She leaves out spreads of leftovers for me on nights when she resigns prematurely.

“Early to bed, early to rise. You know the rest.”

I take to my mother's childhood bedroom and lie sedated by the heat. Golden dusk shines in, casting itself against the wall, and is interrupted only by browning photographs, curling in at the edges, from days when Mom slept soundly here. Evening's stench wafts in through the

pane's screens. I can see specks hover in the air, glittering in the low light, dimming to dark, leaving me in the black vacancy; still sweating, still staining the sheets, still entranced by the crickets' song. Nana's American flag waves just outside the window, storm lights positioned upwards to ensure its shine.

When my brother and I were young, we used to turn the corner in the hallway leading to the staircase quickly, skipping steps to reach the top. At the foot of the stairs, a window to the front of the house sat quietly, facing the long, dark treeline at the end of the yard. I'd repeat Nana's childhood anecdotes to myself to justify my fear of the dark: stepping down the street as a young girl and seeing the Klan drive by, radio blaring, eyes locked on the girl as they'd roll by. I'd imagine glittering lights echoing beyond the trees; and slowly they'd break through, torches in hand, white cloaks shrouding their face. They'd storm the front porch, pull us over the threshold, and condemn us using the same magnolia trees in the yard that I'd spent the summer day climbing just hours earlier. Those storm lights and the banner's beaming were the only avenues for solace those days.

When I was younger and would spend my summers in Nana's house, on those brighter days, she'd tell me to press my ear against the plain asphalt and would ask if I could hear the Devil beating his wife. I'd giggle at the cracking of sky—thunder rumbling down past my distracted eye, stuck on the sight of my chalky mark washing away into the glowing grass, and the deep soil beneath it. When the rain began to fall, Nana insisted we turn everything off: the lamps, the droning radio, all of it. She'd sit solemnly, her chest rising and falling consistently, and would wait for dark clouds to roll over and press away the sun. When silent lightning would split through sound and echo into the home, she'd remain still, though the flash would jolt me.

Nana did not want to know if the power went out. Were the electricity to surge or lapse, she wanted her devices safe from the current. Those days we rested. The storm would pass.



Introduction

Mom would arrive at Stonewall Tell Elementary School, named after the Confederate general Stonewall Jackson, after she'd wrap up with work around 5PM. She'd pull into the empty pick-up lane in her red 2002 Ford Explorer, and my young brother and I would stumble out with our oversized, unzipped backpacks; wrinkled and untucked uniform Polos; and fingertips stained from colorful markers. Depending on the weather, we might carry with us bubble coats or handpicked yellow dandelions--but it's the October evenings that I remember most clearly. She'd hurry us into the car and press against the speed limit as she aimed for the South Fulton Service Center, before the early voting location would close. We'd go in with her and sit up against the brown wall, completing homework assignments amid the slow-moving line. Always, she'd go into the voting booth, and return with an "I Voted" sticker for each of us.

The South is the closest thing that my family has to an ancestral home, having been condemned to historic amnesia due to the impacts of the Middle Passage and American chattel slavery. The region has always demanded a commitment to service in order to make it that--a home. A responsibility to one's community and a dedication to social justice have been preached to me since I was a child, from being urged to pray for my neighbors each night before I fell asleep, to waiting with my mother as she followed her engagement with an early vote. However, despite this legacy of commitment to the betterment of one's own community, my family, candidates, organizers, and activists have been historically and contemporarily hamstrung and suppressed by the efficacy of restrictive, conservative electoral politics within the region.

Among Southern states, the Republican Party can claim all but three governorships: John Bel Edwards, elected in Louisiana in 2015;¹ Roy Cooper, elected in North Carolina in 2016;² and Andy Beshear, elected in Kentucky in 2019.³ The GOP constitutes a majority within the congressional delegations of each state belonging to the South, and has successfully maintained control of each and every state legislature, aside from the state of Virginia.⁴ There are no split chambers in these states. Where Republicans rule, they dominate. They govern brutally, and with a tight grip on the region, hindering progressive activists' work to see leftward change be made at home.

In the state of Tennessee, the Republican-held legislature passed a bill for Governor Bill Lee's signature, criminalizing voter registration drives in the wake of increased Black voter turnout in the 2018 midterm elections.⁵ Led by Tequila Johnson and Charlane Oliver, co-founders of The Equity Alliance, the Tennessee Black Voter Project was an organizing initiative launched in early 2018 to register Black voters across the state. Tennessee has historically come in 44th place in voter turnout, and 45th in voter registration--and much of this has to do with restrictive voter laws that impact Black and brown communities disproportionately. The Tennessee Black Voter Project mobilized in the state's major cities: Nashville, Memphis, and

¹ Elliott, Debbie. "Louisiana Democrat Governor Victory Disrupts Partisan Politics Tradition," November 22, 2015.

<https://www.npr.org/2015/11/22/456988694/louisiana-democrat-governor-victory-disrupts-partisan-politics-tradition>.

² "North Carolina Governor Election Results." The New York Times. The New York Times, November 3, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/03/us/elections/results-north-carolina-governor.html>.

³ Robertson, Campbell. "In Kentucky, a Governor Who Picked Fights Loses a Big One." The New York Times. The New York Times, November 14, 2019.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/14/us/kentucky-governor-race-matt-bevin.html>.

⁴ Kromm, Chris. "GOP Maintains Dominance in Southern Legislatures, Locking in Power over Redistricting." Facing South, November 20, 2020.

<https://www.facingsouth.org/2020/11/gop-maintains-dominance-southern-legislatures-locking-power-over-redistricting>.

⁵ Gardner, Amy. "How a Large-Scale Effort to Register Black Voters Led to a Crackdown in Tennessee." The Washington Post. WP Company, May 27, 2019.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/how-a-large-scale-effort-to-register-black-voters-led-to-a-crackdown-in-tennessee/2019/05/24/9f6cee1e-7284-11e9-8be0-ca575670e91c_story.html.

Chattanooga; registering and restoring the voting rights of upwards of 90,000 Black and brown voters.⁶ Republican legislators accused the program of attempting to overwhelm the state's election offices in order to interfere with the election. As a result the legislature passed, and Governor Lee signed a bill to fine up to \$10,000 and impose a year of jail time to those turning in incomplete or improperly filled out voter registration forms.⁷

The law has since been repealed, after pushback from national politicians, voting rights organizations, civil rights activists, and federal judges.⁸ However, it's initial passage shows the hostility that Southerners today face under the current electoral landscape. North Carolina captured national headlines in the spring of 2016 when its legislature passed the Public Facilities Privacy and Security Act,⁹ otherwise known as the North Carolina "bathroom bill." The bill, banning transgender people from using bathroom facilities that correspond to their gender identity, was defeated in 2019 in a settlement, after a series of legal battles.¹⁰ In May of 2019, Alabama passed the Human Life Protection Act, banning abortion at any stage of pregnancy, with no exemptions for pregnancies caused due to rape or incest. The bill classified abortion to be legally tantamount to murder, and could've result in life sentences in prison for women who seek abortions and for doctors who carry them out.¹¹ Again, this law was defeated in federal

⁶ The Equity Alliance, October 19, 2020. <https://theequityalliance.org/>.

⁷ Mattise, Jonathan. "New Tennessee Law Punishes Voter Signup Missteps; Suit Filed." AP NEWS. Associated Press, May 3, 2019. <https://apnews.com/article/934cfbeca8e1408d8d9ce84c9d9ab5a0>

⁸ "Tennessee Removes Anti-Voter Registration Provisions Following Federal Legal Challenge." American Civil Liberties Union, April 2, 2020. <https://www.aclu.org/press-releases/tennessee-removes-anti-voter-registration-provisions-following-federal-legal>.

⁹ Philipps, Dave. "North Carolina Bans Local Anti-Discrimination Policies." The New York Times. The New York Times, March 24, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/24/us/north-carolina-to-limit-bathroom-use-by-birth-gender.html>.

¹⁰ Levin, Dan. "North Carolina Reaches Settlement on 'Bathroom Bill'." The New York Times. The New York Times, July 23, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/23/us/north-carolina-transgender-bathrooms.html>.

¹¹ "Near-Total Abortion Ban Signed into Law in Alabama." AP NEWS. Associated Press, May 16, 2019. <https://apnews.com/article/e18aa07a0a42439eb8856daca3f1a9cb>.

court,¹² but bills like this--like North Carolina's and like Tennessee's-- represent the standard for not only what Southern organizers are fighting against, but for what persecution Southerners live under each day.

It's bills like this that cement assumptions and stereotypes regarding the South. For decades, the region has been written off by the rest of the nation, much in part due to white Southerners embracing a "lost cause" narrative of the Civil War, and building upon that foundation to continue enacting discriminatory legislation and policies. It was, after all, Southern states that seceded from the Union in order to preserve slavery. This legacy of racism, paired with extreme poverty within the region today, enables stereotypes of Southern rednecks and hicks as being the face of the region.

When election returns came in on November 3, 2020, and as states were called for Donald Trump or for Joe Biden, many took to Twitter to express their thoughts on Southern states voting to send Trump to a second-term in the White House. "If Trump wins Florida, Then a bad Hurricane comes to Florida, I'm not giving a damn penny or support out bye! #ElectionNight," posted Twitter user @KandisTears.¹³ Another, posted by @therealeryn, went "& of course Trump won South Carolina...racist ass state."¹⁴ Or, simply put by @TeeThaGoddess, "the South be useless as fuck."¹⁵ This rhetoric mirrors that of the infamous "Jesusland" map that circulated the Internet in the wake of the 2004 presidential election,

¹² Rojas, Rick, and Alan Blinder. "Alabama Abortion Ban Is Temporarily Blocked by a Federal Judge." The New York Times. The New York Times, October 29, 2019.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/29/us/alabama-abortion-ban.html>.

¹³ @KandisTears. "If Trump wins Florida, Then a bad Hurricane comes to Florida, I'm not giving a damn penny or support out bye! #ElectionNight." November 3, 2020. 7:13 PM.

<https://twitter.com/KandisTears/status/1323795418363342849>

¹⁴ @therealeryn. "& of course Trump won South Carolina...racist ass state." November 3, 2020. 6:22 PM.

<https://twitter.com/therealeryn/status/1323782530353532929?s=20>

¹⁵ @TeeThaGoddess. "the South be useless as fuck." November 3, 2020. 9:09 PM.

<https://twitter.com/TeeThaGoddess/status/1323824562182696960?s=20>

isolating red states as their own backwards country, and linking blue states with Canada.¹⁶ The map was reposted and circulated recently, on December 10, 2020 by author and activist Amy Siskand who tweeted: “Proposed map. NY and CA are sick of supporting these red welfare states!” The post has since been deleted.¹⁷

While these associations are justifiably rooted in a historic and contemporary crisis within the region regarding elevated tyranny inconsistent with the values of inclusion, equity, and justice for all people; they include a glaring omission: the incredible presence of marginalized people within the American South. 55% of Black Americans live in a Southern state,¹⁸ with the majority of the community’s population calling this particular region home. The South boasts the largest concentration of queer and transgender people than any other area in the country.¹⁹ Every Southern state’s demographics show that upwards of 51.0% of their population is made up of women. Only five other states in the country reach that level.²⁰ The South is the birthplace of the Civil Rights Movement, contains the site of the Battle of Blair Mountain, and is the home of environmental activism in the wake of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. To disregard the South is to leave behind the marginalized folks that makeup Southern communities--and ignore the long history of social justice and progressivism that is rooted in the South.

On November 13, 2020, the Associated Press officially called the state of Georgia for Joe Biden, the Democratic nominee for President of the United States, and declared that its two

¹⁶ Hitt, Jack. “Neo-Secessionism.” The New York Times. The New York Times, December 12, 2004. <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/12/magazine/neosecessionism.html>.

¹⁷ @TheCorwan. “Did @Amy_Siskind just delete this tweet? #Jesusland.” December 10, 2020. 1:57 PM. <https://twitter.com/TheCorwan/status/1337124328756883462?s=20>

¹⁸ US Census Bureau Public Information Office. “Majority of African Americans Live in 10 States; New York City and Chicago Are Cities With Largest Black Populations - Census 2000 - Newsroom - U.S. Census Bureau.” Newsroom Archive, May 19, 2016. https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/census_2000/cb01cn176.html.

¹⁹ “LGBT Data & Demographics.” The Williams Institute, January 2019. <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/visualization/lgbt-stats/?topic=LGBT>.

²⁰ “Population Distribution by Sex.” KFF, October 23, 2020. <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/distribution-by-sex/?activeTab=map>.

Senate races would progress to a runoff in order to determine control of the United States Senate.²¹ This represented the first time that Georgia's electoral votes would go to a Democrat since 1992, when Bill Clinton and Al Gore swept the nation,²² Southerners themselves. This Georgia--the same Georgia where I sat with my mother as she cast her ballot, where my father took my younger brother and I to knock doors for the first presidential nominee who we could see ourselves in, where he and my uncles shed happy tears at Obama's victory in 2008--went blue due to the long-term work of voting rights activists like Stacey Abrams, and attention and investment from the Democratic National Committee along with the Biden-Harris campaign. While Georgia's shift in the recent 2020 election is certainly a clear signal of the progress that can come with long-term organizing and attention to countering voter suppression, these lessons must trigger action and a re-envisioning of the broader South.

As he conceded in the race for one of South Carolina's US Senate seats, Democratic candidate Jamie Harrison spoke that "a new South is rising."²³

The recent victory in Georgia cannot be accepted as an isolated anomaly, or as a unique exception to the Southern norm. If Democrats are serious about fighting for racial justice, the rights of queer and trans people, reproductive justice, gender equity, labor rights, and environmentalism among other issues, then they must get serious about the South. While electoral politics may not be the only lens through which to view progress and liberation, it is no doubt an active and determining factor in shaping the conditions under which we can live each

²¹ Slodysko, Brian. "EXPLAINER: Why AP Called Georgia for Biden." AP NEWS. Associated Press, November 13, 2020.

<https://apnews.com/article/why-ap-called-georgia-for-joe-biden-29c1fb0502efde50fdccb5e2c3611017>.

²² Stroh-Page, Caitlyn. "When Was the Last Time Georgia Voted Blue? It's Been Nearly 30 Years." Online Athens. Athens Banner-Herald, November 6, 2020.

<https://www.onlineathens.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/11/06/when-was-last-time-georgia-voted-blue-itrsquos-been-nearly-30-years/43004695/>.

²³ "A New South Is Rising,' Jaime Harrison Concedes Senate Race." The New York Times. The New York Times, November 4, 2020.

<https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/elections/10000007434537/jaime-harrison-concession-speech.html>.

day and alternatively organize. This thesis draws on interviews with voters and organizers to disrupt preconceived academic and popularized notions of the Deep South in order to argue that the Democratic Party needs to reconsider how it approaches the region. There is plenty of room for revision in the apathetic approach that national Democrats and progressives treat the South with. This historic and contemporary disdain, paired with common guilt in the promotion of a limited and exclusionary idea of what the South is, contributes to the marginalization of Southern communities of color, queer and trans people, working class folks, and more. However, through attention to voter access, revised organizing tactics, and more, the Democratic Party can be a part of the solution. There is a moral obligation to uplift and tend to marginalized people who have made their homes in the South; and, as my research illuminates, the survival of the Democratic majority is at risk if it continues to fail to recognize the relevance and power of its electorate in the South.

Having an interdisciplinary approach, my research process has included methods of qualitative study, oral history, narrative inquiry, and auto-ethnography. Through a series of focus groups, I've spoken with campaign organizers, grassroots activists, elected officials, and family members--all from the South, working in the South--about their perspectives on the region and the work left to do. Interviews were conducted through small focus groups in order to allow for organizers to engage with one another and to identify the larger-scale regional issues with the Democratic Party's approach to electoral politics within the South, as well as the broader public's indifferent, or antagonistic attitude towards the region. Chapters are framed by short, creative pieces reflecting upon my own family's history within the South. Through my research methodology, I center the voices and experiences of people working on the ground and living in the South, to demonstrate both the reality of the region and the visions of what the South can be,

while also humanizing the region in opposition to common stereotypes. The voices of these individuals, in conversation with one another across state lines, backgrounds, and identities, highlight a common vision and value for social justice in the American South.

Sophia Howard, student at Spelman College and former field organizer on the 2018 Stacey Abrams for Governor campaign emphasized this hope, stating that “the South is honestly a magical place for all of its flaws. I love it because it’s so constantly energized with this historic legacy of change. [...] The system wins as soon as it squashes all hope; and the South, even though not consistently, it has always had so much hope, and love, and growth, and it’s such a beautiful thing to watch.”²⁴ These perspectives, paired with secondary source analysis and reflections upon my own family’s history, will present a new vision for the South and a roadmap for how to get there.

What is the South? Regional lines have been drawn and redrawn over the course of history, highlighting cultural similarities, geographic placement, economic status, and more. Depending on who you ask, Florida and Texas may not count as Southern; though some would say the same for Kentucky and Virginia. In this project, I do not seek to limit or define what the South is regionally. I paint with broad strokes through the region, to provide a diagnosis to the flawed Democratic majority that exists today, and to uplift those across the region who would call themselves “Southern.” For the purposes of this thesis, I’ve spoken with organizers, elected officials, family, and more with experience in these specific states: Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, and Tennessee.

²⁴ Hicks, Henry, Sophia Howard, Nevin Bulut, and Whitman Miller. New South Focus Group 2. Other, October 30, 2020.

There exists a large body of research on the American South and on electoral politics. From John Judis and Ruy Tiexiera's *The Emerging Democratic Majority* to today's *Our Time is Now* by Stacey Abrams, political scientists and elected officials have long since contemplated the role of the South in future elections. Texts such as *Southern Politics in the 1990s* by Alexander Lamis reflect back on the region's previous political history. Lamis moves through specific election cycles, each two years, and examines the shifting electoral landscape in individual Southern states. In his book, he details the rise of the GOP over the course of the decade, explores the impact of majority-Black congressional districts, and explains the dynamics of urban/rural divides in elections. In his introduction, Lamis writes that "full comprehension of where the region is going in partisan terms must await the long journey about to begin through the detailed commentaries on each of the eleven states."²⁵ Lamis, however, never engages with personal perspectives on the issue and does not highlight the work of organizers on-the-ground. He engages with higher-level, broader political trends, and omits the lived experience of those within the South.

Southern Politics in the 1990s, in its historical approach, does build steadily upon the context of James C. Cobb's *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity*. Cobb goes further back, exploring the evolution of Southerners' attitudes towards the region, different historical periods, and the political issues that impact different groups' eagerness or reluctance to claim the South as home. Cobb emphasizes the role of a common history that unites Southerners, regardless of race--but also explores the complexities of that history. "Blacks and whites defined their frustrations, failures, and defeats so differently that one group's tragedy frequently

²⁵ Lamis, Alexander P. *Southern Politics in the 1990s*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1999.

represented the other's triumph,"²⁶ Cobb writes. The context that *Away Down South* and *Southern Politics in the 1990s* provide is necessary, but their focus remains primarily on those same "frustrations, failures, and defeats" of the past, rather than looking ahead towards the region's future.

The Emerging Democratic Majority by John Judis and Ruy Teixeira brings a more forward-facing approach. Published in 2002, *The Emerging Democratic Majority* was an incredibly well-received study of national Democratic politics, outlining the path moving forward by analyzing economic and demographic trends.²⁷ The book opens by reviewing the conditions that allowed for a GOP rise across the United States, shifts into explaining the voting patterns behind several constituencies, and then focuses on geography to detail the path ahead for a potential--if possible--Democratic surge. Judis and Teixeira, both non-Southerners themselves, come to the conclusion by the end of the book that the American South will not be a part of the new Democratic majority.

"The emerging Democratic majority looks as if it will mirror the conservative Republican majority it is replacing. Its strength lies in the Northeast, the upper Midwest through Minnesota, and over to the Pacific Northwest. But like the old McKinley majority, it includes the Sunbelt prize of California."²⁸

Written in the aftermath of former President Bill Clinton's second term and the rise of the New Democrat faction of the party, Judis and Teixeira make an argument for "progressive centrism,"²⁹ in this book. They argue that "a strategy that retains support among the white working class, but also builds support among college-educated professionals,"³⁰ is the best path

²⁶ Cobb, James C. *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007.

²⁷ "Books of the Year 2002." *The Economist*. *The Economist Newspaper*, December 12, 2002. <https://www.economist.com/books-and-arts/2002/12/12/seriousness-the-new-black>.

²⁸ Judis, John B., and Ruy Antonio Teixeira. *The Emerging Democratic Majority*. New York, NY: Scribner, 2006.

²⁹ Judis, 143

³⁰ Judis, 143

moving forward to energize the party and pursue the goal of achieving social change. In discussing the South, they argue that a number of Southern states--notable Mississippi, Alabama, and South Carolina--would “be very unlikely to vote for a national Democrat,”³¹ emphasizing that the lack of a postindustrial economy is solely the reasoning behind the state’s conservative leadership.

The Emerging Democratic Majority, held up as the standard for political analysis in the immediate aftermath of its publication, lacks an intersectional approach that considers the racial diversity within the South and the historic barriers of voter suppression in place to suppress the votes of people of color, young people, the elderly, and the working class. However, its ideas and theories have guided the Democratic Party for years.³² For race and voter suppression to not be considered when examining electoral politics and the implications on achieving social change in Southern states such as Mississippi, with 37.8%³³ of its population identifying as Black, 32%³⁴ in Georgia, 27%³⁵ in South Carolina, etc., is an incredible, deliberate oversight. This analysis fails to acknowledge the complexities and the potential of the American South, and has impacted the broader archive in popularizing this short-sighted approach. Excluding the South from political agency, will also likely lead to the deterioration of Democratic national victories, as explored later in this thesis.

