

POLITICS  
AND  
RELIGION  
IN THE  
WHITE  
SOUTH

Edited by

GLENN FELDMAN



THE UNIVERSITY PRESS OF KENTUCKY

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# Introduction

*Glenn Feldman*

There are few, if any, subjects that hold more intrinsic interest than the relationship between politics and religion: how religion affects, and is affected by, political thought and behavior. The interplay between the two, both capable of eliciting the most intense of emotions, may be found in virtually all time periods and every imaginable setting. That said, there is perhaps no area of the United States where this intersection is more important—both in daily life and at the ballot box—than the American South.

The South has always been a special place. The history of the South is the history of a place where adherence to courtesy and formal manners coexists with the most shocking outbursts of violence and the settlement of personal differences by resort to physical force; where a slower and easier pace of life is found alongside the most intense and passionate forms of religious and political expression; where a region blessed by bountiful natural resources and stunning physical beauty is beset by pockets of abject poverty, one-crop agriculture, systemic economic problems, and a stubborn strain of anti-intellectualism and indifference to the public and private advantages of education; where the personal warmth of the people and their capacity for private charity and goodwill is outmatched only by a staggering and unquestioning faith in the tenets of “rugged individualism,” *laissez-faire*, and even variants of the most callous forms of Social Darwinism. This is the South—all of these things, and more. It is a place of profound contradiction and, beneath its sunny exterior, of often the most serious struggle and tension between varying allegiances, competing philosophies, and divergent worldviews. Perhaps no other place in the nation is as inherently interesting a setting to study the ancient and ongoing interplay between spiritual beliefs and values, and *realpolitik*.

This book is an attempt to get at the intersection of politics and religion

in the South. It is not an effort to cover all of the denominations in Southern history equally, nor is it an attempt to explore every manifestation of theological belief that has existed in the region. Some of the choices and inclusion of chapters are, necessarily, the product of the availability and, more importantly, the *willingness* of expert students of history, politics, and religion to participate. That said, denominations other than just Baptists and Methodists are included. There is a full chapter on Jews. Jews, as well as Catholics, are studied in important ways in a number of chapters. Smaller Protestant denominations—Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Disciples of Christ, Church of Christ, and others—are represented, as are more fundamentalist and charismatic sects: Holiness Pentecostal, Assembly of God, Church of God.

The book adopts an interdisciplinary approach, to an extent, yet is first and foremost a work of history. Eight of the twelve chapters are authored by historians. Even the few that are not include distinguishable elements of historical perspective, outlook, and research. But the goal was to examine how religion and politics have interacted in the South over time, not necessarily to adhere to the strict disciplinary boundaries of a single avenue of inquiry. In the spirit of believing that other academic disciplines have something useful to say to historians (and vice versa)—economics, sociology, anthropology, demography, literature, psychology, to name a few—four of the chapters, mostly those dealing with recent events, are contributed by political scientists.

The essays in this book, taken as a whole, strongly suggest that in the South, religion has worked hand in hand with political and social conservatism. The region's politics have, in turn, reflected its fundamentally conservative religious temperament. The relationship is not absolute; it is not unchanging. Nor has it gone unchallenged, at times even successfully, in the region's history. Yet, on balance, in the South, religion and political conservatism have been allies far more often than enemies. They have done much more than merely exist alongside each other. They have been mutually supportive and cooperative along with the other major historical factors of causation—a point explored more fully in the book's final chapter. Allegiance to party has been fleeting and ephemeral in the South—another point discussed in the final chapter, and alluded to as well in the chapter by Natalie M. Davis. *Partisan* change, though, should not be confused for *political* change—at least where the white South is concerned. Parties come and parties go, but conservatism has been forever.

The political party that most successfully positions itself as the “conservative” party is the party that will, odds are, day in and day out, win the

South—which, up until the past few decades, has meant exclusively the white South. This has been the case for over a century and a half. It is not less true today.

A number of the essays in this collection make clear the extent of this conservative religious victory in the world of Southern politics. Fred Arthur Bailey's elegant opening chapter explores Southern Baptist racial ideology during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and in the process does much to delineate what have been enduring ties between racial conservatism and related regional orthodoxies in politics, morality, and economics. Politics, morality, and race, although intellectually separable in the South, and more practically divorceable in other regions, have a long history of interconnectedness and overlap in Southern mind, manners, and sensibilities—an indelible relationship that resonates strongly into the present. Bailey's chapter does much to explain how upper-class domination of what passed for official religion coalesced seamlessly with political, racial, and moral orthodoxy, and how it influenced important policy matters on such issues as lynching, disfranchisement, employment, law, and education, especially for blacks. Paul Harvey's examination of the Southern Baptist Convention from 1945 to 1990 traces the evolution of the SBC, the largest and probably most representative denominational institution in the South. Harvey's insightful exposition reveals that "although forces associated with the Religious Right decisively lost the battle over civil rights, they won the larger cultural war for the soul of white Southern believers." In a partisan sense, this victory took the form of the modern Republican Party. In a denominational sense, according to Harvey, it meant the "complete rout" of the moderates by the conservatives in the SBC.

James L. Guth echoes and extends Harvey's analysis through the 2000 elections and elaborates on what he terms the "deeply conservative" ideology of Southern Baptists. Guth evaluates this ideology as historically "usually buttressing the social, racial, and political status quo" in the Southern states. Even during the vaunted era of Southern progressivism, Guth stipulates, the Social Gospel made "relatively few inroads among Southern Baptist ministers." The civil rights movement captivated a few college professors and institutional leaders associated with what Guth calls the "Established Church" in the South but did not resonate with the bulk of white clergy and laity. Perhaps most intriguing in the Guth piece is his discussion of a "civic gospel" that has recently appealed to the most conservative, "dispensationalist" clergy—traditionally among the most other-worldly and politically abstinent. This "new social theology," like the old Social Gospel, summons clerics

to political action, only from the most conservative outlook and temperament. Political activism, according to this new theology, is mandated to clerics as an affirmative duty to prevent the continued “slide of American society down and away from its Christian origins toward a new, secular, and sinful identity.” This kind of theological mandate is clearly present in Ted Ownby’s treatment of Donald Wildmon and his “confrontational ministry” against what he considers to be gratuitous sex, nudity, indecency, and anti-Christian bias in various forms of the “liberal” American media.

Several other essays in this collection echo the theme of conservative religious/political predominance in the American South. Charles S. Bullock III and Mark C. Smith outline a theory they call “core constituency” that further explicates the relationship between conservative theology and politics in the South. Bullock and Smith offer intriguing insights into the relationship of political parties, specifically the GOP, with their core conservative religious supporters. Their study highlights the ongoing balancing act that often takes place between the interests and goals of religious/social conservatives and cosmopolitan Republicans moved more by secular, economic conservatism than moral issues. They examine the problems candidates sometimes have in appealing to a religiously conservative core in the party primary without jeopardizing mainstream, swing-vote support in the November general election. The essay conveys two very important lessons that have a great deal of relevance to recent politics. To be successful politically, Republican candidates have learned, through trial and error, to keep religious and social differences, where they do exist, as quiet as possible within party ranks—a lesson that seems not to have been lost on Religious Right activists who rallied early and almost unanimously to a presidential candidate not so publicly associated with the Christian Right, yet a man they thought had the pedigree, organization, and financing to win in 2000. Republicans have learned, as well, to aid their own success by encouraging members of the Religious Right to get behind the full gamut of the party platform—including planks of an economic conservatism that do not always hold as much strong intrinsic appeal, and even less biblical justification.