Books such as Stacey Abrams’ *Our Time Is Now* and Ari Berman’s *Give Us the Ballot* explore both the history of racial justice and voting rights in the South and modern-day logistics of it. They write about the long fight, emphasizing that “winning doesn’t always mean you get

³¹ Judis, 108

³² Favreau, Jon. *The Wilderness: Chapter Six: The Big We. Crooked Media*, 2019.

³³ “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Mississippi.” Census Bureau QuickFacts, n.d. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/MS>.

³⁴ “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Georgia.” Census Bureau QuickFacts, n.d. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/GA>.

³⁵ “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: South Carolina.” Census Bureau QuickFacts, n.d. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/SC>.

the prize. Sometimes you get progress, and that counts.”³⁶ Abrams, ruminating on her 2018 campaign to be Governor of Georgia and the first Black woman governor in the country, details how voter suppression was weaponized against her in order to decrease Black, Democratic participation in the election. She identifies the broad categories of voter suppression that must be tackled legally, and makes the case for campaign efforts to reach infrequent voters. This playbook is what, in large part, led to Georgia flipping for Joe Biden this past November.

While *Our Time is Now* and *Give Us the Ballot* certainly hold value, they confirm a pattern demonstrated by *Southern Politics in the 1990s*, *The Emerging Democratic Majority*, and more. The majority of research conducted on electoral politics and the American South do so through the lens of political science and general history. The focus is explaining tales of lost elections, or analyzing specific legislative attacks that continue the cycle. They do not attempt to characterize the South or to do the work of reimagining it. The voices of individuals are not centered. They refer to the work of activists and organizers as “not finished,” rather than “ongoing.” What is lacking is an American Studies approach, in which the perspectives of community members and organizers on the ground are uplifted, prioritized, and are used to paint an altogether new vision of what the South is, and can be. Criticism of the Democratic Party’s previous and ongoing approach to the region is necessary for the South to flourish. Thorough analysis of the role that race and organizing play in the region’s past, present, and future is needed. This is the intervention that my research will administer.

Starting with a “Trajectory of Southern Politics,” I engage with the primary and secondary sources mentioned above, in addition to others in order to provide context on current political landscape, work that’s already being done, in addition to unpacking the state of the

³⁶ Abrams, Stacey. *Our Time Is Now: Power, Purpose, and the Fight for a Fair America*. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 2020.

region after the 2020 presidential election. Analysis from interviews with a number of organizers working at progressive nonprofits throughout the South aid in this framing. I specifically examine voter suppression in Georgia, efforts to counter it, and argue for the necessity of investments in similar work throughout the region.

From there, we move into “The South’s Got Something to Say,” which relies on focus group interviews to explore messaging and the viability on progressive issues within the South. The South is an incredibly diverse place, with a long history of championing progressive causes. Not only do progressive issues have value in Southern states, but progressive politics nationwide is contingent on attention to the South. “Regardless of what your political ideology is,” says Charles Booker, the progressive state representative who catapulted to a near-win in his fight for the Democratic nomination in Kentucky’s 2020 US Senate race, “especially in places like Kentucky, everybody’s broke and everybody’s struggling and everybody’s trying to figure out how to keep food on the table, keep the lights, take care of their family and protect their livelihood.”³⁷ Secondary source analysis here will show that just as the political Right has used the Southern condition to galvanize national support, the opportunity is available for the political Left to consider a “Southernization”³⁸ of its own national strategy.

“Relational Organizing and Pushing Power Down” centers the perspectives of campaign organizers and senior staff to argue for renovated campaign organizing approaches, with a specific focus on relational, community-based practices. Relational organizing is a campaign strategy in opposition to traditional field organizing that empowers organizers to reach people in their own communities, using tactics specific to each organizer and community. In Southern

³⁷ Paz, Isabella Grullón. “Charles Booker Says Progressives Should ‘Show Up and Listen’ to Deep Red Districts.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times, July 8, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/08/us/politics/charles-booker-kentucky.html>.

³⁸ Lowndes, Joseph E. *From the New Deal to the New Right: Race and the Southern Origins of Modern Conservatism*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009.

communities, where tight-knit, familial culture reigns--and where progressive candidates for elected office are less likely to receive funding or investment--relational organizing is a valuable strategy to employ.

Lastly, “Visions of a New South” considers the realities and constraints of electoral office as an avenue for liberation, and includes explorations of each interviewees' response to the question: when you think of a new South, what is it that you envision? Closing with these reflections serves as a reminder of just what we're fighting for, while providing alternative visions of the South to the dominant stereotype. The South is always in progress. It's always becoming, perpetually being fought over. It was Maya Angelou who said that “the South was ‘so beautiful, you can understand why people were willing to fight and lose their lives for it.’”³⁹

The South has a great mythology about it. In its long history lies, “the saga of migration from continent to continent and from farm to city, of wars waged and lost, of atrocities committed and borne, of loving and hating, of the long trek from poverty to better times...”⁴⁰ The complexity of this story is erased when we write off the South--and with it, the incredibly diverse, vibrant communities of marginalized people and freedom fighters whose experiences have defined the region through history and today. The story of the South lies within my mother. It is represented by my great uncle, and is contained within my 103-year-old great-grandmother. Like Jamie Harrison said, a new South is rising. “A new South with leaders who reflect the community and serve the interests of everyone, will be here soon enough.”⁴¹ It will. We just have to fight for it.

³⁹ Cobb, 269

⁴⁰ Cobb, 289

⁴¹ “A New South Is Rising,’ Jaime Harrison Concedes Senate Race.” The New York Times. The New York Times, November 4, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/elections/10000007434537/jaime-harrison-concession-speech.html>.

Jerry, Delia, Liz and Diann

Uncle Jerry has a hard time speaking through the tears; his oral recollection jolting through heaves and moans. We stand huddled around him, our informal vigil outside of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham during a family reunion. Each of us remain in our Sunday best, with suits stretched and paper fans swinging as the summer heat grows heavier. Elder hands rest upon Uncle Jerry's narrow back. His breathing slows, exhales slipped through pursed lips as my cousins and I exchange empty glances. Much has been written on what happened that day on the bridge. Less has been said to my Uncle Jerry's scuffed Sunday shoes, pressed against steamed asphalt in heavy March on his rush back to the house. Less has been said of my Aunt Diann, sat in a rural jail cell, hands cuffed behind her, wrists rubbed raw against harsh metal, whole body aching for more than just her mother. And then there's my Mama Liz, sage grandmother of five today, though young as ten on that day when the beatings began.

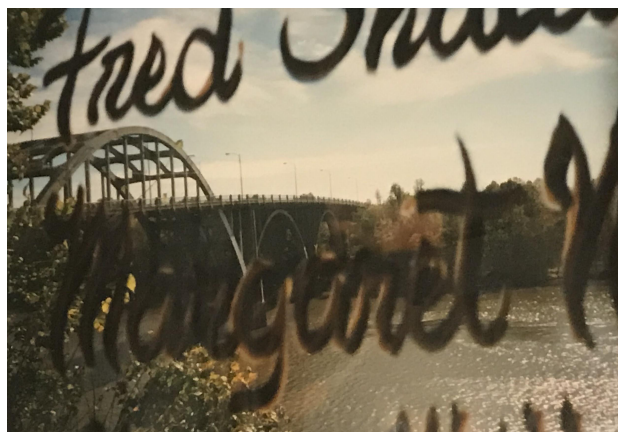
"Take your time," shouts a distant aunt of mine. I do not know who she is. We're a big family.

He does. The story he tells is broad, and I can understand the evasion of specifics. Because the Catholic hospital wouldn't take them, he speaks of his own mother Delia, and their familial home opened as a safe house. He speaks on the sight of blood, the sound of shattered bone, and leaves it to us to imagine the overflowing living room in their house just outside of Selma, a makeshift field hospital sprouted to dole out community care. My great-grandmother Delia passed before I was born, though I imagine her with broad shoulders and red painted fingernails, pressing down on bleeding wounds. I see Uncle Jerry's strained feet drumming down the country road in pursuit of her hand, sweat dripping down his vulnerable temples, his breathing heavy and labored. The warped expression I imagine on his face suggests an unnamed

trauma, and is the same look he carries when he recounts the story to us: scrunched eyes, mouth agape, a trembling jaw.

I know that Delia had no medical training. She knew little about constructing stitches, popping joints back into sockets, dressing a wound. She was a farmer. Though, she and the other mothers rushed the harmed SNCC members towards plastic-covered sofas, twin beds in the children's rooms, lay them out atop kitchen counters. Next to allspice on the counter sat rubbing alcohol, first-aid kits, blood-stained cloths. The protesters, young as my age today, crowded Delia's home in search of aid after having been jumped on the Edmund Pettus Bridge by cops and vigilantes, swinging billy clubs and baseball bats in unison. I imagine Jerry, Liz, and Diann's arrival to the threshold, each of them present for the attack, met at home by roaring howls and sobs.

The three stand close together at the park across from the 16th Street church. Uncle Jerry is flanked on both sides by his sisters, who hold their eyes shut and hum endurance to my great uncle as he struggles. They each press palms gently against his shoulders. There is a particular moment where Uncle Jerry tosses his head up and stretches his eyes wide so as to pause in his crying. He moves his hands from their grip on one another right in front of him, and places them atop each of his sisters'. Their hands are coarse, and worn from experience.



Trajectory of Southern Politics

On August 6, 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the 1965 Voting Rights Act into law, directly countering racially discriminatory practices in place to suppress the votes of Black citizens. The sight of battered Black bodies, turned in retreat as they found themselves jumped by policemen and white vigilantes on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, AL, had proven to be too much to the domineering president. On that day, the dam broke. Johnson, who had previously “voted against every civil rights bill in Congress from 1937 to 1956,”⁴² would sign one of the most consequential pieces of legislation in terms of addressing voting rights and racial justice in our nation's history. However, despite such a momentous milestone being achieved that day, one that would extend promised suffrage to disenfranchised Black voters across the country, and would specifically protect those within the South, came with a grim warning from the president. Writer and voting rights advocate, Ari Berman describes this in his book, *Give Us the Ballot: The Modern Struggle for Voting Rights In America*:

“After signing the Civil Rights Act of 1964, [Johnson would] famously remarked to Bill Moyers: ‘I think we just delivered the South to the Republican party for a long time to come.’ Upon signing the [Voting Rights Act], Johnson ‘felt a great sense of victory on one side and great sense of fear on the other.’”⁴³

Johnson was right to fear Republican retribution for his action on civil rights, specifically in the South. Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act determined that certain states and counties in which voter suppression was present, were required to have revisions to their elections and voting laws approved by the US Department of Justice to ensure that racial discrimination were not to occur.⁴⁴ Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia were entirely impacted by this preclearance provision. Forty-nine counties in

⁴² Berman, Ari. *Give Us the Ballot: the Modern Struggle for Voting Rights in America*. New York, NY: Picador, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2016.

⁴³ Berman, 38

⁴⁴ Berman, 7

North Carolina and five counties in Florida were also included in this grouping.⁴⁵ While Section 5 acted as a check against voter discrimination across the country, it particularly impacted the South, protecting the right to vote among Black Southerners, and stirring distaste among outraged white Southerners. The law worked in protecting the right to vote, though would soon enough face challenges.

The 1964 presidential election between Southern Democrat and incumbent President Lyndon B. Johnson and Republican candidate Senator Barry Goldwater, would be a pivotal one for the South. In the previous 1960 election, Southern states did not swing for a singular candidate or party--John F. Kennedy (D), Richard Nixon (R), and Harry Byrd (I) all carried states that today would be considered solidly red. However, in 1964, Johnson won in a landslide, only losing six total states to his Republican opponent: Arizona, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina--all of them states covered completely by Section 5 of the newly passed Voting Rights Act, and five of them within the South. Alexander P. Lamis, in his book *Southern Politics in the 1990s* would note that Goldwater carried Mississippi “with 87.1% percent of the vote,”⁴⁶ and that “Goldwater’s victory in Alabama swept five Republicans into Congress, an amazing feat for a party that hardly existed in the state before 1964.”⁴⁷ Lamis also points out that shortly after the 1964 election, Strom Thurmond, a former US Senator from South Carolina who holds the record for the longest filibuster in United States history in opposition to the 1957 Civil Rights Act,⁴⁸ switched his party affiliation from Democrat to Republican.

⁴⁵ “Jurisdictions Previously Covered By Section 5.” The United States Department of Justice, September 11, 2020. <https://www.justice.gov/crt/jurisdictions-previously-covered-section-5>.

⁴⁶ Lamis, Alexander P. *Southern Politics in the 1990s*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1999.

⁴⁷ Lamis, 5

⁴⁸ Press, Associated. “Thurmond Holds Senate Record for Filibustering.” Fox News. FOX News Network, March 25, 2015. <https://www.foxnews.com/story/thurmond-holds-senate-record-for-filibustering>.

This electoral transition comes as an example of the party switch that occurred as a part of the infamous “Southern Strategy,” in which Republicans embraced explicit racial resentment among Southern white people, beginning in their decades-long conquest of the South’s electoral votes, legislatures, and more. The Democratic Party had long earlier begun to toe along the line of civil rights, going as far back as President Harry Truman’s 1948 address to the Democratic National Convention, when he argued “for the Democratic Party to get out of the shadow of states’ rights and to walk forthrightly into the bright sunshine of human rights.”⁴⁹ As the Democratic Party further embraced civil rights, as demonstrated by Johnson’s signing of the Voting Rights Act, Republicans seized on the opportunity to embrace and capitalize off of racial animosity. However, a stronger rebuke was yet to come.

This rightward backlash after legislative or representative progress has historical precedent: twelve years of Reconstruction was followed by ninety years of Jim Crow. This pattern is still seen today--and is especially present in the South as conservative politicians and liberal activists continue to grapple over the region. In 2013, the United Supreme Court ruled on *Shelby County v. Holder*, striking down Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act as being unconstitutional. This section, the bulk of the Voting Rights Act’s enforcement strategy, essentially voided the law altogether. Chief Justice John Roberts cited the nation’s recent re-election of a Black president as evidence that racial discrimination in our elections is a historic issue, rather than a contemporary one; and Justice Anthony Kennedy would claim that a sense of “racial entitlement” has exploited white guilt, causing inauthentic sustained support for the law.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Lamis, 4

⁵⁰ Berman, 8

On the same evening that the high court's decision was announced, Republicans in many state legislatures that once were a part of the old Confederacy introduced restrictive voting laws that had previously been prevented due to Section 5's oversight.⁵¹ We see this today. In the wake of the 2020 presidential election, state legislatures across the country have introduced hundreds of bills that restrict voting through policies such as rollbacks to early voting, requiring photo IDs, purging voters, and more.⁵² Many of these policies disproportionately impact voters of color, and Black voters in particular.

Given the long legacy of voter suppression within the South, it is critical to consider its contemporary implications when examining the state of the region. This pendulum swing, with steps towards progress being countered by persistent conservative backlash, must be examined in order to properly analyze the South's history, its contemporary landscape, and the potential in its future. In this chapter, I seek to examine the impact of race and of voting rights in the South, within the context of progression and regression, to properly lay the foundation for this thesis's broader argument for a revised political approach to the South, given the current sense of national apathy that is offered to marginalized people within the region, along with the deteriorating Democratic majority.

Voter suppression is very much a part of the South's legacy, and has been the target of fierce resistance, from Fannie Lou Hamer, to John Lewis, to Stacey Abrams. Abrams can claim much of the credit for Georgia's electoral results in 2020. The last time Georgia swung for a Democrat in a presidential election was in 1992, when the state's electoral college votes went for

⁵¹ "The Effects of Shelby County v. Holder." Brennan Center for Justice. Accessed March 26, 2021. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/policy-solutions/effects-shelby-county-v-holder>.

⁵² Birenbaum, Gabby. "State GOPs Have Already Introduced Dozens of Bills Restricting Voting Access in 2021." Vox. Vox, January 29, 2021. <https://www.vox.com/22254482/republicans-voter-suppression-state-legislatures>.

then-Governor Bill Clinton.⁵³ Since then, Republicans have continued in their steady conquest of Georgia, and of the broader South. In 1990, Newt Gingrich was the lone Republican member of Georgia's US House delegation.⁵⁴ Today, Republicans hold an overwhelming majority, though did lose some ground in this previous 2020 election. Democrats were able to flip one US House seat in the state, sent two Democrats to the US Senate, and solidified a victory for President Joe Biden. This victory served as a milestone for the state, although its spoils were not reflected throughout the entire region.

Candidates throughout the South performed poorly in 2020. US Senate candidates in North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama, and Mississippi all lost to Republican opponents. Only three House seats were flipped throughout the entire region--two in North Carolina and one in Georgia⁵⁵--both states made competitive through DNC support. For so long, the South has been solidly Republican--and that is in many ways on the Democratic Party. Democrats and progressives actively lose ground in the South when approaching it with apathy. Tennessee's state legislature only flipped to Republican control in 1995, and did so for the first time since Reconstruction.⁵⁶ In examining the electoral map in presidential elections since 1992, Democrats steadily ceded more and more ground in the South, eventually carrying no Southern states at all. In 2008, Barack Obama won Florida, North Carolina, and Virginia--though in 2012, lost North Carolina.⁵⁷ In 2016, Hillary Clinton only carried Virginia.⁵⁸ Only in 2020, did Biden

⁵³ Stroh-Page, Caitlyn. "When Was the Last Time Georgia Voted Blue? It's Been Nearly 30 Years." Online Athens. Athens Banner-Herald, November 6, 2020. <https://www.onlineathens.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/11/06/when-was-last-time-georgia-voted-blue-itrsquos-been-nearly-30-years/43004695/>.

⁵⁴ Lamis, 10

⁵⁵ "U.S. House Election Results." The New York Times. The New York Times, November 3, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/03/us/elections/results-house.html>.

⁵⁶ Lamis, 215

⁵⁷ "Presidential Map - Election 2008." The New York Times. The New York Times. Accessed March 26, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/elections/2008/results/president/map.html>.

⁵⁸ "2016 Presidential Election Results." The New York Times. The New York Times. Accessed March 26, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/elections/2016/results/president>.

pick up Virginia and Georgia, much in part due to long-standing on-the-ground organizing followed by intentional investments from the DNC and other national organizations. Georgia's flip wasn't organic; it was intentional and strategic.

“We have access to many more resources, particularly national resources, in Georgia,” said Thulasi Seshan, a research assistant at Fair Fight in Atlanta, GA. Fair Fight gained national notoriety when it was founded by Stacey Abrams on the heels of her loss in the 2018 Georgia governor's race. The organization works to counter voter suppression in Georgia specifically, and has been credited with pushing the state across the finish line in terms of making it electorally competitive. Seshan sent written responses to some of my questions regarding her experience working at Fair Fight and her perspective on the work left to do. “States like Mississippi that people see as foregone political conclusions don't get nearly the level of investment we do. I think we should be investing in Black and brown mobilization across the South, battleground state or no. A state like Mississippi that is almost 38% African-American should not and would not be an inevitably Republican state without suppressive laws.”⁵⁹

Seshan, along with others, would point to voter suppression as being one of the major reasons as to why we see Southern states condemned to immobility when it comes to elections. This is directly in agreement with Abrams's messaging since long before her 2018 loss. In Abrams's book, *Our Time Is Now: Power, Purpose, and the Fight for a Fair America*, Abrams is quoted as saying that “voter suppression works its might by first tripping and causing to stumble the unwanted voter, then by convincing those who see the obstacle course to forfeit the race without even starting to run.”⁶⁰ Seshan echoed that analysis, emphasizing the evolving nature of

⁵⁹ Hicks, Henry, and Thulasi Seshan. Thulasi Seshan Interview. Other, n.d.

⁶⁰ Abrams, 4

voter suppression, and the transition from explicit racial exclusion to coded policies that disproportionately impact people of color.

“Voter suppression has looked different across the decades. Fifty years ago, it was poll taxes and counting jelly beans in a jar. Today, as Leader Abrams says, it often looks like voter error. It’s a thousand tiny barriers that add up to just enough to trip you up on your way to the polls. It’s the combined effect of you not having a photocopier to send in a copy of your now-required ID, plus you having to pay for stamps to mail in your absentee ballot request, plus your county not being funded well enough to process that request in a timely manner, plus the receipt deadline for your absentee ballot being moved up far enough that you can’t meet it in time. Voter suppression is what happens when a thousand “tweaks” are targeted at vulnerable voters as part of a long-term, overarching, anti-democratic electoral strategy.”⁶¹

Many of these “tweaks” are codified using race-neutral language, though clearly have a disproportionate impact on voters of color, and Black voters specifically. For example, voter ID laws require that voters have a photo ID to confirm their identity before voting. These laws are especially present in the South, with Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, Mississippi, and Georgia being five of the strictest states when it comes to requiring photo identification at the polls.⁶² A policy such as this might be defended, as photo IDs in theory are not racialized. However, the American Civil Liberties Union found that whereas 8% of white voters do not have a valid photo ID, a stunning 25% of Black voters lack proper identification to become eligible to vote in these states.⁶³ Much of this disparity has to do with context--government issued IDs can be expensive, and those without access to transportation might find it impossible to travel to the DMV or to another government office to receive a photo ID. Stringent ID laws, rollbacks to early voting, poll closures, voter purges, and more--all of these practices have the impact of stripping

⁶¹ Hicks, Henry, and Thulasi Seshan. Thulasi Seshan Interview. Other, n.d.