This second lesson is explored in my chapter on women and the Ku Klux Klan as well as in the book’s final chapter. The discussion there mentions the tendency of many Catholics in the South, increasingly since 1973, to allow the abortion question to serve as the “Eclipse Issue”: one capable of compelling allegiance to the GOP on a whole array of economic issues because the party has successfully positioned itself, first and foremost in the

minds of Catholics, as the defender of “life” against Democratic “baby killers.” The same obsession with abortion furnishes a “get out of jail free card” to American Catholics—evident in the South more than any other region—a kind of papal dispensation from having to know anything about, or pay attention to, economic issues and the traditional Catholic concerns of poverty, social justice, capital punishment, war, and worker exploitation.<sup>1</sup> As famed Irish-Catholic New York journalist Jimmy Breslin recently noted, under Pope John Paul II, the Catholic Church has four major concerns: “abortion, abortion, abortion, and Poland.”<sup>2</sup>

The more fundamental issue, in both the KKK chapter and the final chapter, deals with the question of the power of a “politics of emotion” as opposed to a “politics of reason” in determining voter behavior—and the recent ascendance of what may be termed the “new racism”: the replacement of overt racist appeals by religious and moral judgmentalism as the primary emotional issue that can move masses of Southern whites to vote for economically elitist policies. Other chapters touch on various aspects of the problem. Paul Harvey realizes that the ascendant right wing of the SBC, although specifically rejecting segregation in the here and now, can trace their lineage and “forebears” to the old anti-civil rights guard of the denomination. He argues that today, white supremacy has largely been replaced by “gendered hierarchies.”

Two studies—Mark J. Rozell and Clyde Wilcox’s on Virginia and Natalie M. Davis’s on Alabama—analyze the relationship between politics and religion on a state level. Davis discusses the conflict between liberalism and conservatism, what she terms “modernism versus fundamentalism,” in terms of a metaphor—the Mercedes Culture versus the Pine Tree Culture—and muses that party might no longer be the “driving force in American politics”; instead, it might be replaced by religion. Rozell and Wilcox examine Virginia politics in the last several decades and conclude, much like Bullock and Smith, that a Christian Right politics can be, and has been, successful at the polls, but it does have its limits. It tends to falter electorally if waged with utter impunity and a heavy-handed lack of finesse. In Virginia, until the early 1990s, Democratic candidates were able to win state elections largely by tying conservative Christian Republicans to the “extremism” of the Virginia-based activist ministries of the Moral Majority’s Jerry Falwell and the Christian Coalition’s Pat Robertson—themselves rivals. But no more. Although the state has been home to, at one time or another, many of the nation’s leading Christian Right activists—among them Ralph Reed, Richard Viguerie, Oliver North, and Paul Weyrich—Religious Right politics in



the Old Dominion has learned to flourish only by having its preferred candidates demonstrate a willingness to compromise and by shrewdly emphasizing the most popular parts of their conservative agenda—that is, advocacy of a moment of silence at the beginning of the school day as opposed to the teaching of evolution; calling for a ban on partial-birth abortions and public funding for abortion as opposed to a blanket ban or criminalization of the practice, even for the victims of rape and incest.

The essays in this volume, much like the history of the South more broadly, are not unqualified or unanimous in their judgments. To do so would be to imply that the South is a monolith, and it is certainly not that. Several deal with what may be called minority currents. Mark K. Bauman's chapter explores the heavy Jewish involvement in the factional city politics surrounding Atlanta from the end of the Civil War through the Progressive Era. In the essay, "Jewishness" is as much a cultural phenomenon as a religious one. Atlanta's "German Jews," principally mid-nineteenth-century immigrants from Germany and Austria, emerge as well-established, politically and commercially savvy, and successful in the department store and dry goods businesses, the banking industry, textile manufacturing, and other mercantile activities. Bauman also conveys considerable tension between older German Jews and newer, poorer, Russian Jews emigrating from southern and eastern Europe. The German Jews are ambivalent about the newcomers: they are embarrassed by their poverty and customs, anxious about losing their hard-won accepted status by being lumped in with the newcomers, yet empathetic to the plight of fellow Jews—a dynamic that has parallels to the present-day tension between new Mexican and Latino immigrants and older, established, often comfortable and conservative Hispanics from Cuba and South America. Perhaps most interesting is the political and economic conservatism of the established and dominant (among Atlanta's Jewry) German Jews. They are quite active in urban politics and consistently ally themselves with the city's older industrial and commercial business conservatives against organized labor. Here, religion—or, more accurately, the business-friendly side of Jewish culture—contributes to the furtherance of conservatism.<sup>3</sup> Tensions exist throughout the period between the German Jews and both labor unions and blacks.