⁶² “Oppose Voter ID Legislation - Fact Sheet.” American Civil Liberties Union. Accessed March 26, 2021. <https://www.aclu.org/other/oppose-voter-id-legislation-fact-sheet>.

⁶³ “Oppose Voter ID Legislation - Fact Sheet.” American Civil Liberties Union. Accessed March 26, 2021. <https://www.aclu.org/other/oppose-voter-id-legislation-fact-sheet>.

suffrage away from Black voters and hindering political agency among those who would crusade for equity and justice in the South.

“Republicans aren’t prepared to welcome everyone into full democratic participation,” said Seshan about the recent onslaught of voter suppression bills introduced in state legislatures across the country, “and communities of color will be in a dogged fight to defend their rights to vote for weeks, months, and years to come.”⁶⁴

As for the work that she’s done at Fair Fight to counter voter suppression and to empower voters of color in Georgia, Seshan said that “Election Day this year was more like one, long, hazy, Election week. As a researcher, I spent most of the day media monitoring for voter issues and facilitating rapid responses from the rest of our team.” When speaking about Fair Fight’s mission more broadly and the work that they did in the lead up to the election, she said that “from filing litigation to voter declaration collection to poll observing, Fair Fight sought to ameliorate the systemic effects of voter suppression throughout the election cycle. Fair Fight also worked with allies to provide counties resources to help with election administration during the pandemic.”⁶⁵

Their efforts worked. Building off of the foundation developed by grassroots organizations such as Black Voters Matter, Georgia STAND-UP, and Abrams’s earlier launched New Georgia Project, Georgia flipped to blue in the 2020 presidential election, and sent two Democrats to the United States Senate, shocking the country. The 2020 election set records in terms of voter turnout and registration, due to the diligent voter engagement and protection work

⁶⁴ Hicks, Henry, and Thulasi Seshan. Thulasi Seshan Interview. Other, n.d.

⁶⁵ Hicks, Henry, and Thulasi Seshan. Thulasi Seshan Interview. Other, n.d.

implemented by organizations like Fair Fight, and the integration of voter protection work into Senator Jon Ossoff and Senator Raphael Warnock’s campaigns.⁶⁶

“Just four years ago, 22 percent of Georgia’s eligible voters were not even registered,” writes Audra D.S. Burch in her *New York Times* article “Turning Out the Vote in Georgia.” “That figure fell to 2 percent this year, according to *The Washington Post*.”⁶⁷

The mission to flip Georgia has been a long-term and collaborative one; but deliverance didn’t come until national resources were offered to organizations and campaigns on the ground. Like Seshan said, in the case of the 2020 election, Georgia had resources to fund campaigns and voter protection efforts not offered to those in other Southern states, despite how fertile the soil may be. This does not mean, however, that there isn’t movement going on in other Southern states. Organizers--specifically organizers of color--have been doing the work to expand the electorate, to empower voters, and to make the South competitive--all in pursuit of shifting the electoral foundation so that they might organize and implement progressive policies to improve the conditions of the region, shifting its politics to represent the diverse constituency that is present in the South.

In Florida, organizers launched a campaign to pass Amendment 4, a ballot initiative to restore voting rights automatically to formerly incarcerated people upon completion of their sentence, in a statewide referendum during the 2018 midterm elections. Felony disenfranchisement is a practice exercised nationally that strips the right to vote from anyone convicted of a felony. This practice is standard in most states across the country, but has its roots

⁶⁶ Burch, Audra D.S. “Turning Out the Vote in Georgia.” *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, December 29, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/29/magazine/georgia-senate-runoff-election.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&ion=The+New+York+Times+Magazine>.

⁶⁷ Burch, Audra D.S. “Turning Out the Vote in Georgia.” *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, December 29, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/29/magazine/georgia-senate-runoff-election.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&ion=The+New+York+Times+Magazine>.

in the South. The disenfranchisement of incarcerated people comes out of the rise of the Black Codes throughout Southern states,⁶⁸ another example of conservative backlash. As Black Americans were liberated from enslavement, many states--especially those in the South--criminalized practices such as loitering or vagrancy. Many Black Southerners were rounded up and sent off to prisons or were mandated to join chain gangs--with the lingering effect being that each of these citizens then lost their right to vote. The practice is a direct response to the intended suffrage of Black voters in the South, and still has a racialized impact today. The Sentencing Project, a nonprofit working to counter racism and mass incarceration, would point out that “African Americans are incarcerated in state prisons across the country at more than five times the rate of whites, and at least ten times the rate in five states.”⁶⁹ In Tennessee, one in ten people cannot vote due to a felony conviction. For Black Tennesseans, that’s one in five. The same statistic was true in Florida⁷⁰ before Amendment 4’s overwhelming passage by voters at the polls.

The amendment was approved with 64.55% of the vote, restoring voting rights to up to 1.4 million people within the state.⁷¹ This progressive leap was once again followed by a rightward swing. Despite the ballot initiative’s statewide popularity and democratic approval, Republican Governor Ron DeSantis signed a bill, mandating that formerly incarcerated people must pay any fines or fees associated with their conviction before they could register to vote. The

⁶⁸ Bazelon, Emily. “Will Florida’s Ex-Felons Finally Regain the Right to Vote?” The New York Times. The New York Times, September 26, 2018.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/26/magazine/ex-felons-voting-rights-florida.html>.

⁶⁹ Nellis, Ashley, and Nicole D. Porter. “The Color of Justice: Racial and Ethnic Disparity in State Prisons.” The Sentencing Project, January 10, 2019.

<https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/color-of-justice-racial-and-ethnic-disparity-in-state-prisons/>.

⁷⁰ Uggen, Christopher. “6 Million Lost Voters: State-Level Estimates of Felony Disenfranchisement, 2016.” The Sentencing Project, 2016.

<https://felonvoting.procon.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/48/sentencing-project-felony-disenfranchisement-2016.pdf>.

⁷¹ CBS News. “Florida Ex-Felons Can Begin Registering to Vote as Amendment Takes Effect.” CBS News. CBS Interactive, January 8, 2019.

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/florida-ex-felons-begin-registering-to-vote-as-amendment-4-takes-effect/>.

law was criticized widely as a modern-day poll tax, and went through a lengthy court process to determine its legality. The courts allowed it to stand--at least through the 2020 election, and national figures such as LeBron James and Michael Bloomberg had to intervene,⁷² offering their own funds or aiding in raising money to pay these new voters' fines for them. While Florida in the end didn't swing for Joe Biden, it took national attention, energy, and investment to counter the conservative backlash.

“American democracy is at a tipping point,” Thulasi Seshan said in regards to the onslaught of restrictive voting laws proposed in state legislatures across the country, much in response to Democratic victories secured across the country due to the persistent organizing done by Black and brown people. In Georgia, legislation has been introduced to ban early voting on Sundays, hindering the reach of Souls to the Polls programming to energize Black voters.⁷³ In Tennessee, the legislature is seeking an end to early voting altogether.⁷⁴ “Are we going to continue to be a country where the powerful live in fear of voters exercising their rights? Or are we going to continue a forward march of progress and expansion of the franchise? Right now, state legislatures are balancing on a knife’s edge, and the choices they make, the narratives they tell to their voters, could tip the balance either way.”⁷⁵

The bills proposed in state legislatures by Republicans across the country threaten the operations of democracy and are another barrier to the long-promised suffrage of Black people

⁷² Allen, Greg. “Bloomberg Adds \$16 Million To A Fund That Helps Florida Felons Get Chance To Vote.” NPR. NPR, September 24, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/24/916625348/bloomberg-adds-16-million-to-a-fund-that-helps-florida-felons-get-chance-to-vote>.

⁷³ Waldman, Michael, Hazel Millard, Martha Kinsella, Ciara Torres-Spelliscy, and Kaylana Mueller-Hsia. “State Voting Bills Tracker 2021.” Brennan Center for Justice, March 24, 2021. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/state-voting-bills-tracker-2021>.

⁷⁴ Harris, Gerald. “Tennessee Bill to Abolish Early Voting and Machines Is Withdrawn.” WREG.com. WREG.com, February 24, 2021. <https://wreg.com/news/tennessee-bill-to-abolish-early-voting-and-machines-is-withdrawn/>.

⁷⁵ Hicks, Henry, and Thulasi Seshan. Thulasi Seshan Interview. Other, n.d.

within the United States. Paired with escalating distrust of democratic systems within the U.S.,⁷⁶ the potential damage to be done here cannot be overstated. Democrats across the country are rallying behind H.R. 1, the For the People Act; and H.R. 4, the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act. H.R. 1 would expand voting rights nationally in a number of ways, ending partisan gerrymandering, restoring voting rights to formerly incarcerated people, offering automatic and same-day voter registration, and more.⁷⁷ H.R. 4 creates a federal process for reviewing voting law changes, especially in areas with a pattern of voter discrimination--codifying in law the once-standard practice of pre-clearance through Section 5 of the now-gutted Voting Rights Act. Stacey Abrams has called for reforms to the filibuster in the United States Senate in order to pass these bills, saying that “an exemption to the filibuster for the purposes of protecting our democracy is not only logical, but it is fundamental to who we are.”⁷⁸

This pendulum, a back-and-forth between progressive progress followed by conservative backlash, has been central to Southern politics for centuries--especially as it relates to voting rights. In order to make the region electorally competitive, and in order to reimagine the path ahead for the South, proactive and sustained attention to voting rights is critical; both as it relates to the Democratic Party’s infrastructure, but also in our polarized perceptions of value and worth in the South.

⁷⁶ Keeter, Scott, Andrew Perrin, and Lee Raine. “Americans' Trust in Government, Each Other, Leaders.” Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy. Pew Research Center, September 18, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/07/22/trust-and-distrust-in-america/>.

⁷⁷ “For the People Act (HR1) - Common Cause: Join the Movement.” Common Cause. Accessed March 26, 2021. <https://www.commoncause.org/our-work/constitution-courts-and-democracy-issues/for-the-people-act/>.

⁷⁸ “Stacey Abrams: Exception to Filibuster to Pass Voting Rights Is 'Logical'.” NBCNews.com. NBCUniversal News Group, March 14, 2021. <https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/video/abrams-exception-to-filibuster-to-pass-h-r-1-is-logical-106455109707>.

Historic legislation in Georgia was passed on the evening of March 25, 2021, curtailing access to drop-off ballot boxes, narrowing polling location hours, empowering the GOP-held legislature to check the power of the Secretary of State, and more. Georgia Senate bill 202 makes it illegal for someone to give voters food or water while waiting in line.⁷⁹ These types of restrictive laws, as part of this pendulum, are not new to the South and are not limited to Georgia. However, due to the electoral success within the state in 2020, Georgia is getting disproportionate attention and resources--as Seshan mentioned earlier. On NPR's *Up First* politics podcast, host Steve Inskeep said that "it's one state, but a vitally important state nationally, so we've been covering the legislation that's evolved there over several weeks."⁸⁰ While attention to this restrictive legislation in Georgia is certainly justified, what of Mississippi, South Carolina, Alabama, and more? For so long, Democrats have abandoned the fight in the South altogether. Georgia has shown what is possible, though this national support and attention to the state of the region must expand into other Southern states in need and must last beyond our debrief of the 2020 election.

"Voter protection work can't be the work of a few weeks or a few months," said Seshan. "Voter protection work ought to be undertaken as a component of long term, community based organizing. Campaigns should also focus on the voter suppression issues that affect their communities in particular. Culturally competent voter protection, like culturally competent organizing, is everything. The language barriers that constitute a barrier to voting in a predominantly East Asian community are different from the poll closure barriers that constitute a barrier to voting in rural Black communities."⁸¹

⁷⁹ Karimi, Faith. "It's Now Illegal in Georgia to Give Food and Water to Voters in Line." CNN. Cable News Network, March 26, 2021.

<https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/26/politics/georgia-voting-law-food-drink-ban-trnd/index.html>.

⁸⁰ Inskeep, Steve. "Friday, March 26, 2021." Episode. *Up First*. NPR, March 26, 2021.

⁸¹ Hicks, Henry, and Thulasi Seshan. Thulasi Seshan Interview. Other, n.d.

Fair Fight is pushing back against voter suppression in Georgia. Organizers working to see the implementation of Amendment 4 in Florida shows the power of grassroots organizing when combined with national support. H.R. 1 and H.R. 4 seek to push back nationally. This work is good, but it must be ongoing and supported by those with resources at the national level. Charlane Oliver, co-founder of Tennessee's *The Equity Alliance*, a nonprofit that works to ensure voting rights for Black Tennesseans, tweeted the morning after Georgia Senate bill 202's passage, saying that "we know that the same voter suppression tactics used in Georgia will make its way to the Tennessee General Assembly. Let's not wait to react. Grow a backbone, strategize and fight back. [...] It can't be just grassroots organizers and activists risking our livelihoods for freedom and liberation. Yes, follow the lead of those impacted and on the ground. But we need politicians, electeds, legal, progressive donors committed to the strategy too."⁸²

Oliver is calling attention to the fact that if legislation like that can be signed into law in a state like Georgia, with such national attention at the moment--other Southern states are bound to fall under attack, and with fewer resources to fight back. Comprehensive and consistent momentum on voting rights, when paired with the various strategies explored through later chapters, can mean the difference between a successful campaign in the South and yet another loss--and it goes beyond Election Day. In addition to the alarming bills being proposed within the realm of voting rights, Southern legislatures are proposing transphobic laws, restrictions to abortion, anti-protesting bills, and more. The struggle for Black liberation has always been affected by Southern politics. Voting rights is about more than our elections, and the South is more than limited caricature.

⁸² @CharlaneO. "we know that the same voter suppression tactics used in Georgia will make its way the Tennessee General Assembly. Let's not wait to react. Grow a backbone, strategize and fight back." March 26, 2021. 9:59AM.

The South is, and always has been, an American battleground where our system of democracy has been tested. The nature of the long fight must be recognized and faced, in order to effectively approach electoral change within the region. We have to remain prepped and continue to play heavy defense against the inevitable backlash that is a part of the pendulum of Southern politics, and do the work to strengthen and expand the bounds of our democracy. It's about more than winning elections. It's about what comes after. Don Fowler, chairman of the organization South Forward, had this to say:

“Where can you find a place where a new Democratic thrust would be more welcome and could do more good?”⁸³

⁸³ Ball, Molly. “Can Democrats Win Back the Deep South?” The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, June 25, 2013. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/06/can-democrats-win-back-the-deep-south/277123/>.

Speedy, Harrison, & I

Harrison and I hiccupped and giggled, absent teeth worn proudly with our beaming smiles as we scaled along the elevated ropes course, shouting to one another and reaching up towards the sky in search of higher ground. The other boys followed behind us or stretched even higher up into the trees, our bodies paralleled to the grand stems. Even the boys who were taller than us let Harrison and I move without comparison. We'd piled into my mother's Ford Explorer after gooey pizza and dripping popsicles for a joint birthday party--Harrison's eighth, and my tenth. I stretched outward for the next rope ahead of me, hoping to grip it and swing strikingly to the next platform. My foot slipped. My body dipped harshly, arms limp with disbelief, a sharp yelp slipped from my lips; though the clipped harness kept me from the drop. I peered to the ground, and despite the distance, made out my father's trembling eyes and still chest.

What does it mean to share a legacy with those who'd prefer to see me erased? We held our birthday party at Stone Mountain Park outside of Atlanta. The park, a great expanse of green walled in by small shops, outdoor attractions, and a quartz mountain, was synonymous to Harrison and I with the summers' laser show and our Chucks coated over with Georgia red clay. However, away on the mountain: a Confederate legacy draped overhead; fortified men sat atop steers, brushed along the mountain's face, perpetually in movement, continuously marching, etched in their conquest. What does it mean to share the same ground? For my memories of skinned knees, grass stains, and band aids to conflict with the pounding of boots, kept alight by the glow of burning torches? Or crosses? We knew as much as to avoid the park on some days; the Klan claimed the site as home for their yearly revivals. Even on the June day, the carved profiles of Stonewall Jackson, Jefferson Davis, and Robert E. Lee watched each of us as we

dangled by rope from the treetops. In my father's eyes, my slip must've carried with it a heavier suggestion.

"Be careful, now," he called up to Harrison and I. His great-grandfather was lynched. I wouldn't hear this story until coming to college, but therein lies another tale of a Black life cut short, left for the dogs in some Alabama county. The story is told to me by my grandmother, whose voice carries with it a solemn sort of rage. Shot dead in the plowing fields by a white man, premised upon a later withdrawn claim by a white woman. It's a familiar story. My grandmother would recount to me a day in her youth--she'd been collected by her mother suddenly, and drug off to the local general store. There at the register, stood an older white man, waiting for his groceries to be rung up.

"That's the man who killed your grandfather," she tells me one evening in her quiet home, recounting her own mother's voice. She would have to return to this common shop one day soon. "Don't you forget that face."

What did it mean for my father to see his own Black children in the trees, gripping onto rope fiercely, just another slip away from dangling? What ancestral fear must've been recalled and resonant in his own veins? Rebel flag caps jutted out amidst the crowd that day, as we stepped from one attraction to another at Stone Mountain. Daddy did not shoot that day, but he kept watchful, his own concern veiled over. Harrison and I continued to toddle around, still naive in our youth; but my father's gaze continued. The echoes still remained.



The South Got Something to Say

In the days leading up to the 2020 general election, Democrats were optimistic about their odds for success. After four tumultuous years under the Trump administration, the escalating COVID-19 pandemic and unrest within the country in regards to racial injustice had been shown to sway public support towards Democratic nominee Joe Biden and to the party that had taken back the House just two years prior. Polls indicated a healthy lead for Biden over Trump,⁸⁴ and suggested that the US Senate might reliably fall under Democratic control as well.⁸⁵ In its final few days, the Biden campaign began allocating resources and sending surrogates to states like Georgia, Texas, and Ohio⁸⁶--previously assumed to be solidly red states. It's safe to say that Democrats expected to win on November 3, 2020--and win big. However, these promising assumptions would be stifled on Election Night. The race between Trump and Biden would be closer than expected. Texas and Ohio would be called early on, and decisively for Trump and for Congressional Republicans. Democrats conceded in races across the country--Tennessee, South Carolina, Mississippi, Alabama, Kentucky, and North Carolina among them. Biden's eventual national victory did not bring with it the "blue wave," that many had hoped for. While Democrats would go on to maintain control of the House of Representatives and eventually flip the Senate, these victories too were close, and did not come with a sweeping mandate.

"There's a moral victory and there's a political victory. They're not the same thing."

Political correspondent and former Obama appointee Van Jones spoke on CNN the night of

⁸⁴ "President: General Election Polls." FiveThirtyEight, March 26, 2021. <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/polls/president-general/>.

⁸⁵ "U.S. Senate Polls." FiveThirtyEight, March 26, 2021. <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/polls/senate/>.

⁸⁶ Bradner, Eric. "Obama Heads to Georgia as Democrats Seek Breakthrough That Has Eluded Them in Trump Era." CNN. Cable News Network, November 2, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/11/02/politics/georgia-biden-obama/index.html>.

November 3, 2020 as the electoral map showed a tighter race than anticipated. “There were people who were hoping for a big repudiation, and that has not come. A lot of people are hurt and scared tonight in the Democratic Party.”⁸⁷

Among those left reeling from the harsh electoral reality were House Democrats, whose internal debates around the party’s shortcomings spilled into the public eye when a leaked caucus conference call included concerns expressed by US Representative Abigail Spanberger of Virginia. Spanberger narrowly won her Trump-held congressional district, blaming the party’s more progressive wing for embracing leftward political stances, utilizing progressive messaging, and thus for dooming Democratic candidates across the country.

“Tuesday, from a Congressional standpoint, was a failure—it was not a success. [...] The number one concern and thing that people brought to me in my district that I barely re-won, was defunding the police. [...] We need to not ever use the word “socialist” or “socialism” ever again. [...] We lost good members because of it.”⁸⁸

Spanberger blamed the party’s progressive wing, claiming that candidates running in moderate or Republican-held districts were hindered by the Democratic Party’s association with leftward stances. The argument was continually built upon, particularly after former President Barack Obama criticized the phrase “defund the police,” which entered mainstream conversation after the summer’s historic protests and uprisings in defense of Black lives against police brutality.

⁸⁷ “Van Jones: The Fact That It’s This Close Hurts - CNN Video.” CNN. Cable News Network, November 4, 2020.

<https://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2020/11/04/van-jones-reaction-2020-election-elexnight-vpx.cnn>.

⁸⁸ “Spanberger Criticizes Democrats’ Strategy in Caucus Call.” The Washington Post. WP Company, November 5, 2020.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/spanberger-criticizes-democrats-strategy-in-caucus-call/2020/11/05/6ec2b368-258a-4061-9738-d83ee8971c3c_video.html.

“I guess you can use a snappy slogan like ‘defund the police,’” said Obama in an interview, “but, you know, you lost a big audience the minute you say it.”⁸⁹

However, progressives and left-leaning Democrats have pointed out that “every incumbent that co-sponsored Medicare for All in a swing district kept their seat. Only one Green New Deal co-sponsor lost reelection.”⁹⁰ In Elaine Godfrey’s *Atlantic* article, “The Democratic Truce is Over,” she explores increasing divides within the Democratic Party’s more moderate and progressive factions. She examines differences between the two in their approaches to both campaigning and legislating, citing that “in early summer, BLM demonstrations led to a huge jump in Georgia voter registration,”⁹¹ where Democrats would flip two Senate seats, building off of Biden’s historic, and unexpected win there in November.

This question of messaging and adoption of stances, of appealing to progressives versus moderates, and of keeping the “big tent” together, is not new to Southern organizers and elected officials. Candidates in the South have always struggled with the temptation to run to the right, appealing to moderates and curious Republicans as opposed to cultivating and finding support among Democrats and progressives within Southern states. Given continuing Republican dominance, voter suppression efforts, and the uncomfortable positioning of Southern Democrats, the assumption is often made that progressive messaging can’t work in the South. However, candidates should not shy away from progressive stances or messaging for the sake of

⁸⁹ Duster, Chandelis. “Obama Cautions Activists against Using ‘Defund the Police’ Slogan.” CNN. Cable News Network, December 2, 2020.

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/12/02/politics/barack-obama-defund-the-police/index.html>.

⁹⁰ Jayapal, Pramila, and Mark Pocan. “Don’t Blame the Left for Underperformance down-Ballot.” USA Today. Gannett Satellite Information Network, November 12, 2020.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2020/11/11/election-results-dont-blame-left-underperformance-down-ballot-column/6259604002/>.

⁹¹ Godfrey, Elaine. “The Democratic Truce Is Over.” The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, November 10, 2020.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/11/conor-lamb-aoc-democrats-fighting-socialism/617045/>.

maintaining the “big tent” that the party is known for--with progressives and moderates casting votes for the same candidates. This broad coalition of voters can be bolstered through bold approaches to issues and communication.

The South is never going to change if Democratic campaigns continue to default to appealing to the political right and middle, ignoring the swaths of progressive voters that exist within the region. As argued by the various interviewees whose perspectives are included in this chapter and framed by historic case studies, progressive issues not only have their roots in the South, but progressive issues today would likely be embraced in many Southern communities. While the region might be known for its conservative politics, it’s much more complicated than that. Democrats and progressives do exist in the South. Candidates and campaigns should do the work of expanding the electorate and building energy among these constituencies. Progressive messaging can work in the South, and candidates and organizers shouldn’t shy away from this fact. Sacrificing progressive values to appeal to the assumed more moderate or conservative voter population might seem like the obvious avenue for success in Southern politics, but doing so actually hinders candidate success and undermines the South’s progressive history. Many campaigns and candidates running in the South still struggle with this.

“Do we win with a John Bel Edwards or a Jon Ossoff kind of deal?” asked Whit Miller, a senior at the University of Alabama at Birmingham who’s spent the past few years organizing for Let America Vote, Doug Jones for US Senate, and for Alabama College Democrats as their political director. Miller stated that the assumption made by Southern campaigns has always been that “if you want to win a statewide race in the South, they have to be pro-Medicaid expansion but pro-life on top of that.”⁹²

⁹² Hicks, Henry, Sophia Howard, Nevin Bulut, and Whitman Miller. New South Focus Group 2. Personal, October 30, 2020.

This tension between perspectives has been seen in recent US Senate races within Southern states. In 2018, former Governor of Tennessee Phil Bredesen easily secured the Democratic nomination to run for the open US Senate seat vacated by retiring Senator Bob Corker. Bredesen maintained optimistic polling numbers throughout the campaign against his opponent, US Representative Marsha Blackburn, leading Blackburn by an eight point margin at one point.⁹³ He held his competitive status until October--a month before Election Day-- when he stated his support for then-nominee to the United States Supreme Court, Brett Kavanaugh, who'd been accused of sexual assault by a number of women, including Dr. Christine Blassey Ford.

"It's something that happened when they were in their teens, if it happened at all. And I just sort of felt like it didn't rise to the level of you would disqualify somebody from the Supreme Court based on that stuff,"⁹⁴ Bredesen claimed in an interview. He would state that he believed the issue to be a polarizing one, putting him as a Southern Democrat in a difficult position. "This is one where there's no politically good answer. No matter what you say, half of the people out there are going to be unhappy about it."⁹⁵

Bredesen failed to maintain his base of Democratic support after this appeal to the right, losing funding from major Democratic PACs who'd offered or considered ad buys on behalf of his campaign in the lead up to Election Day.⁹⁶ He would go on to lose his race, ceding victory to

⁹³ "Tennessee U.S. Senate Polls." FiveThirtyEight, March 26, 2021.
<https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/polls/senate/tennessee/>.

⁹⁴ Garrison, Joey. "Bredesen, Explaining Party Break on Kavanaugh, Says Evidence 'Didn't Rise to the Level' of Disqualifying." The Tennessean. The Tennessean, October 7, 2018.
<https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/politics/tn-elections/2018/10/07/tennessee-elections-bredesen-kavanaugh-allegations-not-disqualifying/1551730002/>.

⁹⁵ Garrison, Joey. "Bredesen, Explaining Party Break on Kavanaugh, Says Evidence 'Didn't Rise to the Level' of Disqualifying." The Tennessean. The Tennessean, October 7, 2018.
<https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/politics/tn-elections/2018/10/07/tennessee-elections-bredesen-kavanaugh-allegations-not-disqualifying/1551730002/>.

⁹⁶ Garrison, Joey. "Bredesen, Explaining Party Break on Kavanaugh, Says Evidence 'Didn't Rise to the Level' of Disqualifying." The Tennessean. The Tennessean, October 7, 2018.
<https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/politics/tn-elections/2018/10/07/tennessee-elections-bredesen-kavanaugh-allegations-not-disqualifying/1551730002/>.

far-right conservative, Marsha Blackburn.⁹⁷ Many cite his stance on the confirmation of Justice Brett Kavanaugh as being the reason why his campaign went from competitive, to collapse.

“Republicans are going to vote for Republicans,” said former Bernie Sanders for President and Renee Hoyos for Congress (Tennessee’s 2nd US Congressional District) organizer, Nevin Bulut. “We’ve seen how awful the DNC strategy has been with this current and past presidential election, in the way that they have this strategy of, ‘oh, we’re just going to appeal to Republicans now. Because we need to be moderate. And we need to get those people in,’ as if there aren’t millions of people that just need to get registered, and just need to be excited about their candidates--though, I could go on about that for a long time. But I think that strategy is something that a lot of Southern Democratic campaigns default to, because they’re saying, ‘well, geez, you know, we’re already in a super red state, or county, or whatever it is. We can’t take any big risks.’”⁹⁸

Fighter pilot, and former candidate for US Senate in Kentucky, Amy McGrath, would run into this same problem early on in her campaign--and similarly, in the wake of the controversy surrounding the nomination of Brett Kavanaugh. Like Bredesen in Tennessee, McGrath would be quoted in an interview as believing that “there was nothing in [Kavanaugh’s] record that I think would disqualify him in any way.”⁹⁹ Hours later, she shifted her position via Twitter: “...upon further reflection and further understanding of his record, I would have voted no.”¹⁰⁰ McGrath’s

⁹⁷ “Tennessee Senate Election Results: Marsha Blackburn vs. Phil Bredesen.” The New York Times. The New York Times. Accessed March 26, 2021.

<https://www.nytimes.com/elections/results/tennessee-senate?mtrref=www.google.com&gwh=C93429F07288D22691A852ACB2879F08&gwt=pay&assetType=PAYWALL>.

⁹⁸ Hicks, Henry, Sophia Howard, Nevin Bulut, and Whitman Miller. New South Focus Group 2. Personal, October 30, 2020.

⁹⁹ Bailey, Phillip M. “Amy McGrath: ‘If President Trump Has Good Ideas, I’ll Be for Them.’” Journal. Courier Journal, July 10, 2019.

<https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/politics/2019/07/10/amy-mcgrath-outlines-why-kentucky-should-ditch-mitch-mcconnell/1694488001/>.

¹⁰⁰ McGrath, Amy. “I Was Asked Earlier Today about Judge Brett Kavanaugh and I Answered Based upon His Qualifications to Be on the Supreme Court. But upon Further Reflection and Further Understanding of

campaign would later come under fire after airing an ad featuring a pro-Trump voter, in order to appeal to the right and show bipartisan support, in a media market that overlapped with Ohio, a critical battleground state in the 2020 presidential election. The ad, curated for Kentucky voters, bled into Cincinnati and the surrounding areas, leading to the chair of the Ohio Democratic Party to specifically request that the McGrath campaign pull it from the airwaves.¹⁰¹ McGrath, who broke fundraising records in her candidacy,¹⁰² would lose in the 2020 general election against incumbent Senator Mitch McConnell by 25.1%.¹⁰³

McGrath's primary opponent, state Representative Charles Booker, campaigned on Medicare-for-All, the Green New Deal, and radical solutions towards addressing systemic racism. On his progressive approach to messaging, Booker claimed that "regardless of what your political ideology is, especially in a place like Kentucky, everybody's broke and everybody's struggling and everybody's trying to figure out how to keep food on the table, keep the lights, take care of their family and protect their livelihood."¹⁰⁴ While he lost his party's nomination, the margin between him and McGrath was only 15,000 votes¹⁰⁵--a notable feat, given that his surge

His Record, I Would Have Voted No." Twitter. Twitter, July 10, 2019.

<https://twitter.com/AmyMcGrathKY/status/1149098724678918146>.

¹⁰¹ Wartman, Scott. "Ohio Democratic Chair Calls for Amy McGrath to Take down Ad Featuring a Trump Voter." The Enquirer. Cincinnati Enquirer, October 7, 2020.

<https://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/politics/2020/10/06/election-2020-mcgrath-features-trump-voter-in-ad-against-mcconnell-d/5900411002/>.

¹⁰² Hall, Ben. "Kentucky's US Senate Race Sets Fundraising Records but a Different Story in Tennessee." WTVF. WTVF, October 20, 2020.

<https://www.newschannel5.com/news/election/kentuckys-us-senate-race-sets-fundraising-records-but-a-different-story-in-tennessee>.

¹⁰³ "Kentucky U.S. Senate Election Results." The New York Times. The New York Times, January 5, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/03/us/elections/results-kentucky-senate.html>.

¹⁰⁴ Paz, Isabella Grullón. "Charles Booker Says Progressives Should 'Show Up and Listen' to Deep Red Districts." The New York Times. The New York Times, July 8, 2020.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/08/us/politics/charles-booker-kentucky.html>.

¹⁰⁵ "Kentucky U.S. Senate Primary Election Results." The New York Times. The New York Times, July 6, 2020.

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/06/23/us/elections/results-kentucky-senate-primary-election.html>.

in support came shortly after Kentuckians began voting early and absentee.¹⁰⁶ McGrath's loss, and Booker's stunning rise, show not only the pitfalls to appeals to the right at the expense of the Democratic base, but also the potential for electoral success contingent on a commitment to progressives within the South. Booker recently announced his forming of an exploratory committee to consider a campaign against Republican Senator Rand Paul. If Booker officially declares his candidacy, he'll have another opportunity to demonstrate the prospects for progressives in the South.¹⁰⁷

The South has a long history of being a movement center. From Greensboro, North Carolina to Jackson, Mississippi; the Civil Rights Movement, which led to racial progress nationwide, had its roots in the Southern United States. Between its coasts and deep mountains, the region has been a home to environmental activism for so long. Being one of the poorest regions in the country, working people have always had to fight for their rights at home. The infamous tale of a mother, calling her son at the last minute to ensure that he vote in favor of women's suffrage occurred in Tennessee. That vote cast led to the state becoming the 36th to vote in favor of the Nineteenth Amendment, pushing it forward to ratification. Voices such as Fannie Lou Hamer and Martin Luther King Jr. are distinctly Southern.

“Atlanta was straight up burned to the ground. Truly burned to the ground. And when it was built back up again, there were Black people everywhere.” Sophia Howard, a senior at Spelman College and former organizer for the Stacey Abrams for Governor campaign in Georgia spoke on the vibrance, and long legacy of social justice in her city. “They took over this city.

¹⁰⁶ Martin, Jonathan. “In Kentucky, Racial Justice Movement Transforms Quest to Oust McConnell.” The New York Times. The New York Times, June 20, 2020.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/20/us/politics/amy-mcgrath-charles-booker-kentucky-senate.html>.

¹⁰⁷ Bowden, John. “Charles Booker Launches Exploratory Committee to Consider Challenge to Rand Paul.” TheHill. The Hill, April 12, 2021.

<https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/547795-charles-booker-launches-exploratory-committee-to-consider-challenge-to-rand>.

They said, ‘okay, well, I’m here now, girl, and I’m not going anywhere.’ And now, the queer community is so beautiful here. I love it. It’s so amazing. I’ve met the most amazing, wonderful, inspiring queer activists in the city who are changing whole neighborhoods and the city of Atlanta. I’ve also met some really badass white women, old white women that have been doing this stuff since the 70s. Like pre-Roe, we’re out here, you know, pimping out dorm rooms and giving illegal abortions. It’s awesome stuff, right?’¹⁰⁸

Recognizing this history is key to re-envisioning the South, and to including the diverse communities of marginalized people that lie there, into the offered image of what the region represents. This progressive legacy is also not a thing of the past. The work continues today--often with no attention or support from the national Democratic Party or other liberal and progressive organizations. Localized and regional groups like Southerners on New Ground (SONG), the New Georgia Project, and Alabama Arise continue to fight for progressive change, building off of the foundation laid by Southerners before. Organizers like Noah Nordstrom, who worked with the Knoxville City Council Movement and on campaign to elect Memphis environmentalist Marquita Bradshaw to the United States Senate, believe that this history, paired with contemporary activism taking place, makes the South a unique place for progressive messaging--and would argue that progressive stances and messaging absolutely can work for Democratic campaigns in Southern states.

“We’re right next to the most visited national park in America: the Smokies,” Nordstrom explained. “People love our mountains. People value clean water, and clean air, and stuff like that, and so I think putting a bigger emphasis on that stuff and being willing to embrace policies

¹⁰⁸ Hicks, Henry, Sophia Howard, Nevin Bulut, and Whitman Miller. New South Focus Group 2. Personal, October 30, 2020.

like the Green New Deal will actually help a lot.”¹⁰⁹ Nordstrom would continue to speak on the state of the South, echoing the commonly-held belief among Southern organizers that the South isn’t even a solid-red region currently, but is rather a non-voting area.

“[Tennessee’s] produced the lowest voter turnout in America. We’re consistently 50th or 49th in voter turnout. There’s this interesting map that was put out that shows the county map of America. It’s red or blue based on if Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton won the majority of the vote. But they were shaded gray if the plurality were non-voters. Almost the entire state of Tennessee were gray counties.”¹¹⁰ Other organizers, such as Bulut, would emphasize that non-voters tend to “swing left.”¹¹¹

I spoke with Charlane Oliver and Tequila Johnson, co-founders of the Tennessee nonprofit, The Equity Alliance. Founded in 2016, their organization works to “build Black political power,”¹¹² through voter registration, community engagement, restoration of voting rights, political education programming, and more. Since its founding, The Equity Alliance has reached a ground-breaking number of Black voters, leading to a record number of registered voters in Tennessee this past year¹¹³--but have been targeted by conservative attacks¹¹⁴ based upon their voter empowerment initiatives, their progressive stances, and their unapologetic

¹⁰⁹ Hicks, Henry, Charles Uffelman, Rickia Stafford, Henry Walther, and Noah Nordstrom. New South Focus Group 1. Personal, September 21, 2020.

¹¹⁰ Hicks, Henry, Charles Uffelman, Rickia Stafford, Henry Walther, and Noah Nordstrom. New South Focus Group 1. Personal, September 21, 2020.

¹¹¹ Cohn, Nate. “Nonvoters Are a Source of Hope for Democrats. But Maybe a False Hope.” The New York Times. The New York Times, November 7, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/07/upshot/nonvoters-2020-presidential-election.html>.

¹¹² The Equity Alliance. The Equity Alliance, October 19, 2020. <https://theequityalliance.org/>.

¹¹³ “Number of Registered Voters Breaks Record in Tennessee, Expected to Continue Rising.” wbir.com, October 9, 2020.

<https://www.wbir.com/article/news/politics/elections/number-of-registered-voters-breaks-record-in-tennessee-expected-to-continue-rising/51-a8f3d7c4-c1e7-4b7d-bffa-cba61422d0a9>.

¹¹⁴ Sauber, Elaina, and Jonathan Mattise. “Federal Judge Blocks Tennessee Voter Registration Law, Citing Harm to ‘Constitutional Rights’.” The Tennessean. The Tennessean, September 12, 2019. <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/2019/09/12/tennessee-voter-registration-law-blocked-judge-citing-harm/2300293001/>.

Blackness. Oliver and Johnson engaged in conversation in response to the leaked House Democrats caucus call, the debate around “defund the police,” that followed, and Southern potential. Oliver made her stance clear early on: progressive issues and messaging can work in the South, and we have an obligation to speak truth.

“The oppressed people have always won the wars in the South. The Civil War was not won because white people decided Black people needed to be free. We were losing the Civil War until Black people were able to participate in it and started enlisting. And then we helped them win. So, this whole notion of we need to not placate the people who are oppressed and placate the people who are already in position because these people we know are gonna vote. To me, it's not progressive. It's regressive.”¹¹⁵

Oliver and Johnson continued, contrasting former President Obama and progressives like US Representative Cori Bush--both of whom began their careers as community organizers and activists who would go on to walk the halls of Congress, with Bush most recently winning her seat in 2020.

Johnson: “I don't think anybody's wrong. I don't think Cori Bush is wrong and I don't think Obama is wrong.”

Oliver: “You have to build coalitions.”

Johnson: “That's what Obama is saying. He's speaking from a practical standpoint, because he knows how the system works with the people that are in place right now. And Cori is speaking from a theological light. ‘We can change this, we can do this, we shouldn't be watering it down,’ standpoint, because she understands the hunger, and the thirst, and the fight in the streets. We shouldn't be using each other's movements to invalidate one another. We should be teaching each other about our movements.”¹¹⁶

The Democratic Party has been known as “a big tent.” The party is notably more diverse than the Republican Party in its makeup, and in regards to the wide range of political beliefs its members may hold. US Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez stated in January of 2020 that she and then-candidate for president, Joe Biden, would not be in the same party in any other

¹¹⁵ Hicks, Henry, Charlane Oliver, and Tequila Johnson. Tequila Johnson and Charlane Oliver Interview. Personal, December 2, 2020.

¹¹⁶ Hicks, Henry, Charlane Oliver, and Tequila Johnson. Tequila Johnson and Charlane Oliver Interview. Personal, December 2, 2020.

country--emphasizing the party's role as a "big tent."¹¹⁷ How to move forward in one direction, when members' beliefs are so far separated along the political spectrum is the same question that Spanberger is grappling with; it's the same question that Oliver and Johnson are answering, emphasizing the important role of intentionality and education when using progressive messaging in the South.

"The Equity Alliance is the glue that's gonna pull Obama and pull Cori Bush together and say, 'we have but one oppressor, and it ain't neither one of y'all,'"¹¹⁸ Johnson said in regards to the work that she and Oliver do in Tennessee. While progressive stances can work in the South, coalition building must be at the heart of approaches to messaging.

In 2017, organizers in Knoxville, Tennessee--along with Noah Nordstrom--worked to recruit progressive candidates for the upcoming city council race. They trained organizers, developed a field program, and since then, have elected two progressive, democratic socialists to the city council. One of those victorious candidates, Seema Singh, has maintained her seat since 2018. I spoke to her over the phone to get her thoughts on the party's internal debate and on her approach to messaging as a brown, bisexual, progressive woman holding elected office in the South. Throughout the interview, she used the phrase "reallocate money from the police." I asked her about this.

"I work really, really hard to support the police and reprimand bad behavior," said Singh. "I mean, it's my own little game. Everyone on Facebook the next day says whatever they want to. I'm a hater or I'm a lover, right? But it's the messaging. Yes, Black lives matter. Definitely. [...But] I can't say 'you're a privileged white man, what do you think about that?' We're not going

¹¹⁷ Forgey, Quint. "AOC: 'In Any Other Country, Joe Biden and I Would Not Be in the Same Party!'" POLITICO. POLITICO, January 6, 2020.

<https://www.politico.com/news/2020/01/06/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-joe-biden-not-same-party-094642>.

¹¹⁸ Hicks, Henry, Charlane Oliver, and Tequila Johnson. Tequila Johnson and Charlane Oliver Interview. Personal, December 2, 2020.

to move any further than that word, right? If I say, ‘you have certain advantages, what do you think that they might be?’ They'll take the time to consider it. [...] It's not spinning, it's just trying to remind people that you're a part of this too. [...] I'm trying to include more people in the message.”¹¹⁹

Singh’s intention through conveying her stance is one that emphasizes education through particular language. Progressive issues and stances in the South shouldn’t be shied away from; however, as Singh mentions, the communication should be specific and may differ in phrasing than messages conveyed outside of the region. The South is a diverse place with a long history of leading the nation in terms of social justice, but the landscape is different compared to states such as California or New York, two states that carry with them more progressive reputations. Voter suppression, a lack of national attention, and voters’ preemptive surrender requires that candidates and organizers must take the extra step of catering their messaging specifically, in addition to running on progressive solutions that attempt to address racial inequities, the worsening class divide, gender-based discrimination, and more. Singh’s distinction between “defund the police,” and “reallocate money from police,” is a clear example of this. These are the candidates that energize and maintain the broad coalition of voters needed to win in the South. Bredeesen and McGrath serve as cautionary tales.