Chapters by Andrew M. Manis and Steven P. Miller more self-consciously address the liberal and progressive potentialities of Southern religion. Yet both also recognize, and perhaps make even clearer, the limits and uniqueness of that kind of activism in the Southern past. Manis's story of Dorothy Tilly and her Methodist women's Fellowship of the Concerned is truly in-

spiring. Tilly exemplified her Christian faith and the social reform potential of Wesleyan tradition of Protestantism to its fullest. She lived a life that encouraged and fostered change, racial toleration, and inclusiveness while exhibiting a sensitivity to her region's people and the difficulty that people in any time and place often have living up to the rhetoric of their national ideals and the better angels of their nature. Tilly nudged white Southerners to do the right thing on race relations much as a mother might encourage her children, as painful as it might be, to do the right thing—hence Manis's adoption of Jessie Ash Arndt's moniker of "city mothers" for Tilly and her group. Miller's essay deals with a more moderate, yet more famous, white Southerner: Billy Graham. In his chapter, Miller explores Graham's efforts, sometimes dramatic, to encourage the South to peacefully accept the demise of racial segregation as part of his perennial emphasis on individual personal conversion, salvation, a personal relationship with Christ, decency, civility, moderation, and God's desire for law and order here on earth.

Yet both essays, and others, recognize the exceptionalism and the limits of even this kind of religious progressivism in the Southern experience. Graham, in particular, comes across as little more than a moderate in Miller's estimation. At times he is defensive about Southerners and their customs, never missing an opportunity to conflate militant segregationists and civil rights advocates as one and the same type of "extremist"; he advises Martin Luther King Jr. and others not to push too far or too fast; reminds people that race is a national, not peculiarly Southern, problem; and he denounces Northern hypocrisy and racial extremism on both sides from a place he thought was squarely in the middle of the controversy. More than that, though, Miller effectively evaluates Graham as a white Southerner who became a national and even global figure whose commitment to the demise of racial segregation had much to do with the realization that his credibility on the national and international stages could never survive a defense of his native region's reactionary racial customs. Perhaps most troubling about Graham's career in this regard, though, is his activist role in aiding and abetting Richard Nixon's "Southern Strategy," including playing an important role in the 1970 defeat of Tennessee senator Al Gore Sr. by Republican Bill Brock—a campaign in which Republican manipulation of the race issue hurt Gore badly. Although Graham is to be commended for his public stand against segregation when most of the white South did not approve, including his insistence on racially integrated crusades, it is difficult to believe that anyone with Graham's intellect could not have known that the Nixon strat-

egy appealed to white supremacists in the South on a veiled and muted, yet still very real, level. Andrew Manis, meanwhile, openly acknowledges that the pro-*Brown* decision statements of some Southern Methodist bishops were a “minority view” among the lay faithful, that a great deal of the Methodist rank and file was pro-segregation, and that Dorothy Tilly and her group represented not the mainstream, but “the most progressive element in the white South.” Prominent Methodist white supremacists such as Georgia’s Rebecca Latimer Felton, of the Holiness movement, and Alabama’s Hugo Locke, jurist, political operative, and Methodist deacon, furnish a stark counterpoint to the example of Dorothy Tilly. Both Paul Harvey and Steven Miller also comment on the notable gulf between some Protestant denominational leaders in the wake of *Brown* and a markedly more reactionary Southern white laity of deacons and others who practiced a folk (in Harvey’s words) “theology of segregationism.”