Included in this coalition building, must be rural Southern communities, who are most often assumed to be solidly red. Much of the conversation surrounding Democrats’ upset victories in Georgia this past election cycle center around the metro center of Atlanta and its surrounding suburbs. However, in his *Atlantic* article, Derek Thompson delivers a stark warning to Democrats: “The Democrats’ dominance in large metros seems like cause for optimism, especially in a rapidly suburbanizing country. But this reliance on density is creating a host of

¹¹⁹ Hicks, Henry, and Seema Singh. Seema Singh Interview. Personal, November 24, 2020.

problems for the party going forward.”¹²⁰ Thompson argues that rural communities have an influence over electoral victories that is not currently being addressed by the Democratic Party. He writes that the popular vote does not win victories, the Electoral College does--which favors states with higher rural populations, and where Republicans continue to dominate: states like Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina, Tennessee, etc. “One analysis of Census Bureau data projected that by 2040, roughly half of the population will be represented by 16 senators; the other, more rural half will have 84 senators at their disposal.”¹²¹ Democratic victory in the South is critical to the party’s survival. Electoral reforms are beneficial and necessary, but in order to flip the South, and to maintain victory nationwide, Democrats must make inroads within rural and Southern communities. This does not necessarily mean running to the right in terms of stances and messaging, however.

I first met Charles “Chas” Uffleman, in Waterloo, Iowa in October of 2019, as we’d both moved from Tennessee to the Hawkeye State as field organizers on the Kamala Harris For the People campaign. While the job was my first, Chas brought with him a breadth of campaign experience: a field organizer for Bernie Sanders for President in 2016, the Tennessee Democratic Party, and more. When our campaign ended, Chas moved back to rural Tennessee to work on Elizabeth Warren’s campaign for president in the lead-up to Super Tuesday. From there, he was hired as a regional organizing director on Amy McGrath’s Senate campaign in Kentucky. Chas, known for his denim overalls, his leather jacket spotted with various campaign patches, and his homemade biscuits and gravy recipe, spoke with me on his perspective regarding rural organizing and reaching rural voters through intentional messaging.

¹²⁰ Thompson, Derek. “Why Big-City Dominance Is a Problem for Democrats.” The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, November 26, 2020.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/11/why-big-city-dominance-problem-democrats/617161/>.

¹²¹ Thompson, Derek. “Why Big-City Dominance Is a Problem for Democrats.” The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, November 26, 2020.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/11/why-big-city-dominance-problem-democrats/617161/>.

“...if a campaign in the South is going to release their rural policy plan, it's normally going to speak to a white farmer that goes to church. I'm a rural voter. I'm from a town of 1,200 people. That's not the rural I grew up in. Rural voters are diverse. They are Black, they are new Americans, they are queer. They're focused on access: access to transportation and health care. They're also focused on their safety in communities that don't always feel safe. We don't really speak to that. We don't really organize around that. I think that's built on folks' misconceptions of what the rural South is.”¹²²

Not only is the South home to upwards of half of Black people living in the United States, but “90 percent of America’s entire rural Black population is concentrated in the South.”¹²³ This is much in part due to the historic presence of chattel slavery in the American South, and the lasting presence of Black agriculturalists who’ve inherited that labor. Rural voters within the South, as is with the overall image of the region, are much more complicated and are far from the accepted stereotype.

“A lot of people forget that we have really large immigrant populations in certain areas,” Noah Nordstrom added. “Even in rural Appalachia--places like Morristown, TN is a third Latinx.”¹²⁴ According to the Migration Policy Institute, from 2000 to 2010, Alabama, South Carolina, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Kentucky were the top five states in the U.S. for percentage growth in their immigrant populations.¹²⁵

“It's not Mayberry,” Chas agreed. He participated in our focus group interview by phone, weaving in and out of service as he drove through rural Appalachia after a day of door-knocking.

“It never was, and it's not now.”¹²⁶

¹²² Hicks, Henry, Charles Uffelman, Rickia Stafford, Henry Walther, and Noah Nordstrom. New South Focus Group 1. Personal, September 21, 2020.

¹²³ Paschal, Olivia. “The Rural South Defies Demographic and Political Stereotypes.” Facing South, June 16, 2017. <https://www.facingsouth.org/2017/06/rural-south-defies-demographic-and-political-stereotypes>.

¹²⁴ Hicks, Henry, Charles Uffelman, Rickia Stafford, Henry Walther, and Noah Nordstrom. New South Focus Group 1. Personal, September 21, 2020.

¹²⁵ Hanna, Mary, and Jeanne Batalova. “Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States.” migrationpolicy.org, February 11, 2021. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states-2020>.

¹²⁶ Hicks, Henry, Charles Uffelman, Rickia Stafford, Henry Walther, and Noah Nordstrom. New South Focus Group 1. Personal, September 21, 2020.

“If you listen to everything that the Democratic Party says at the national level, you would have no idea,” added Henry Walther, a senior at Tulane University. Walther currently serves as President of the College Democrats of Louisiana, as well as the Southeastern Field Director for the College Democrats of America. “You would think that the only people who live in rural areas were farmers in the Midwest. That’s the only rural messaging that we have as a party. If you grow corn, we’ve got you. We have talking points for that. Anything else, Appalachia included in those rural areas, a complete lack of messaging.”¹²⁷

Many of the organizers that I spoke to expressed concerns that go beyond the reluctance of Southern campaigns to embrace progressive values and messaging--they’re frustrated with the Democratic Party and national progressives’s lack of messaging, attention, and investment in the South. Many of these organizations may choose not to send resources to Southern chapters, or are apathetic to Southern voters when it comes to crafting a national messaging strategy. Tequila Johnson expressed her frustration with this:

“What is the psychological conditioning that happens when we say certain things about certain areas within the United States? What does that represent now and historically? The South represents Black people. So, I get triggered when people say that, because I don't think that they understand what it means to be a Southern Black person in an electoral organizing space. It means you're going to be underfunded, one. It means you're going to be overlooked, two. [...] Every instance where anything has been won in this country, has been won through the South. People should respect that.”¹²⁸

Given his Southern roots, newly-elected DNC Chair and former candidate for US Senate in South Carolina, Jamie Harrison may certainly bring attention and resources to the region--he’s already indicated his excitement at Charles Booker’s potential campaign.¹²⁹ However, national

¹²⁷ Hicks, Henry, Charles Uffelman, Rickia Stafford, Henry Walther, and Noah Nordstrom. New South Focus Group 1. Personal, September 21, 2020.

¹²⁸ Hicks, Henry, Charlane Oliver, and Tequila Johnson. Tequila Johnson and Charlane Oliver Interview. Personal, December 2, 2020.

¹²⁹ Jaime Harrison, DNC Chair. “Proud of You Charles! Hey... There Is Another Senate Seat up in '22!” Twitter. Twitter, July 1, 2020. <https://twitter.com/harrisonjaime/status/1278149953001529344>.

Democrats and progressives are late. Republicans and the far-right have exploited the South for decades, filling the void left behind by absent Democrats and progressives. George Wallace, segregationist and former Governor of Alabama “insisted that the South was *the most* American region,”¹³⁰ and would use the South as an allegory through which to pitch himself for national office.

“You native sons and daughters of old New England’s rock-ribbed patriotism...and you sturdy natives of the great Midwest, and you descendants of the far west flaming spirit of pioneer freedom, we invite you to come and be with us, for you are of the Southern mind, and the Southern spirit, and the Southern philosophy, you are Southerners too and brothers in our fight.”¹³¹

Wallace would refer to the struggle for “state’s rights,” as an example of federal overreach, claiming that as a Southerner, he most understood conservatives’ strife. While Wallace’s weaponization of the South to promote white supremacy would be condemned--“John Egerton had warned in 1974 that neither the South nor the nation were benefiting from the ‘Americanization of Dixie’ or the ‘Southernization of America’ so much as they were simply ‘sharing and spreading the worst in each other while he best languishes and withers.’”¹³²

This “Southernization” can be examined to argue for a Southern characterization of national progressive interests, and consistent attention and care to the South. The South’s history of resistance against oppressive reign lends itself to the national progressive movement: if you care about racial justice, then you are of the South; if you care about environmental justice, then you are of the South; if you care about economic justice, then you are of the South. Not only does the South have much to gain by increased national attention, but national progressives would benefit from including the South in their work.

¹³⁰ Lowndes, Joseph E. *From the New Deal to the New Right: Race and the Southern Origins of Modern Conservatism*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008.

¹³¹ Lowndes, 83

¹³² Cobb, 318

“Tennessee has the most minimum wage jobs in the country,” mentioned Noah Nordstrom. “Nobody's thinking about the people who are working at Applebee's and if they're voting.”¹³³

Progressive messaging can work in the South. Progressive messaging should be *pulled* from the South. Progressive messaging has its roots in the South.

—

Newly elected Senator Reverend Raphael Warnock, who holds the pulpit at Martin Luther King Jr’s old Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, GA and who began his political career as a voting rights activist, leading Stacey Abrams’s New Georgia Project,¹³⁴ decisively beat incumbent Republican Senator Kelly Loeffler in their 2020 competition for one of Georgia’s US Senate seats. Warnock embraced his activist background, and has been credited with sparking somewhat of a movement among the religious Left.¹³⁵ He would speak on the fact that the last time he was present at the United States Capitol building before being sworn in, was when he was arrested attending a protest on the Capitol grounds against “an immoral budget.”¹³⁶ Warnock’s victory signifies what is possible, and changing tides within the South. Instead of playing defense against Republican attacks and running a more palatable campaign, he instead took the offensive, giving voters someone to root for and doubling down on his commitment to progressive advocacy on Capitol Hill.

¹³³ Hicks, Henry, Charles Uffelman, Rickia Stafford, Henry Walther, and Noah Nordstrom. New South Focus Group 1. Personal, September 21, 2020.

¹³⁴ “Warnock for Georgia Releases TV Ad ‘Store,’ Highlighting Commitment to Address System of Inequality and Give Working Georgians A Fair Shake.” Warnock for Georgia, October 5, 2020. <https://warnockforgeorgia.com/warnock-for-georgia-releases-tv-ad-store-highlighting-commitment-to-address-system-of-inequality-and-give-working-georgians-a-fair-shake/>.

¹³⁵ Green, Emma. “Georgia Sends a Preacher to Washington.” The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, January 6, 2021. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/08/raphael-warnock-mlk-georgia-senate/615379/>.

¹³⁶ Hallerman, Tamar, and Shelia Poole. “Rev. Raphael Warnock Arrested, Released during Capitol Protest.” AJC. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, July 18, 2017. <https://www.ajc.com/news/ebenezer-rev-raphael-warnock-arrested-during-capitol-protest/dApzGUSTARS GGAm2KB2fzI/>.

“A new South is emerging. Let’s win this,” Warnock’s campaign posted on Twitter in the remaining days before the final run-off date.¹³⁷

Campaigns are beginning to realize what is possible. Justice Democrats, a political action committee that launched the candidacies of notable progressives like Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rep. Ayanna Pressley, and Rep. Ilhan Omar has already announced their backing of Tennessean, Odessa Kelly in her primary campaign against Blue Dog Democrat, Rep. Jim Cooper (TN-05).¹³⁸ Kelly is the organization’s first endorsed candidate of the 2022 cycle, and has already brought national attention and funding to the South. In her campaign video, she emphasized her support for “Green New Deal union jobs,”¹³⁹ already altering her phrasing to reframe the progressive legislation as an avenue for labor rights, and educating voters on the intersection. This work of intentional schooling and coalition maintenance is critical to the success of progressive messaging.

“You have now in the South that the strongest statewide candidates we've seen are people that are pro-choice, that are progressive in a lot of different ways,” said Whit Miller. “People like Doug Jones here in Alabama, you got Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock in Georgia. Jamie Harrison in South Carolina. A lot of these fairly progressive candidates for the region are running very competitive races--more competitive than it's ever been before.”¹⁴⁰

This most recent election cycle, and the debate that ensued afterwards, has shifted the conversation in a number of ways with regards to Southern campaigns’ approach to messaging and stances, as well as the amount of outside support offered to them. Seema Singh, a Knoxville

¹³⁷ Warnock, Raphael. “A New South Is Emerging. Let's Win This.” Twitter. Twitter, December 30, 2020. <https://twitter.com/ReverendWarnock/status/1344402964245606401>.

¹³⁸ “Odessa Kelly.” Justice Democrats, April 5, 2021. <https://justicedemocrats.com/candidate/odessa-kelly/>.

¹³⁹ “Odessa Kelly.” Justice Democrats, April 5, 2021. <https://justicedemocrats.com/candidate/odessa-kelly/>.

¹⁴⁰ Hicks, Henry, Sophia Howard, Nevin Bulut, and Whitman Miller. New South Focus Group 2. Personal, October 30, 2020.

City Council member, believes that Trump's defeat, and the South's role in delivering a win for Joe Biden, shows the potential for a different type of campaigning and governing.

“Before the election, it was like Trump and his minions were in charge. They're in charge, and I'm allowed to sit at their table for a while and do what I can. But I know that as Democrats, we've always been the nice people, and I'm kind of tired of that. We can't say 'please let us have some power.' I think it's the right time to demand some.”¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ Hicks, Henry, and Seema Singh. Seema Singh Interview. Personal, November 24, 2020.

Curtis

Nana and Papa met when they were young. I ask if they remember just how, and they both agree that it's one of those relationships where you can't trace it back to a specific moment. She was always the girl next door. He was always the roughy boy in her class. There was only one school for Black children in Dalton, the small mountain town in North Georgia where my family on my mother's side has sat and resided since enslavement. They both recount their memories of the Emery Street School as fond ones; of plays in the small schoolhouse, jaunts home with younger siblings--Papa is the oldest of eight. He'd always expected to remain in Dalton after graduating; partly for Patricia, but mostly because he saw no reason to leave. The town was home. It's where he'd learned how to raise chickens under his mother's guidance. Plenty of memories of burgers at the Creamo on Morris St. lingered.

When he'd received his draft papers to head off to Vietnam, he may not have been surprised. His brothers were soon to receive letters similar; and those in his graduating class had certainly gotten their notices already. Papa doesn't explain the days leading up to his departure as being dismal ones. Nana does most of the talking here. She loves to tell the long story of her letter--the one written out in a love-frenzied hurry having just received her ring months ago. Nana appealed to higher-ups for her man to come home to her, come the wedding already set for May. She holds us in suspense here, before recapping the two weeks leave he was given. They were married at New Hope Baptist down the road, quickly and without breath. The two honeymooned in South Georgia. She keeps the return letter, approving his short leave, framed and above two statutes of young angels in love. The letter is headed with the address 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Washington, DC.

Papa's war story was one of the chill above clouds. Wind kissed each Black GI, leaving tawny marks upon their cheeks, forever fleeting, softened by memory. His story was of the jerk of a parachute, backpack straps tugging at underarms, in place of the absent girls they'd left behind, stateside, still seeming to whisper them home. His story was Vietnam weeds, shooting up into trees, the grace of the jungle, a misted glow, and something about the damn sweat. Papa never mentioned bombs.

When I used to beg for stories, as boys often do, he spoke very softly, and left out the gore I'd ache for. As I grew older, my mother would come to mention the nights during her childhood, disturbed by hearing shouts within her own home, night terrors unsettling the whole house; a parent's bedroom supposed to remain a site of refuge, instead haunted.

My mother came shortly after his lasting return. The oldest child, and a daughter at that. Papa would cradle her tightly, and with gentle hands. I have to assume that her birth gave reason for his run for Whitfield County School Board. In 1970, Papa became the first Black candidate to run for the office, his personal stake tending to the vestment of service within him. Such a milestone, you'd think Papa would wear it like a badge. However, he tells me through trailed-off anecdotes over the phone, that it was the Hatch Act that limited him in his agency. Papa was working for the Postal Service at the time, and as he tells it, the local postmaster conveyed that were he to officially campaign, he'd risk losing his job.

"A lot of people didn't even know I was running," he mutters over the phone. "And then, I didn't have a lot of help. I didn't have a campaign manager. I didn't have a lot of helpers for advertising. I guess I had some cards that were given out. I couldn't give them out, but someone else gave them out. There were no signs with my name on it, you know."

Papa would not be the final word for Dalton, and not for the South. Though his intervention--planted like a seed in his own mother's backyard--would be recognized. I do not remember the ceremony as well, but Papa would soon enough be portrayed through a mural on the back stone wall of Four Paws Pet Resort, near the Waugh Street Bridge. He'd purchased the old Emery Street school house property, after it'd been burnt down by the Klan and rebuilt shortly before integration led to its disuse. His black-and-white image would be backed by a golden orange canvas, slapped against the wall and headlined as one of many notable citizens out of Dalton. Nana, my mother, and I dressed nicely for the unveiling ceremony. They pulled the drapings away, showing his etched silhouette. Papa would smile.

His image would be positioned to the right of Confederate General Joseph Johnston.



Relational Organizing and Pushing Power Down

The 2020 Democratic primary race for President of the United States was a notable one in many ways. The field was historically diverse, and the stakes could not have been higher, as twenty-one major candidates competed for the party's nomination to face incumbent President Donald Trump in the general election. The cycle was eventful, and led to a number of key conversations coming out of it. Whether it be a flawed tracking app used in the Iowa Caucuses,¹⁴² or discourse surrounding the party's primary calendar positioning Iowa as the nation's king-maker,¹⁴³ most relevant issues generated significant attention. Though, one particular lesson--emphasized by the COVID-19 pandemic--has been overlooked and ignored.

This notable problem is the way that we organize--especially in areas like the American South, in which the Democratic Party and national progressive organizations do not traditionally invest in campaigns or in organizing efforts. While many articles have been written about the Democrats' success specifically in Georgia and the role that organizing, and expanding the electorate, played in the party's historic victory, the bigger picture is still not being processed. Traditional, standard field organizing tactics are flawed. This is evident in the Democrats' electoral performance, winning only by narrow majorities in 2020--and losing most of the South. Democrats must revise their approach to electoral organizing in order to center community-based approaches; otherwise they'll be doomed to forfeit the state of Georgia, the South, and the nation as a whole in time. This shift is necessary in order to bring commonly overlooked, marginalized communities into the political process, as well as to ensure ongoing, localized political engagement beyond individual campaign cycles.

¹⁴² Schneider, Avie. "What We Know About The App That Delayed Iowa's Caucus Results." NPR. NPR, February 4, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/02/04/802583844/what-we-know-about-the-app-that-delayed-iowas-caucus-results>.

¹⁴³ Siders, David, and Elena Schneider. "It Might Just Be Game over for the Iowa Caucuses." POLITICO. POLITICO, February 18, 2021. <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/02/18/iowa-caucus-469735>.

Charlane Oliver, co-founder of Tennessee's The Equity Alliance reflected on progress in Georgia, and how she'd like to see more attention given to the rest of the region:

“They’re still using these old, traditional campaign models that only speak to a small number of voters. We know that we have to expand the electorate in order to win over seats and build more power here. We just don’t see that on the campaign side--from politicians, from the party leadership, any of that. Where’s the voter registration? Where’s the programming? It’s almost like they’re intentionally relying on us to do all of their work without resourcing us.”¹⁴⁴

Grassroots community organizers have been sounding the alarm for years. Political campaigns are only just now beginning to realize this issue with organizing.

Out of the historically large field of candidates in the 2020 Democratic primary, the one who would go on to win the Iowa Caucus, the first contest in the cycle, would be former Mayor of South Bend, Indiana and newly-appointed Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg. Buttigieg entered the race with virtually no name-recognition and a steep uphill path ahead of him. The race pitted him against senators, governors, and a former vice president--though it was the former mayor of a small town in a flyover state that would go on to win the most competitive primary competition. Voters in the state might attribute his rise and eventual victory to his moderate values, his Midwestern background, or his military service--but the Buttigieg campaign piloted an innovative organizing program, countering the traditional field models used by others and instead centered “relational organizing.”

I spoke with Greta Carnes, National Organizing Director for the Pete Buttigieg campaign. Carnes has been passionate about organizing and electoral politics since she was young, skipping out on soccer practice and high school classes to knock doors for Barack Obama in 2008 when she was fifteen. She became a volunteer leader with the local campaign office, phone-banking

¹⁴⁴ Hicks, Henry, Charlane Oliver, and Tequila Johnson. Tequila Johnson and Charlane Oliver Interview. Personal, December 2, 2020.

and canvassing alongside seasoned politicos and adults in the community--some of whom being her peers' parents.¹⁴⁵ After Obama's first victory, Carnes returned to help in his re-election campaign as a field organizer.

"In 2012, they'd perfected the science of how to knock as many doors as possible. And so I think that all of us who fell in love with Obama in 2008, and then became organizers in 2012--and I think that's a lot of leadership right now in campaigns--were people who learned that organizing equals knocking doors,"¹⁴⁶ said Carnes.

After finishing up on the Obama campaign, Carnes moved to Kentucky in 2014 to elect Alison Lundergan Grimes in her campaign for United States Senate against incumbent Senator Mitch McConnell. She worked in the campaign's digital department, and stuck with digital and communications as she moved to Hillary for America, the campaign to elect former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton as the first woman to become President of the United States. It was while working on these two campaigns that Carnes began to recognize the flaws in our approach to electoral organizing. Campaign organizers were told to make Facebook accounts, and were given quotas for the number of posts uploaded per day. They were given peer-to-peer texting templates, sending stock messages to Democrats and Republicans. Carnes describes the campaign's approach to digital organizing as a "square-peg-round-hole" situation, as the template approach leaves little room for personalized or individualized organizing methods. She has cited data¹⁴⁷ suggesting that fewer people pick up cold calls and answer the door for canvassers, in order to

¹⁴⁵ McGowan, Tara. "Campaigning Amidst a Pandemic." Episode. *FWIW*, March 19, 2020.

¹⁴⁶ Hicks, Henry, and Greta Carnes. Greta Carnes Interview. Personal, October 28, 2020.

¹⁴⁷ Sterling, Greg. "Don't Call Me: Nearly 90% of Customers Won't Answer the Phone Anymore [Study]." *MarTech Today*, August 21, 2019.

<https://martechtoday.com/dont-call-me-nearly-90-of-customers-wont-answer-the-phone-anymore-study-234979#:~:text=Declining%20success%20rates.&text=Widely%20cited%20data%20from%20separate,the%20passing%20third%2Dparty%20citations.>

identify and explain shortcomings. Despite this evidence, she says that campaigns are resistant to changing.

“They would just say, ‘trust the model. We know what we’re doing. [...] The campaign line was--which I remember hearing constantly was--‘we trust the data, we trust the analytics, just do what you’re told.’ And then we lost.” These flawed tactics, paired with criticism from community leaders and activists, such as Charlane Oliver, led Carnes to rethink the strategies she’d been taught. “We listen to groups on the ground tell us that they’re frustrated with us because we swoop in, steal all the money, steal all the attention, and then we leave without building any real infrastructure behind. And I always said, ‘you know, well, that’s the nature of campaigns.’ You know, that’s what we do. And for the first time, I think I’ve started becoming really critical of the work that we do.”¹⁴⁸

The case against field organizing, the standard method for on-the-ground campaigning, is simple: less people are engaged by a generalized, transactional approach that shows little concern or care for the individual voters being courted. Carnes interviewed for a number of 2020 primary campaigns--the eventual nominee Joe Biden’s included--though took the job on Pete Buttigieg’s campaign, seeing it as an opportunity to create a unique organizing program that might avoid those shortcomings, for a campaign that she believed might only last a few months.

“Relational organizing, to me, is the idea that people are more likely to be persuaded by somebody that they know and trust, than by a stranger.” Empowering individual organizers to speak in their own way to community members in their “turf”--the term for a designated area that campaign organizers are responsible for--was central to the program that Carnes put together. “Relational organizing, to me, literally means training and empowering people to talk to their

¹⁴⁸ Hicks, Henry, and Greta Carnes. Greta Carnes Interview. Personal, October 28, 2020.

own friends and family in whatever way is more natural for them. It's the idea that that'll be more convincing than strangers talking to strangers or anything like that."¹⁴⁹

On a more traditional campaign, like the ones that Carnes worked for before becoming Buttigieg's National Organizing Director, the day-to-day experience might look like a long day of knocking doors in an unfamiliar neighborhood or working to meet a set goal for phone calls made, yielding little change in support to those who pick up the phone or answer the door. These interactions may last thirty seconds--a quick "hello," "I'm not interested," and "have a good day." In rare instances, they may last several minutes--you've either found someone who is genuinely curious, trolling, or an untapped yet committed supporter. In these cases, it becomes critical to escalate these supporters to an active volunteer. How many canvassing shifts can you sign them up for? Can they come to the office to make phone calls sometime soon? This direct voter contact is crucial for getting out the vote efforts (GOTV) and for building upon your existing base of support, but does have its issues.

Voters who cannot afford childcare or to take time off from work, may not be able to fit it into their schedule to make phone calls. Those who are not able-bodied or are otherwise unable to walk from door to door for several hours may not be able to participate in door knocking. This is, of course, assuming that you're able to reach voters and turn their support to your candidate. Recent data shows that as spam robocalls become more prevalent, fewer and fewer people are answering the phone for unrecognizable numbers.¹⁵⁰ During the nine-to-five workday, many potential voters may not be home. All this, on top of the fact that many people don't casually enjoy phone-banking or canvassing.

¹⁴⁹ Hicks, Henry, and Greta Carnes. Greta Carnes Interview. Personal, October 28, 2020.

¹⁵⁰ Madrigal, Alexis C. "Why No One Answers Their Phone Anymore." The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, May 31, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/05/ring-ring-ring/561545/>.

Organizers on campaigns are held to certain goals--a pre-designated number of call attempts, door attempts, volunteer shifts confirmed, etc. While door-knocking and phonebanking have proven to be effective in boosting turnout among already existing supporters,¹⁵¹ the metrics to which organizers are held to in a traditional field organizing program are less relevant to the content of conversations with voters or time spent integrating yourself into the community that you're organizing. Traditional field organizing metrics reduce interactions with potential voters to be quick, to the point, and transactional.

“People generally just want to feel as though they're valued and as though they're important. Not their vote. Them as a person,”¹⁵² said former organizer on the Stacey Abrams for Governor campaign, Sophia Howard.

This is where relational organizing comes in. The metrics by which Greta Carnes held her organizers accountable, did not include phone calls attempted or doors knocked--despite pleas from staff who were more comfortable, or eager to continue with the tradition of printing off a packet, grabbing some pens, and going door-to-door.

“Through the summer, you guys staffed up way earlier than we did,” Carnes told me, referring to my time spent in Waterloo, Iowa on the Kamala Harris for the People campaign. “Elizabeth Warren was on the ground way earlier than we were. We did not have staff on the ground until mid-June, which is pretty late. And at that point, I think Warren's campaign started knocking doors, and all of our organizers came to us. And they were like, ‘We want to knock doors.’ We were like, ‘No, you guys don't.’”

¹⁵¹ Matthews, Dylan. “The Pandemic Is Forcing Democrats to Ask: How Important Is Door-Knocking, Anyway?” Vox. Vox, September 3, 2020. <https://www.vox.com/21366036/canvass-ground-game-turnout-gotv-phone-bank-tv-ads-mailers>.

¹⁵² Hicks, Henry, Sophia Howard, Nevin Bulut, and Whitman Miller. New South Focus Group 2. Personal, October 30, 2020.

Through the summer months, the Buttigieg campaign required that their organizers have a certain number of “one-on-ones”--campaign jargon for individual meetings, coffee dates, etc. with community members. Organizers also had to hold a certain number of community events, mostly “house parties” where they’d chat casually about Buttigieg with community members over refreshments. They were also held accountable for attending a certain number of neighborhood events within their turf. Carnes said that on their campaign, organizers began attending regular church services, joining soccer teams, participating in Magic: the Gathering tournaments, going to PTA meetings, signing up to join book clubs, doing community service, and more.

“It was just a way to meet communities--especially communities of people who might not necessarily be Democratic activists, which was that small pool of people that everybody in Iowa was courting. We were trying to find just tight knit communities in any place.” Organizers integrated themselves into the community, becoming friends, teammates, and more with the very people who were getting cold-calls from other campaigns. After this several month period of general community engagement and nonchalant conversations about Pete Buttigieg, organizers would then escalate their peers. “So, at this point, all the people that organizers had met with over the summer and had bonded with, this was the time that we started sitting down with them and asking them ‘who do you know in the community, who can you talk to about Pete?’”¹⁵³

This type of network certainly exists already for Black Southerners. Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have been critical to the success of candidates like Stacey Abrams and Andrew Guillum, graduates of Spelman College and Florida A&M University, respectively. Divine 9 fraternities and sororities; organizations like Jack and Jill, and the Boulé; are examples of Black cultural groups that link communities throughout the region, providing a

¹⁵³ Hicks, Henry, and Greta Carnes. Greta Carnes Interview. Personal, October 28, 2020.

firm foundation for relational organizing to be implemented by political campaigns seeking to engage Black voters and escalate them to volunteers.

The community members that Pete and Greta's organizers had gotten to know throughout the summer were then given their own quotas--not of phone calls to make or doors to knock, but of people for them to speak with, be it their mother, their professor, their partner.

“[Organizers] would call all of their volunteers and say, ‘Did you talk to Karen this week? Did you talk to Jan? Did you talk to your dad?’ And it got really granular so that organizers weren't just asking volunteers to talk to people, they were coaching them on how to talk to each person in their life one by one by one. I think it really requires a shift in how you think about time and efficacy. Because on the one hand, that feels like such a waste of time. But on the other hand, all of that time is built towards training so that eventually, those volunteers can go to their best friend, and once they've talked to their best friend and gotten them to support a candidate, then they can be the person that coaches every single person. Also, if you are sitting down for an hour with an organizer, and you're a volunteer, and you end up talking to 20 people, that is probably more people than you'd spend that hour cold calling.”

Relational organizing seeks to attach campaign work to existing infrastructure within communities, as opposed to starting from scratch with organizers creating entirely new opportunities for voter engagement. Organizers in these programs are required to understand and be present in the communities that they're working in, instead of engaging in transactional relationships with community members in order to solely secure a vote. Relational organizing is much more concerned with the well-being of a community and its members, and empowers folks to organize their own communities when campaigns up and leave at the end of an electoral cycle. It doesn't emphasize the temporary presence of a national or statewide campaign apparatus, but rather encourages community members to remain active at the local level, even in their absence. This is the direction that Democratic campaigns need to shift to nationally if they hope to

maintain and grow support across the country. Additionally, relational organizing is a tool that would be specifically beneficial for campaigns in the Southern United States.

“Obviously, it’s a best practice everywhere, but I think that just because of cultural stuff in the way that families are a bit closer-knit here, and people are just warmer down here in general,” said Nevin Bulut, former organizer for Senator Bernie Sanders and Renee Hoyos, candidate for Tennessee’s 2nd congressional district. “It’s easier to talk to and connect with people who disagree with you if you have other personal ties with them.”¹⁵⁴

Culturally, the South places emphasis on community. The South is Sunday dinners, potlucks, tailgates. In addition to this, common stereotypes regarding the South and biases towards those who live there often impact the way that non-Southern organizers approach their work when parachuting in from out of state. Tennessee Congressman Jim Cooper, in a profile with the *Nashville Scene* spoke on Democrats’ loss in the recent US Senate race in South Carolina, saying that “so many people who contributed, they don’t really know South Carolina. They may have never visited South Carolina. [...] This isn’t top-down; this is bottom-up. People hate to be told what to do by outsiders.”¹⁵⁵

Whit Miller, former organizer for Let America Vote, Doug Jones for US Senate, and current political director of the Alabama College Democrats would agree, citing tension between Southern organizers and those from other regions peering in and making judgments about the South. “Something that I’ve experienced a lot of is on top of having to fight for progress here and fight against the bad elements here, I’ve also had to debate with progressives outside of the South,” Miller said. “Telling them yes, this is a place you need to care about. There’s stuff going

¹⁵⁴ Hicks, Henry, Sophia Howard, Nevin Bulut, and Whitman Miller. New South Focus Group 2. Personal, October 30, 2020.

¹⁵⁵ Elliot, Stephen. “Jim Cooper on 2020, 2022 and More.” *Nashville Scene*, November 23, 2020. <https://www.nashvillescene.com/news/pith-in-the-wind/article/21144629/jim-cooper-on-2020-2022-and-more>.

on here. It's one of the most frustrating things I've experienced. It feels like just as much as I'm having to debate and work with conservatives, I'm also having to debate with progressives from outside the South. The amount of dismissive comments I've had thrown at me from people from outside of here is endless. It's one of the most frustrating things.”¹⁵⁶

“That's the thing that bothers me about Northern, and Midwestern, and Eastern, West Coast organizers. They see the South as backwards. They see the South as regressive, but what that communicates on a larger scale is that Black people are backwards,” said Tequila Johnson, Charlane Oliver’s partner in founding The Equity Alliance. “When you think about the South, you think about Atlanta, you think about Mississippi, you think about Memphis. You think about all of these places--Louisiana. What comes to your mind? Black people. So, when we talk about the South, it's important that we name that the South is comprised of Black people who have, for centuries and centuries and centuries been oppressed, and have been fighting to get out of oppression.”¹⁵⁷

Relational organizing is critical, not just for electoral success, but in order to properly understand and reimagine such a rigidly-defined and ill-approached region; especially as it relates to Southerners of color. Rickia “Kia” Stafford, a lifelong Georgia resident and former organizer with the Democratic Party’s Organizing Corps 2020, expressed similar concerns to Oliver.

“When I organized, a lot of people were afraid to go into Black neighborhoods or minority dominated neighborhoods. [...] I would try to push people into going into neighborhoods, where people haven't been registered to vote. You see the numbers: these people don't vote in this neighborhood. People see that they're Black--because you can see all of this stuff on your phone, and they're like, ‘oh, no, we're gonna skip that door.’ [...] If you aren't comfortable speaking to Black

¹⁵⁶ Hicks, Henry, Sophia Howard, Nevin Bulut, and Whitman Miller. New South Focus Group 2. Personal, October 30, 2020.

¹⁵⁷ Hicks, Henry, Charlane Oliver, and Tequila Johnson. Tequila Johnson and Charlane Oliver Interview. Personal, December 2, 2020.

people, or you aren't comfortable speaking to a Latinx voter, because you feel like you don't know Spanish...I've pulled out Google Translate so quick to get that registration. [...] Diversity and cultural trainings are going to be imperative for people working on the ground.”¹⁵⁸

Under a relational organizing program, organizers should be integrated into these communities--all communities. Paired with trainings on bias and identity, hiring locally, and empowering volunteers with paid canvassing programs as well, organizers can improve gains. Community members can be empowered. The electoral landscape in the South can be altered.

Carnes also explained that a relational program, oftentimes can generate momentum easier--something that is critical when examining Southern campaigns, as many are running with fewer funds and more hesitancy among voters than Democrats or progressives running in other regions.

In November of 2019, a *Des Moines Register* poll was released, showing that for the first time, Pete Buttigieg had topped the rest of the field, leading the pack with 25% of likely caucus goers indicating support for him.¹⁵⁹ Carnes, who was stunned and elated by the news, doesn't think that the poll was entirely accurate, but credits the premature momentum, which built to real and sustained support through the caucuses, to their relational organizing strategy.

“I actually don't think it was 100% accurate. But the week that the poll was in the field, we'd had three times the number of conversations about Pete and we had had so far. I don't necessarily know that all those people would have shown up and caucused for Pete, but when Ann Selzer from the *Des Moines Register* called and asked them who they were supporting, I think they were like, 'well, I've heard about Pete from forty-five people this week. I guess I'll just say Pete.' And so, I think it was great because it ended up sort of jumpstarting a fake momentum that turned into real momentum.”¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Hicks, Henry, Charles Uffelman, Rickia Stafford, Henry Walther, and Noah Nordstrom. New South Focus Group 1. Personal, September 21, 2020.

¹⁵⁹ Pfannenstiel, Brianne. “Iowa Poll: Pete Buttigieg Rockets to the Top of the 2020 Field as a Clear Front-Runner.” *Des Moines Register*. The *Des Moines Register*, November 18, 2019. <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/politics/iowa-poll/2019/11/17/pete-buttigieg-leads-new-iowa-poll-warren-sanders-biden-follow/4198100002/>.

¹⁶⁰ Hicks, Henry, and Greta Carnes. Greta Carnes Interview. Personal, October 28, 2020.

Campaigns in the South, where viability and electability concerns hinder voter energy and donor support, would benefit from such an organizing practice. Raising name recognition and generating conversations about candidates--and about organizers--can pique the interest of potential voters and donors. In Iowa, the phrase we heard most often by senior staff was that voters “come for the candidate, but stay for the organizer.”

“That is how you flip the South,” said Tequila Johnson. “You flip the South by grassroots organizing. Concrete roots organizing. Going below the surface, actually talking to everyday people who are impacted by these issues and empowering them to actually go forth and make change in their own lives.”¹⁶¹

Carnes also spoke on how relational organizing is a potentially cheaper strategy to employ as opposed to traditional field organizing, an important feat given the lack of financial investments made currently by the Democratic Party and national organizations in Southern Democrats and progressive candidates for elected office, as well as in Southern chapters of advocacy organizations or affiliate groups.

A *Memphis Commercial Appeal* report showed that in this past cycle, Marquita Bradshaw, the Democratic Party’s nominee for the US Senate seat in Tennessee vacated by retiring Senator Lamar Alexander, only had \$630,000 cash on hand, compared to \$1.9 million held by her Republican opponent, Bill Hagarty.¹⁶² Bradshaw was the only Black woman to run for US Senate in the 2020 cycle, the first Black woman nominated by a major party in Tennessee, and if elected would’ve become the only Black woman in the US Senate. She

¹⁶¹ Hicks, Henry, Charlane Oliver, and Tequila Johnson. Tequila Johnson and Charlane Oliver Interview. Personal, December 2, 2020.

¹⁶² Macaraeg, Sarah. “In U.S. Senate Race, Trump Favorite Bill Hagerty Has Funds. But Marquita Bradshaw Isn’t Fazed.” *The Commercial Appeal*. *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, October 23, 2020. <https://www.commercialappeal.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/10/23/tn-senate-race-hagerty-brads-haw-fundraising-donors/3685074001/>.

received little attention or investment from the national Democratic Party, and lost to Hagarty by a staggering amount.

“Relational is a way that we can build programs that don't necessarily require the amount of resources that other campaigns do, and that last longer so that we don't have to continue to staff up in the way that we do every single cycle,”¹⁶³ said Carnes. Relational organizing as a strategy, has the end result of leaving behind community members who have effectively organized their own communities. Once the torch is passed from organizer to volunteer to do that recruitment, to host house parties, and train their friends to have conversations about a candidate; that same volunteer could lead a local effort to establish a community oversight board for police, could petition to have potholes fixed, or might even decide to run for their local school board. For less money, relational organizing empowers more people and can expand the electorate. “So, I think Pete is a good example. We staffed up much later than every other campaign, and at first we had fewer organizers and everybody else on the ground. We were able to catch up quickly because we didn't treat our organizers like organizers. We treated them like local organizing directors, and we treated our volunteers like organizers.”¹⁶⁴

While Pete Buttigieg would eventually lose in his bid for the Democratic nomination for president--Carnes believes that the campaign had to spend so much time working to prove his viability in Iowa, that they lacked what they needed to replicate the same strategy nationally--the impact of Greta Carnes's relational organizing program would lead to a much larger conversation about organizing tactics, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. When the pandemic first struck the United States in the spring of 2020, Joe Biden's campaign--who was by then the party's presumptive nominee--halted their door-knocking program out of concerns for the health

¹⁶³ Hicks, Henry, and Greta Carnes. Greta Carnes Interview. Personal, October 28, 2020.

¹⁶⁴ Hicks, Henry, and Greta Carnes. Greta Carnes Interview. Personal, October 28, 2020.

and safety of campaign staff, along with that of the voters who they were attempting to court.¹⁶⁵

The Biden campaign would shift organizing to rely heavily on phone-banking, along with the development of the Vote Joe app, in which volunteers could reach their peers via social media.

This partial integration of relational organizing, paired with the migration of Iowa organizers to other states across the country who would spread word of the benefits to Carnes's program, has made the term "relational organizing" a common one in campaign circles.

Organizers, young ones especially, are more vocal about their concerns regarding the standard organizing program than Carnes remembers herself and other organizers during the Obama and Hillary years being. In focus group interviews conducted with campaign organizers across the South, many of whom are currently finishing college or are recently graduated, a desire to see relational organizing implemented at a larger scale was routinely expressed.

"I'm starting to lose faith in that in that basic organizing model of building teams, starting with county Democratic parties, getting them together, making phone calls into the community, turn them around, escalate them into volunteers, and then get them to go knock doors, and get them to grow supporters and turn them into volunteers. That's how we've been doing it for 20 years. And I do think it works for certain segments of the population. I think it works well for folks who have good transportation that can go down to an office, it works well. [...] And it also works for folks who have landlines and folks who, you know, just want to go hang out with strangers. But that's not everybody. And I think I think that can be a pretty exclusive model when it comes to building teams and effecting change and communities."¹⁶⁶

Organizers would mention the hybrid versions of relational and field organizing that they've encountered recently, as well as describing the lasting impacts of relational organizers in their community. Noah Nordstrom, an organizer based in Knoxville, Tennessee described the

¹⁶⁵ Otterbein, Holly, and Alex Thompson. "Down-Ballot Dems Split from Biden on Door-Knocking." POLITICO. POLITICO, September 15, 2020.

<https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/14/down-ballot-democrats-canvassing-414715>.

¹⁶⁶ Hicks, Henry, Charles Uffelman, Rickia Stafford, Henry Walther, and Noah Nordstrom. New South Focus Group 1. Personal, September 21, 2020.

way that community members impacted by the Knoxville City Council Movement continue to meet to foster community and to push for change at home.

“I think it’s making the movement a lot more sustainable,” he said.

Southern communities are already benefiting from relational organizing--it’s how organizations like Tennessee’s the People’s Plaza Movement are able to engage the deep pockets of Democratic voters and non-voters, diverse coalitions of Southerners just waiting to be reached, signal fertile soil for growth and progress within the region. It’s an active choice to not invest in the South. It’s an active choice to overlook voters of color within the region.

Carnes says that the Democratic decision to leave the South behind is not unsurprising, but is one that is wrong.

“We try to win by one vote, right? A 50+1 win means that you've won, you've spent your money exactly right, you spent just enough money to win a close race. And I think that that's becoming really problematic for us because we are not winning in ways that are resounding. We are not winning in ways that include communities that wouldn't otherwise have a voice if we don't think that they're part of our path to victory. [...] We are much more likely to invest in a race in Arizona that could be won by one vote than we are in a race in Georgia that is either, you know, we could drive up voter turnout a lot for somebody like Jon Ossoff that would help races down ballot, but we don't feel like that's an investment that makes sense.”¹⁶⁷

It’s a self-fulfilling prophecy: a candidate in the South cannot win, and so we will not provide critical resources and aid to make Southern campaigns competitive. The South has always been a bargaining chip throughout history, seeming to be perpetually at the mercy of outside decision-makers--many of whom, throughout history, have sided with white supremacy and kept the region cemented in poverty and injustice. We’ve given up on the region altogether, preferring more “competitive” territory and condemning the South to immobility.

¹⁶⁷ Hicks, Henry, and Greta Carnes. Greta Carnes Interview. Personal, October 28, 2020.