Two recent books—both of them very good—have done much to swing the recent historiographical center of gravity toward the proposition that Southern religion should be viewed, basically, as a force for liberal reform. Charles Marsh’s *God’s Long Summer* looks compellingly at the role of evangelical religion in providing meaning and inspiration for some of the civil rights movement’s most notable figures. David L. Chappell argues in *A Stone of Hope* that the white South never did fashion a strong, organized, coherent defense of segregation from the point of view of religious theology, unlike its experience during the antebellum abolition crisis.<sup>4</sup> Although both books are important works that have much of value to offer, there is the very real danger that their arguments, taken together, might morph into a kind of misleading generalization by less than careful readers—and the overlooking of a couple of realities about the South that remain unchanged *even if* the central arguments of both books are accepted. First, when Marsh and Chappell speak of the potential for religion to inform Southern progressivism, they are speaking, predominantly, of *black-led* and Northern liberal reform—not that of white Southerners. Both books spend much time and energy on the central role of religion as a catalyst for the modern civil rights movement, but the vast bulk of this tie between progressive reform and theology deals with African Americans and their understanding of evangelical religion. Chappell’s argument about the lack of a strong, cohesive, and organized religious defense of segregation from white Southerners also actually focuses on the elites who made up church leadership in the pulpits and denominations. What is left unsaid is that folk religion among ordinary whites was an undeniably powerful buttress for “massive resistance” and the de-

fense of white supremacy. Church leaders may have been reluctant to engage the question directly from a religious standpoint, and a good number even ventured varying degrees of support for desegregation. But there is much in the Southern past to suggest that the rank and file of white Southern believers did not construct an elaborate religious defense of white supremacy *precisely because* it already functioned at a perfectly adequate level. Why bother to create and formalize something that was already so powerful and pervasive as part of a less formal folk religion? After all, white Southerners failed in the defense of their “way of life” because they were overwhelmed by black direct-action and federal intervention, not because they somehow suffered a failure of religious resolve to carry on.

The essays also make clear the sometimes very heavy “social penalty for nonconformity,” as Paul Harvey calls it, of bucking the predominant regional conservatism. Harvey writes of such people as Georgia’s Joseph Rabun, a Baptist minister and Marine Corps combat veteran, driven from his pulpit for criticizing Eugene Talmadge’s defense of the white primary. Andrew Manis tells of the necessity for Dorothy Tilly and her Fellowship of the Concerned to use secrecy to deal with the Southern white majority’s fury at having laws changed from outside their region, an outrage that channeled itself against her husband’s business prospects and social standing. Mrs. Tilly herself, as Southern as she could possibly be, found herself denounced as an “outside agitator,” an abettor of “Socialism and Communism . . . not worthy to live in the South,” and a “cheap publicity seeker and nigger lover” who should “leave the South to the Southerners”—a theme also explored in the chapter on women and the KKK. Manis admits that, however inspiring and admirable, it is “difficult” to assess the effectiveness of Tilly’s work in the South.

In the end, it is difficult not to notice the kinship between the old racial superiority of white religious Southerners—that is, most Southerners—and the more recent sense of religious exclusivity and moral monopoly of people such as Donald Wildmon, Jerry Falwell, George W. Bush and figures in his administration, and many less vocal and intense Southerners who identify with the Religious Right.<sup>5</sup> Ted Ownby writes of the conviction of Wildmon and others like him that the existence of what they define as “sin” in their world and community is not an individual affair, but a cancer that imperils the spiritual health and salvation of the whole—a corporatist belief not unlike that in vogue during the supremely violent, centuries-long obscenity that was the French Wars of Religion between Catholic and Huguenot. Acceptance of a view that ties together individual piety with societal health

and orthodoxy, even on a small and subliminal level, implies a call to action, political involvement, activism, and religious and political evangelism for anyone who would seek to call himself “Christian.”