“We invest in those places, because they’re hovering on 50+1, but they’re hovering in that 50+1 because we’ve always invested in those races,” said Carnes. “Iowa, I would argue, is more conservative than the South, in a lot of ways. It’s whiter than the South--and we make it competitive every single cycle. Part of the reason why it is, is because we all circle Iowa constantly. I don’t think that Michigan is that dissimilar. I don’t think Minnesota is dissimilar.”¹⁶⁸

Southern states and communities are filled with potential. A volunteer for the Buttigieg campaign in Tennessee, Elizabeth Madeira decided to run for Tennessee State House of Representatives after the Buttigieg team packed up and left the state. She did eventually lose in her bid, but was the first serious Democrat to run against incumbent Republican Glen Casada since his election in 2002. Organizations like Southerners on New Ground (SONG) and The Equity Alliance (TEA) are blending relational with their existing organizing programs, and are in a large part responsible for increasing voter registration and turnout within the region. Relational organizing pushes Democratic campaigns further along, because of its inherent commitment to communities; and its people-centered approach makes it suited especially for reaching new constituencies, and energizing already active voters in the South. This transition amongst campaigns is urgent. A new South is possible, and relational organizing is a part of the way there. When asked if she thought it possible to flip the South, Greta Carnes had this to say:

“What if, for the first time, we talk to people in the South? Is it absolutely flippable because we can empower people to talk to their own friends and family. For the first time, Democrats can start talking to people in a real, honest way that doesn’t just send a million texts to Georgia voters in the last two days before an election in hopes that it might be competitive, even though we haven’t done any work to build it. But if we run better programs that push power down, that empower people on the ground, that build a better bench, I would argue that we can do so much more to win. Yes, absolutely.”¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ Hicks, Henry, and Greta Carnes. Greta Carnes Interview. Personal, October 28, 2020.

¹⁶⁹ Hicks, Henry, and Greta Carnes. Greta Carnes Interview. Personal, October 28, 2020.

Jane & the rest of us

Here is how the story is told to me--and I am young when I first hear it:

My grandfather always begins with anecdotes of thick summer days spent under a Louisiana sun, tumbling through long stocks of grass set against a backdrop of crickets' humming and an evening's orange sky. A toddler's stumbling over red clay towards the eluded pond, my grandfather stuffed with biscuits and buttermilk in his early days before the 1946 move North--he reminisces on this fabled land, a plot upon which our ancestors labored as slaves. This is Jane's story--and thus, is all of ours. Our foremother came up enslaved near Gibsland, Louisiana, herself descended from trauma. Her father was her owner, and her mother his property. For her life, and for those unnamed before her, the Southern sun would be a terror. After war tore through Dixie and a proclamation's call was heeded, Jane's white father fell ill. In a unique turn, as he succumbed to his affliction, he willed the land to Jane--and since, it has been broken apart and passed down to the eldest children of each new generation.

In my great-grandfather's papers, this home is remembered by "the hay loft in the barn, the pond in the pasture, the smoke behind the main house, and dinner with sweet milk, clabber, light bread, three meats, three or four vegetables, plus two or three deserts."¹⁷⁰ This land of injury, turned to abundance. This plot offered itself as a placeholder--and as reparation.

Some summers ago, those of us still young and far enough removed through the years that Jane's story be conveyed to us through lucid fragments, reminiscent of unfamiliar mythology, took our pilgrimage to the site, untouched and unchronicled for decades. The crumbling structures have since rotted down, meeting unmarked graves in their absence. My Chuck Taylors pressed into the dirt with each step, guilt stinging against my tight chest with the suffocation of each shrub underneath my feet. I'd hoped to go carefully. There was no hearth to

¹⁷⁰ Hicks, H. Beecher. *Pausing for Station Identification*. Kerygma Associates, 2001.

meet us. No brick fireplace stood erect from the dirt. No distinguishable oak tree, as my grandfather had suggested. There were no markers or memorials to Jane, to her mother, to those of us who followed--only a sprawling scene overwhelmed by brush and tall weeds. However, with the air's exhale and the sprouted wood's murmurs, the embrace still came.

What my grandfather tells us, and he tells it with the delicacy of a bedtime story, is that the redemption of the land has been done. He tells my cousins and I of a home; barred from Africa, this plot as being the only place we have to return to. He tells us of cast-iron cornbread on Sunday evenings in June, misty pink dawns spent on a front porch with an Uncle Thomas, a boundless horizon beyond which the world may be cruel, but here was safe. Here was ours. Here there was rest.



Visions of a New South

“How curious a land is this,--how full of untold story, of tragedy and laughter, and the rich legacy of human life; shadowed with a tragic past, and big with future promise!”¹⁷¹

Throughout this project, by elevating the perspectives offered by organizers doing the work on the ground, we’ve seen a picture of the American South alternative to the commonly offered stereotype. Whether it be through popular media, political rhetoric, or casual exchanges, the South has been characterized as stuck. It’s been characterized as backwards, as immobile, as a lost cause. However, it’s offerings like the above quote from W.E.B DuBois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* that beg a more compassionate, forward-looking eye--not for those within the region who would continue the legacy of racialized, intolerant terror; but for those who have historically and contemporarily been targeted by such subjugation. To the Southerners left affected by conservative reign, life in the South may be difficult, but it still remains home.

What does the South mean to those who live there? What does it mean to stand atop spoiled ground, to dine in Jim Crow relics, to feel the ancestors’ exhale with the breeze? For many, despite the history of trauma that is steeped in the soil of the region, the South is synonymous with community and belonging. For Black Americans especially, the Deep South has historically served as a placeholder for an ancestral home. Rooted in the trauma of chattel slavery, Black Americans have had no other option but to develop communities, traditions, and practices to foster a sense of home and healing within the South.

“I did not travel across Africa to find my roots. I traveled South to find them. For the South, is home to Black Americans and Black Americans as a race are essentially southerners,”¹⁷² James C. Cobb quotes Eddy Harris in his book, *Away Down South*. He also cites

¹⁷¹ DuBois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Chicago, IL: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903.

¹⁷² Cobb, 279

writer Randall Kenan in saying that, “most African-Americans in this country can't trace their roots back to Africa, but they certainly can trace them back to Tennessee, Georgia, North Carolina, Mississippi, the Southern states.”¹⁷³

Notable Black Americans have spoken about this connection to the South. Tennessean Nikki Giovanni, would say that the South is “a place where no matter what, I belong,” continuing to say that her son also “must know we come from somewhere. That we belong.”¹⁷⁴ Poet Margaret Walker would say that she “had the feel of the South in [her] blood,”¹⁷⁵ while writer Alex Haley would express that “I don’t know anything I treasure more as a writer than being a Southerner.”¹⁷⁶ The region holds meaning, and serves as a homeland for those who have historically been barred from their native origins. Much of the racial justice activism that has its roots in the South has been done to alter the region for this very reason, reaffirming Southern ground as being a place in which Black people are home.

Author of *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker would attribute Dr. Martin Luther King Jr’s activism in the Civil Rights Movement with redeeming the South in this same way. In 1972, Walker said that King “gave us back our heritage. He gave us back our homeland, the bones and dust of our ancestors, who may now sleep within our caring *and* and or hearing...He gave us continuity of place, without which community is ephemeral. He gave us home.”¹⁷⁷

The South’s legacy as a home for Black Americans persists today. The city of Atlanta has been dubbed the “Black Mecca.” *Essence* magazine’s Essence Music Festival occurs annually in New Orleans. Popular media, such as Beyonce’s Grammy-winning “Formation,” refers to ancestral roots in the South: “My daddy Alabama, momma Louisiana / You mix that Negro with

¹⁷³ Cobb, 279

¹⁷⁴ Cobb, 268

¹⁷⁵ Cobb, 267

¹⁷⁶ Cobb, 267

¹⁷⁷ Cobb, 266

that Creole, make a Texas bama.”¹⁷⁸ Black Southerners today are expanding upon the bounds of community life within Southern states. Charlane Oliver and Tequila Johnson, co-founders of Tennessee’s *The Equity Alliance*, spoke on this:

Oliver: “Church.”

Johnson: “The club, the bar, the gym, the fish fries, the jazz and blues festivals.”

Oliver: “The South has got some of the best music and cultural festivals for Black folks there is. Atlanta got them, Houston got them, Memphis? What’s that one? Memphis in May? Man, there ain’t nothing like the South. I wouldn’t leave. I don’t want to leave.”

Johnson: “I don’t want to leave neither.”¹⁷⁹

Scholar, and author of the book *The Devil You Know*, Charles Blow advocates for a return-migration--for Black Americans to move back to Southern states, reclaim the region as home, and jumpstart a new era of Black political representation. In a NPR review of his most recent book, Hope Wabuke begs readers to “consider this: Just after the Civil War, Blacks were the majority in three Southern states and within inches of the majority in three more. ‘If the Great Migration hadn’t happened, and those Black people had remained in the South until the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, it is possible that African Americans would dominate the politics of the Deep South,’” she quotes Blow. “They could have controlled as many as 12 seats in the U.S Senate.”¹⁸⁰

Demographic trends do show that more and more Americans are moving to Southern states, with the United States Census Bureau reporting in 2019 that “movers to and from the South make up the largest domestic migration flows at the regional level.”¹⁸¹ Data also shows

¹⁷⁸ “Beyoncé – Formation.” Genius, February 6, 2016. <https://genius.com/Beyonce-formation-lyrics>.

¹⁷⁹ Hicks, Henry, Charlane Oliver, and Tequila Johnson. Tequila Johnson and Charlane Oliver Interview. Personal, December 2, 2020.

¹⁸⁰ Wabuke, Hope. “Charles Blow’s ‘The Devil You Know’ Is A Black Power Manifesto For Our Time.” NPR. NPR, January 26, 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/26/960665185/charles-blow-s-the-devil-you-know-is-a-black-power-manifesto-for-our-time>.

¹⁸¹ Bureau, U.S. Census. “Moves to and From the South and West Dominate Recent Migration Flows.” The United States Census Bureau, May 23, 2019. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2019/04/moves-from-south-west-dominate-recent-migration-flows.html>.

that between 2005 and 2010, more than two-thirds of Black Americans who moved to a new region within the U.S., settled in the South.¹⁸²

The South is a region that has been warred over for years--both literally and figuratively--as varying groups have sought to claim ownership. Those who fly the blood-stained Confederate flag proudly, do so based upon the argument of claiming their “Southern heritage.” This white supremacist mission to claim the South has been doggedly countered on every end--from the Union army, to organizers today. Queer activists have argued for representation and validation within Southern and rural communities, claiming the South in a more inclusive way. In his book *Exile and Pride*, Eli Clare writes about rural spaces in the Pacific Northwest, though his argument for rural queer representation is relevant here: “I want queer activists to struggle against homophobic violence in rural areas with the same kind of tenacity and creativity we bring to the struggle in urban areas. I want rural, working class, and poor queer people to be leaders in our communities, to shape the ways we will celebrate the 50th anniversary of Stonewall. I want each of us to be able to bring our queerness home.”¹⁸³

The South is always becoming. It remains a battleground for social change, and claims to ownership of the region have always been constant. Despite the tense back-and-forth--an exchange that goes back centuries--progressive Southern organizers are optimistic about the region’s future. They’re optimistic partly because they see a clear and evolving foundation for electoral reforms and social change, but also partly because they see no other option. When it comes to whether or not Democrats and progressives can flip the South, Knoxville City Councilmember Seema Singh, sees no alternative.

¹⁸² Toppo, Greg, and Paul Overberg. “After Nearly 100 Years, Great Migration Begins Reversal.” USA Today. Gannett Satellite Information Network, March 18, 2015.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/02/02/census-great-migration-reversal/21818127/>.

¹⁸³ Clare, Eli. *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation*, 1999.

“We have to,” said Singh. “We have to get the souls of people--of the, quote unquote, common people. We've somehow left them behind. The Democrats have somehow left them behind.”¹⁸⁴ She’s calling for a new approach to the region, much in line with the explorations of progressive messaging, relational organizing, and expanding the electorate that’ve been mentioned throughout this project. Electoral potential exists within the South. The challenges facing Democrats and progressives in the region are daunting, but they must be faced--morally and politically.

Southern organizer Nevin Bulut, had this to say regarding the barriers, and whether or not they can be overcome:

“With my background in Bernie organizing, I'm a big cynic. So, I have no reason to be optimistic about organizing in places where it's tough to get people to even, you know, see value in their vote. But I think it can happen and it is happening. It might be a slow process, and it will be tedious, and it will be hard, but it's definitely on the way to flipping. I think it'll happen in our lifetimes. With things like increased access to voting, and awareness about things outside of electoral politics--increased awareness about more community organization, mutual aid, and just, being good, good neighbors to one another.”¹⁸⁵

Sophia Howard, who organized on Stacey Abrams’ campaign for the Georgia governor’s mansion, views the path ahead as gradual and as involving an increased focus on countering voter suppression and energizing existing Democrats.

“I also agree, I think that we can do it. I'm hopeful--and that might be naive, but I think that that's one of the beautiful things about progressive politics in the United States is that we just keep trying. [...] It's not just gonna happen miraculously. People have to go, and we have to energize the vote and give people access where they haven't been given access before. Georgia is a great example of that. Lots of the things that are happening in Georgia now could not have been done without what Stacey Abrams did. Without a doubt. There's no way that Jon Ossoff would be able to run on the platform that he is currently running on without Stacey

¹⁸⁴ Hicks, Henry, and Seema Singh. Seema Singh Interview. Personal, November 24, 2020.

¹⁸⁵ Hicks, Henry, Sophia Howard, Nevin Bulut, and Whitman Miller. New South Focus Group 2. Personal, October 30, 2020.

Abrams and her support through Fair Fight and the DNC support in the state of Georgia.”¹⁸⁶

This DNC support didn’t come easily. Abrams started her advocacy to flip the state of Georgia in 2013, when she founded the New Georgia Project, which worked to engage and educate overlooked voters within the state. She began this advocacy with little to no out of state support or backing from the state party. In fact, when she launched her 2018 campaign for the governorship, her campaign’s approach of focusing on expanding the electorate was criticized. This party pushback was explored in Maya King’s recent Politico article, “How Stacey Abrams and her band of believers turned Georgia blue.”

“Abrams’ strategy was once rebuffed by the party establishment. Jessica Byrd, a political strategist and lead organizer with the Movement for Black Lives, helped steer Abrams’ 2018 bid as deputy campaign manager. She said the campaign team warned in 2018 that their plan would succeed only if the voters they needed most--largely first-time, young and Black--were not disenfranchised. But the party was unwilling to provide support for the voter protection resources the campaign was seeking. Byrd recalled Democrats characterizing Abrams’ campaign strategy as ‘just crazy.’”¹⁸⁷

In the 2020 presidential election, followed by two US Senate runoff races in 2021, the state of Georgia went for Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden, and elected two Democrats to the United States Senate. This success is in large part due to the bold approach taken by Stacey Abrams and other Southern organizers, who worked using unconventional approaches to flip the state. The Democratic Party should take note. Except for the case of potential massive electoral overhauls, such as abolishing the electoral college, a restructuring of the composition of the United States Senate, and reforms to the Supreme Court bench, Democrats’ loss in the South and in more rural areas within the country will lead to a

¹⁸⁶ Hicks, Henry, Sophia Howard, Nevin Bulut, and Whitman Miller. New South Focus Group 2. Personal, October 30, 2020.

¹⁸⁷ King, Maya. “How Stacey Abrams and Her Band of Believers Turned Georgia Blue.” POLITICO. POLITICO, November 8, 2020. <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/11/08/stacey-abrams-believers-georgia-blue-434985>.

disproportionate nationwide shortage of Democratic representation at the federal level. The party's increasing reliance on urban centers within specific states can almost guarantee eventual losses, given the absence of popular vote value within our current electoral system.¹⁸⁸ The South's present reality is the nation's potential future, and our survival once again runs through Dixie.

Voters, organizers, and activists have long fought to see this progression; and have to play fierce defense against the pendulum of responding to GOP attacks. Since President Biden's election, the Republican party has mobilized to implement laws to make voting harder across the country, but especially in Southern states. As Congressional Democrats move to counter these attacks on voter access through passage of the For the People Act, many within the party have still refused efforts to extend suffrage to incarcerated people, to lower the voting age, and other potential reforms to more radically expand the electorate and empower the silenced.¹⁸⁹

As conditions worsen, and as the Democratic Party's approach has been criticized as not being bold enough, many have contemplated the role of electoral politics in shifting the Southern landscape. The South's legacy is one of direct action; however, its most notable movement--the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s--was in many ways centered around voting rights. Is electoral politics an avenue for liberation, or is it a symbolic avenue, simply offering space to integrate within institutions that cannot be properly reformed? Activist and author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander explores this question of the value of reform work, and moving within existing systems of democracy and justice when striving to achieve transformative change.

¹⁸⁸ Thompson, Derek. "Why Big-City Dominance Is a Problem for Democrats." The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, November 26, 2020.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/11/why-big-city-dominance-problem-democrats/617161/>.

¹⁸⁹ Iannelli, Jerry. "The Fight for People in Prison to Vote Reaches Congress." The Appeal Political Report, March 2, 2021. <https://theappeal.org/politicalreport/congress-voting-from-prison-vote/>.

Alexander examines the shift of racial justice work since the 1960s' Civil Rights Movement. She cautions against an entirely political approach, using *Brown v. Board of Education* as an example of a legal victory that's led to a shift in approach to how we think of doing racial justice work. Her reflections can be applied to speak broadly to the state of political advocacy and progressive organizing, especially with implications on the state of the American South. Alexander claims that "the movement's center of gravity shifted to Washington, D.C. As lawyers and national pundits became more prominent than clients and citizens, we isolated ourselves from the people who were our anchor and on whose behalf we had labored. We not only left people behind; we also lost touch with the moral force at the heart of the movement itself."¹⁹⁰

Alexander would continue that this shift "had profound consequences for the future of racial justice advocacy; in fact, it was debilitating to the movement. Instead of a moral crusade, the movement became an almost purely legal crusade. [...] The law became what the lawyers and lobbyists said it was, with little or no input from the people whose fate hung in the balance."¹⁹¹ In focusing primarily on electoral politics, we've abandoned the heart of our movements--the very people elected officials are sent to Washington to represent. However it is more complicated than that. Alexander would argue that we can't abandon electoral politics and legal work altogether. "*Brown* did not end Jim Crow; a mass movement had to emerge first--one that aimed to create a new public consensus opposed to the evils of Jim Crow. This does not mean that *Brown v. Board* was meaningless, as some commentators have claimed. [...] But standing alone, *Brown* accomplished for African Americans little more than Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation

¹⁹⁰ Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New Press, 2010.

¹⁹¹ Alexander, 226

Proclamation. A civil war had to be waged to end slavery; a mass movement was necessary to bring a formal end to Jim Crow.”¹⁹²

Focusing on electoral politics has value. It’s an undeniable factor in shaping Southerner’s experiences--in a way that is distinct from the rest of the nation. To ignore electoral politics within the South, is to ignore the reality shaping the region's condition. While electoral politics shouldn’t be the primary avenue for seeking to change the Southern condition, attention to electoral politics is critical to reshaping the conditions impacting marginalized people within the South as well as the ground upon which activists can organize. Anti-protesting laws are certainly not exclusive to the South, but when the national attitude towards the region is one of apathy, conservatives within state legislatures can govern with few checks in place. Mass disenfranchisement, an increased police state, and extreme restrictions on the right to protest are direct results of the current state of Southern politics.

I spoke with organizers and elected officials working in the South about their thoughts regarding the value of an electoral focus for achieving social change, and their perspectives were diverse--however, the common theme throughout all answers, was that electoral office does deserve a significant amount of attention and investment, especially within the South, but that more should be done to correspond with it.

“It’s the only way it can be done,” said Knoxville City Council member Seema Singh on focusing on electoral office as an avenue for fighting for change within the South. “I now see from here, it doesn’t matter how many people gather outside and scream. People inside in the chairs are going to do what they feel that they are supposed to do, whichever direction that is. [...] We have to get into the seats.”¹⁹³

¹⁹² Alexander, 235

¹⁹³ Hicks, Henry, and Seema Singh. Seema Singh Interview. Personal, November 24, 2020.

From her position as an elected official, Singh's observations of her colleagues lead her to believe that organizers can only be effective in shifting policy if elected officials are receptive to their demands. Organizers must flip and fill seats if that is to happen. Noah Nordstrom, former organizer on the Marquita Bradshaw for US Senate campaign--and who also spent a stint of time working for the Knoxville City Council Movement that organized around elevating Singh's own candidacy--believes that elected office is a critical avenue to making change, especially in the South. However, Nordstrom, along with other organizers that I spoke with, would emphasize that elected office on its own is not enough.

"I don't think electoral politics is the only solution," said Nordstrom, "and it certainly has its limitations. But, I think it's going to take a combination of both mass movements--on the ground organizing around issues--and mutual aid."¹⁹⁴

Chas Uffelman would agree. To him, an electoral focus for achieving social change in the South is necessary, but limiting. Looking ahead, Uffelman would personally prefer to see more of an emphasis on the role of community organizing and nonprofits in providing direct aid to Southerners. A new brand of Southern politics is one that involves child-care, tutoring programs, food pantries, and more. All this, along with relational organizing and a continued focus on electoral deliverables. This type of work in the long run, he believes, will benefit Democrats in working to change the minds of Republicans and in energizing hesitant Democratic voters. In order to see this shift in focus, Uffelman sees himself exiting the arena of political campaigns:

"The work of the people is the only thing big enough to fix the problems we have. Shifting towards a more movement-focused era, instead of around personalities, is one of the reasons I actually want to get out of electoral politics soon. I'm realizing that organizing around the personality has its limitations, but organizing around a movement, around the issues, is unlimited. [...] I want to work in service-based organizations, because I've found that is a more effective tool of

¹⁹⁴ Hicks, Henry, Charles Uffelman, Rickia Stafford, Henry Walther, and Noah Nordstrom. New South Focus Group 1. Personal, September 21, 2020.

persuasion than electoral politics. I really struggle to get folks who are reluctant Republicans to move over, because they may hate the Democratic brand; or poor moderates to move over, because they hate the progressive brand. [...] In my hometown, I was really involved in my local county party. I worked on the governor's race; but I was also really involved in my church. There were a lot more people I could talk to when we were building an addiction service ministry in my town, in bringing people together and asking them to build community with folks that were hurting than asking moderates and reluctant Republicans to push the button for someone different.”¹⁹⁵

Sophia Howard, a senior at Spelman College and former organizer on the 2018 Stacey Abrams for Governor campaign, similarly does not see herself pursuing a career in electoral politics or in political organizing. However, she would echo the sentiment that electoral politics is an unavoidable factor in determining the state of life within the American South, and that the electoral landscape drastically impacts the ground that organizers stand on when seeking to achieve change outside of electoral politics. The issue of voting rights, and progressive Southerners' access to the ballot is critical in allowing people the ability to make change--within electoral politics and outside of it. She and Nevin Bulut, a former organizer for Bernie Sanders for President and Renee Hoyos for Congress, discussed the need to balance both in a focus group interview.

Howard: “My job was not even to get them to vote for Stacey Abrams, but to figure out how to just allow them to be able to exercise this right [to vote]. That was really, really hard. It was a really hard fight for a lot of the people that I talked to. [...] Several of my friends were turned away from the polls, even though they had their credentials and whatnot. But you know, Brian Kemp is Brian Kemp. [...] And so it was a really unique experience for me. Doing the nonpartisan work after that was very important, as somebody who identifies not so much as like, as a Democrat, but more so as a radical. It was important for me to see what the fight is and the importance of the access.”

Bulut: “They're expending so much energy, just to participate in this one thing that we should be using as a small tool in the grand scheme of actual direct organizing and direct action. I just think it's really unfortunate. I don't know how to balance it without changing the access. [...] All the counties surrounding us are very rural, and have dealt with a lot of things, especially in light of the current

¹⁹⁵ Hicks, Henry, Charles Uffelman, Rickia Stafford, Henry Walther, and Noah Nordstrom. New South Focus Group 1. Personal, September 21, 2020.

pandemic. Things like rural hospital closures, or people not having access to broadband, or just the internet in general. It's a big struggle for people going to school, sending their kids to school and not being able to choose online options. But then, these people don't even have an option to use the ballot as a way to try to make some sort of material gains and try to get some type of progress. And like you said, Sophia, I don't align myself as much as a Democrat. I distance myself from that label as much as I can, and I align with much more radical ideology; but in terms of organizing in the South and in rural areas, a lot of people need voting as that tool just to make some material advances."¹⁹⁶

Bulut and Howard's conversation on voter access, and the importance of recognizing the imbalanced playing field for Southern organizers is critical to the conversation regarding the advantages and drawbacks of focusing on electoral politics for achieving progressive goals, as well as emphasizing the reality for those in often overlooked rural communities. As self-described radicals, they see voter access as being an important part of empowering people. Using the electoral avenue strategically allows activists to change the foundation upon which they can organize. Without addressing the far-right elected officials within the South who are, through their positions as elected officials, empowered to institute anti-protesting laws, voter suppression, and an expanded police state, community organizers will be stuck in a sort of purgatory, rallying against a state that is plenty comfortable knee-capping them with no significant pushback or outrage beyond the state's limited borders--especially considering national apathy towards the Southern condition.

Southern organizers are well-versed in this balance of community work, and electoral organizing. Voting rights and racial justice organizers have testified before legislative committees against problematic bills, and spent time organizing to unseat GOP representatives and senators. They've balanced this work with developing mutual aid programming, organizing marches and die-ins, setting up community meals, and more. However, many are doing this work alone, with

¹⁹⁶ Hicks, Henry, Sophia Howard, Nevin Bulut, and Whitman Miller. New South Focus Group 2. Personal, October 30, 2020.

no investment in year-long canvassing programs or off-cycle organizing from the Democratic Party or political campaigns. Only recently, and under the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and February 2021's winter storms, have campaigns modified their approach to tend to the needs of voters, as opposed to asking for their vote every couple years.¹⁹⁷

According to Henry Walther, engagement in the democratic process has been commonly reduced to showing up to cast a ballot every four years--presumably in presidential elections--with no follow up. Walther thinks that attention to our electoral process is important, especially showing up during local and state elections, but also believes that more can be done. Walther would argue for more imaginative thinking, pairing together electoral politics and community organizing in a new approach to political engagement.

“I think we need to redefine what democracy means.[...] So many people treat politics and democracy as every four years. We go out, and we cast a vote, and then we go home, and then we cross our fingers, and hope for the best. But that's such an ahistorical and limited view of what democracy is. It's a very active, ongoing, participatory, liberating, and an engaging process. We just ceded so much ground where it's just so limited. We put so much emphasis on our representatives and elected officials, when democracy is practiced in the streets with Black Lives Matter. It's practiced in local faith communities. It's practiced when you're talking to your neighbors about your lives. Democracy is the expression of our interests, and desires, and having the power to actually enact them and put in changes. [...] We're the Democratic Party. In terms of words like democracy, we can rebrand that into something new. [...] We have the election and we have more. But at the same time, I think we still have to invest in electoral politics, but we need to radically shift the power of how much attention we put towards electoral politics versus other stuff. It needs to be very holistic.”¹⁹⁸

Walther's perspective is in line with Michelle Alexander's analysis in *The New Jim Crow*. Alexander goes: “The foregoing should not be read as a call to movement building to the exclusion of reform work. Reform work *is* the work of movement building, provided that it is

¹⁹⁷ Siders, David. “Texas Disaster Puts Beto O'Rourke Back in Business.” POLITICO. POLITICO, February 24, 2021. <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/02/24/beto-orourke-texas-governor-471254>.

¹⁹⁸ Hicks, Henry, Charles Uffelman, Rickia Stafford, Henry Walther, and Noah Nordstrom. New South Focus Group 1. Personal, September 21, 2020.

done consciously *as* movement building work.”¹⁹⁹ This is what Chas Uffleman means when he says that approaches to electoral politics must expand. In this new South, with a new brand of politics, and with new approaches to the constituencies of the region, electoral campaigning is done in parity with community-based organizing.

This work requires imagination. It requires attention to voter access, to intentional organizing tactics, and to empowering local community organizers. It requires rethinking concepts of democracy, civic engagement, and political participation. In order to see a new South, we have to demonstrate a commitment towards re-envisioning a region that has been so rigidly defined, exclusionary in its interpretation, and fought over for centuries. The South has been a theater of war, the site of uprisings--both admirable and abominable. Each great American movement has flowed through the South, as have national tales of romance and tragedy. Claims to ownership of this region have always been constant, but what we’ve done is forfeit in the fight, leaving behind my brothers and sisters to fend for themselves. The South is very much still a battleground--socially and electorally. We just have to get back in the fight.

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The term “new South,” has been recently adopted by Democrats running in Southern campaigns. Candidates from Charles Booker, to Raphael Warnock, to Jamie Harrison have used the term in referring to their electoral odds and to the potential for the region that it represents. However historically, the term has a more regressive meaning, falling into the lexicon in the aftermath of the Civil War and abolition of slavery. James C. Cobb in his book *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* explains the origins of the term:

“It’s proponents vowed to use industrial development to northerize their region’s economy while doing their best to restore and then to uphold the most definitely ‘southern’ ideals of the Old South, especially its racial, political, and class

¹⁹⁹ Alexander, 235

hierarchies. Defeated and embittered, southern whites drew determination and hope from the New South's promises of an affluent golden age just ahead."²⁰⁰

Sophia Howard pointed this out in a focus group interview. "The times in which that phraseology has been used have been very important periods of time that were dominated by white supremacy,"²⁰¹ Howard said, referring to moments of unfulfilled promises in American history. "New South" emerged after the Civil War, when the promise of unamended emancipation, forty acres, and a mule were promised to Black Americans. Notably, these promises were not kept and the offerings were never delivered. Howard thinks that our current moment in time, amidst a global pandemic and a national reckoning with racial injustices, is similar in its magnitude and in its potential.

"This pandemic has been such an interesting thing, because all of the things in terms of the way that resources are distributed, like when we're talking about the stimulus checks and things like that--all of these things, for hundreds of years, the United States has said they are unable--not unwilling--but unable to give to American citizens; and they were given. I think that's a very important moment. People need to remember that. That must not be erased from our collective consciousness. Because these things are possible. They're possible. We've been convinced over and over again that there's just no way, [...] and then during this pandemic, by God, I mean, that's what they did, right? [...] But the South could be such a magical place. And to me, the South is honestly a magical place for all of its flaws or whatever. But I love it, because it's so constantly energized with this historical legacy of change. [...] And so for me, the South looks like being visible as what it's always been. It's always been there. It's always had this amazing potential."²⁰²

Whereas the old "new South" refers to a maintenance of white supremacy and political regression, the new South that progressives today envision, is one of social justice, equity, and inclusion. This work requires imagining what is possible, as all liberation work does. However, the South's redemption does lie within its history, too. Mississippi residents organized after

²⁰⁰ Cobb, 68

²⁰¹ Hicks, Henry, Sophia Howard, Nevin Bulut, and Whitman Miller. New South Focus Group 2. Personal, October 30, 2020.

²⁰² Hicks, Henry, Sophia Howard, Nevin Bulut, and Whitman Miller. New South Focus Group 2. Personal, October 30, 2020.

government inaction in response to Hurricane Katrina.²⁰³ Those living in Southern states mobilized to develop infrastructure for mutual aid during February 2021's winter storms.²⁰⁴ Environmental activists in Memphis have organized for years around a mounting water supply crisis.²⁰⁵ This history is recent, it's rich, and it's complicated. While the South has historically been ground zero for mounting activism, the region also claims exclusion and tragedy that's often triggered these organizing responses. When envisioning a new South, recognizing this history honestly and facing it head-on is critical, according to Chas Uffleman.

“In the 30s and 40s, the South got a ton of investment in the New Deal, creating real public infrastructure. They moved literal mountains to create an electric grid infrastructure in the Tennessee Valley. [...] We created a ton of jobs that lifted a lot of people out of poverty who were almost exclusively white people. So, I want to see that kind of investment that's going to actually be just, and that's going to be corrective, and that's going to lift up communities. I mean, with [the Tennessee Valley Authority], they didn't just want electricity for the South. They wanted to lift rural Southern towns out of poverty. And a lot of them did. The town I grew up in did--but my town is 94% white. At the time, the people that worked at the plant were 100% white. I want to see us give that same level of energy and investment in Black communities and new American communities.”²⁰⁶

A new South must pull from its history--recognizing the large strides we've taken as a region, and how those particular moments in time did--or could have--impacted us all for the better. This new South must be inclusive. It must be recognized and practiced as being a home for people of color, queer and trans people, women, rural folks, disabled people, and others.

Those who historically have been most targeted by conservative lashings must be brought into

²⁰³ Costley, Drew. “15 Years After Katrina, a Fight Against 'the Jim Crow of Climate Change' Rages on in the Gulf Coast.” Medium. OneZero, January 15, 2020. <https://onezero.medium.com/15-years-after-katrina-a-fight-against-the-jim-crow-of-climate-change-rages-on-in-the-gulf-coast-d2690bc1cbab>.

²⁰⁴ Siders, David. “Texas Disaster Puts Beto O'Rourke Back in Business.” POLITICO. POLITICO, February 24, 2021. <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/02/24/beto-orourke-texas-governor-471254>.

²⁰⁵ Elliot, Stephen. “What's next for Marquita Bradshaw.” Nashville Post, February 15, 2021. <https://www.nashvillepost.com/politics/elections/article/21146015/whats-next-for-marquita-bradshaw>.

²⁰⁶ Hicks, Henry, Charles Uffelman, Rickia Stafford, Henry Walther, and Noah Nordstrom. New South Focus Group 1. Personal, September 21, 2020.

the picture--and not just socially, but in who we center when we approach political issues and organizing.

“When I think of the new South, I think of it being inclusive,” said Kia Stafford, a former organizer with Georgia’s Organizing Corps 2020. “I’m not talking like the basic dictionary definition inclusive. I’m talking about everything that we talked about in this call actually being brought into action.”²⁰⁷

Tequila Johnson and Charlane Oliver’s visions of a new South centers around inclusivity as well, especially as it relates to Black Southerners, who have found a home in the South, though have historically and contemporary been most targeted.

Johnson: “Freedom. That’s my explanation. Freedom. Freedom and self determination. [...] Freedom for Black people to just show up and be Black, to just exist in our natural state, to be able to enjoy the things that we enjoy doing. To not have our culture used against us. To not be perceived a certain way because we’re from the South and we have an accent or because we prefer hip hop music over jazz, or whatever the case may be. I think we’ve been categorized, and we’ve been boxed into so many different stereotypes, that we’ve never had the opportunity to just explore what it means to be free and just exist without feeling like you have to look at things, breathe, move a certain way. You know what I mean?”

Oliver: “Yeah. I would echo that. I would say freedom too. I was watching over the Thanksgiving break, *Lovecraft Country*. [...] I was just looking around the scene, and it was like an all-Black community. The town was all-Black. I was just like, man, can you just imagine what it’s like to just be in a city of all Black things, all Black people? Like your car mechanic is Black, your grocery store is Black, and just the utopia of that. I just think back to Reconstruction where Black people were thriving and had their own shit and were left alone. If you just leave Black people alone--like just leave us the fuck alone and let us do what we do and have our cultural currency and thrive in that. That’s what I see as what the South could be like--leave us the fuck alone. Let us thrive. Let us have our own shit, and be free. Let us be Black. They came and burned our stuff down. We weren’t messing with nobody.”²⁰⁸

²⁰⁷ Hicks, Henry, Charles Uffelman, Rickia Stafford, Henry Walther, and Noah Nordstrom. New South Focus Group 1. Personal, September 21, 2020.

²⁰⁸ Hicks, Henry, Charlane Oliver, and Tequila Johnson. Tequila Johnson and Charlane Oliver Interview. Personal, December 2, 2020.

This emphasis on the new South as being a haven for Black folks is not ahistoric, in its ambition. James Cobb writes in *Away Down South* that “before integration there had been ‘vibrant black communities all over the South,’” explaining that “you had black doctors living next door to black postal workers and institutions like the church were very active and powerful. Now you have people coming back and recognizing that these communities served a purpose.”²⁰⁹

Sophia Howard would argue that taking an approach to Southern redemption that centers Black people and people of color, is a clear avenue towards elevating the entire region: “It's really clear in history, and it's really clear in sociology and in anthropology that when you when you center the most marginalized in the community, everybody is free. Everybody is free. Nobody is left behind when you center the most marginalized.”²¹⁰

It's this philosophy that shapes Noah Nordstrom's vision of a new South, as well. Nordstrom said, “to me the new South looks like a new Southern Strategy, like a lot of what Charles Booker talks about. From the inner city, to the holler, to the country, to all the different diverse places we've been talking about. A new solidarity politics that refuses to divide us up by sexuality, and gender, and race, and all these things that have been used to put wedges in our communities. Really coming together, fighting for dignity for everybody. I think that long term strategy can really bring the different constituencies of the South together.”²¹¹

The South is an incredibly diverse region, home to many marginalized groups. Making space for one another, celebrating diversity, and prioritizing justice for all people will be key towards shaping a new South. The Democratic Party can be a part of this shift in redefining the region, expanding the bounds of Southern associations to recognize the communities of color

²⁰⁹ Cobb, 278

²¹⁰ Hicks, Henry, Sophia Howard, Nevin Bulut, and Whitman Miller. New South Focus Group 2. Personal, October 30, 2020.

²¹¹ Hicks, Henry, Charles Uffelman, Rickia Stafford, Henry Walther, and Noah Nordstrom. New South Focus Group 1. Personal, September 21, 2020.

that have always been there, have always organized there, and who call the South “home.” As political progressives gain national influence, and as the country moves further along with an overdue, renewed sense of energy in the fight for racial justice, many hope to see the South be on the forefront of that progress. Whit Miller said that he wants “people from outside to look at the South as a beacon of progressive change; as like, ‘oh, that's the place to be. That's where the big work's being done. That's where a lot of the big change is happening.’ And it is. It is, and I want them to recognize it for that.”²¹²

When prompted with the question “when you envision a new South, what do you imagine?” Henry Walther had this to say: “I'm gonna choose three words: equitable, sustainable, and community-centered is what I envision a new South being. Especially the rising threats of climate change, white supremacy, fascism, and all the other stuff going on--being the leader in the response to that.”²¹³

This is possible. The new South that these organizers see and aspire to, can emerge. We have to reject the narrative that the South is stuck in a state of conservatism, that it's immovable from its current state, and that its legacy is only one of bigotry and of trauma. We have to view the South through an honest, holistic lens. We must see the communities of color, the queer and trans folks, the women, the environmentalists, the working class organizers as being just as Southern as bluegrass and grits.

“We have to redefine what we think of as possible,” said organizer Nevin Bulut. “I can tie this back to electoral stuff in organizing with the [Renee Hoyos] campaign. Literally every single day on the phone, someone tells me, ‘oh, I'll vote for her, but she won't win,’ or ‘she can't win,’

²¹² Hicks, Henry, Sophia Howard, Nevin Bulut, and Whitman Miller. New South Focus Group 2. Personal, October 30, 2020.

²¹³ Hicks, Henry, Charles Uffelman, Rickia Stafford, Henry Walther, and Noah Nordstrom. New South Focus Group 1. Personal, September 21, 2020.

or ‘a Democrat can't win here.’ Because again, it is the longest Republican-held district in the entire country. No Democrat has won here since literally over 150 years ago. So, it's hard not to think of certain things as impossible and unattainable--but they definitely are. [...] When we energize each other, and when we maintain that hope, and when we feel like we can do these things, and actually work towards them, it can happen. We just need to take away that barrier of telling ourselves that certain things will never happen.”²¹⁴

In his 2007 speech at the Iowa Democratic Party’s Jefferson-Jackson Dinner, during the primary season of his first campaign for President of the United States, then-Senator Barack Obama would say that “if we are really serious about winning this election, Democrats, we can’t live in fear of losing it. This party--the party of Jefferson and Jackson; of Roosevelt and Kennedy--has always made the biggest difference in the lives of the American people when we led, not by polls, but by principle; not by calculation, but by conviction; when we summoned the entire nation to a common purpose--a higher purpose.”²¹⁵

For so long, the South has been written off as being as immobile, disgraceful, and a reminder of our nation’s regrettable flaws. However, like Obama stated, we have to remain committed to imagining a new America, and a new South, in which those “left behind” are recognized and empowered. We must allow our moral imperative to drive us, and a commitment to overlooked Southern communities--particularly Southerners of color--is certainly urgent enough. As shown through this thesis, that envisioning and corresponding work is already being done by Southern organizers. However, progressive organizations and campaigns are beginning

²¹⁴ Hicks, Henry, Sophia Howard, Nevin Bulut, and Whitman Miller. New South Focus Group 2. Personal, October 30, 2020.

²¹⁵ Berry, Mary Frances, and Josh Gottheimer. “Power in Words: the Stories behind Barack Obama's Speeches, from the State House to the White House.” Beacon, September 6, 2011. <https://www.amazon.com/Power-Words-Stories-behind-Speeches/dp/0807001694>.

to notice and follow through with the work of voter engagement and community care. It only begins in Georgia.

We *can* win when we remain committed to forging a path towards victory. However, Democrats and progressives cannot become complacent because of what’s happened this past election cycle. The Democratic Party’s stunning victories in Georgia, delivering the White House and control of the US Senate, will certainly have a ripple effect throughout the region, and will impact national rhetoric surrounding what is possible. However, we can’t get lazy here.

Democrats control both chambers of Congress and have a hold on the White House. Maintaining Georgia, and flipping Texas, might be the game plan moving forward--a collection of Texas’s 38 electoral college votes would certainly be a comforting prize--but, we must not lose sight of the moral imperative. Democrats cannot claim to be the party of John Lewis if we do not tend to the people of Selma, Alabama; of Nashville, Tennessee; and of Jackson, Mississippi.

This new South will not come easily. It will not come overnight, either. Stacey Abrams, in her book *Our Time Is Now*, speaks on the need to value gradual change, especially when recognizing the path ahead for the South. “I learned long ago that winning doesn’t always mean you get the prize. Sometimes you get progress, and that counts.”²¹⁶ This sentiment is echoed by Cliff Albright, one of the co-founders of Black Voters Matter in Georgia, who said that “one of the most important victories in [Georgia] isn’t the presidential, but it’s the fact that Jackie Johnson is no longer the district attorney that covers the region where Ahmaud Arbery was murdered.”²¹⁷

²¹⁶ Abrams, 6

²¹⁷ Changa, Anoa. “Grassroots Organizers Flipped Georgia Blue. Here's How They Did It.” Truthout. Truthout, November 12, 2020. <https://truthout.org/articles/grassroots-organizers-flipped-georgia-blue-heres-how-they-did-it/>.

A new South, new in our approach and new in its deliverables, is possible. It's seen by the organizers and the candidates living there; it's visible to my family whose roots are buried deep in Southern soil; it's the unfinished project of those martyrs whose bold foresight attracted further violence and persecution. Through intentional organizing, consistent investment, and a return to our history in leading the nation in demands for progress, we can unlock the potential of the American South, and leave no one behind this time around. This American battleground is still in play.

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