## NOTES

1. See, for example, the popular flyer “It’s Time to Elect Candidates Who Will Protect Life!” (2004), distributed by Priests for Life for the 2004 presidential and national elections (flyer in possession of the author). In it, the group provides a blueprint for voting for Republican candidates without jeopardizing their 501(c) tax-exempt status without mentioning the party by name. First the flyer quotes the United States Bishops’ “Living the Gospel of Life”: “Every voice matters in the public forum. Every vote counts . . . We encourage all citizens, particularly Catholics, to embrace their citizenship not merely as a duty and privilege, but as an opportunity meaningfully to participate in building the culture of life.” Then the flyer informs the Catholic faithful that “As we approach our national elections, Priests for Life has prepared resources to help you to carry out your civic responsibilities . . . in the light of moral law.” What is more, these “resources will help you” to learn to put abortion above and beyond any other possible competing issue and to “Understand why the Right to Life is the primary election issue.” Once the faithful Catholic has put abortion at the pinnacle of his list on how to vote, he may feel free to remove all other competing issues from his conscience because he has done his duty as a good Catholic. The flyer closes by inserting a quote from Pope John Paul II’s 1988 encyclical, *Christifideles Laici*: “The common outcry, which is justly made on behalf of human rights—for example, the right to health, to home, to work, to family, to culture—is false and illusory if the right to life, the most basic and fundamental right . . . is not defended with maximum determination.”

2. Jimmy Breslin, *The Church That Forgot Christ* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 1 (quoted).

3. For a lucid and interesting, if not always persuasive, account of the relationship between Jews and capitalism in the European mind, see Jerry Z. Muller, *The Mind and the Market: Capitalism in Modern European Thought* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002).

4. Charles Marsh, *God’s Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); and David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

5. For more on this subject, see chapter 12 in this book.

# The Religious Right and Electoral Politics in the South

*Charles S. Bullock III and Mark C. Smith*

Perhaps no other topic surrounding religion and politics has received more attention of late than the role and activities of the Religious Right. In some quarters, it is generally assumed that the Religious Right has the political capital to run roughshod over virtually any opposition, within or without the Republican Party. However, a close examination of issues, constituencies, and electoral results in eleven Southern states between 1994 and 2000 suggests otherwise. The power of the Religious Right is not absolute or unfettered—although it is undeniably strong. This chapter will present a theory—“core constituency theory”—that seeks to shed light on the relationship between a party’s most devout adherents and candidates for public office. What emerges is that the power of core constituencies, such as the Religious Right for the GOP, is real. Yet these constituencies and the candidates that appeal to them must maintain a delicate balancing act so as not to alienate general election voters with primary contests that indulge too overtly in the issues that move core constituents.

Survey data have long since confirmed the impression that the level of commitment to a political party greatly varies, even among voters who profess to be loyal supporters. Each party in the United States has a core group of supporters, and as one moves from the core supporters of one party toward the core of the other party, the intensity of support for the first party declines. After passing through a range of voters who are truly independent, one encounters voters with increasingly strong affinity for the opposition. Support for a party can be examined not only at the individual level but also at the group level. Discussions of realignment and dealignment invariably identify certain groups as being key components of each party. Thus the

New Deal Coalition is often defined as labor, Catholics, Jews, urbanites, minorities, and, at least until recently, Southerners.

The New Deal realignment largely bypassed the South, which had been the nation's most loyal Democratic region for decades.<sup>1</sup> White Southerners remained homogeneously Democratic through the mid-twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> In a region in which the face of the Democratic Party was Eugene and Herman Talmadge, Tom Heflin, Ben Tillman, Theodore Bilbo, and their political heirs, the few African Americans who could vote found little reason to forsake the party of Lincoln. Ironically, the extension of the suffrage to blacks in the South coincided with the Goldwater takeover of the GOP, which shifted Lincoln's party well to the right on a range of issues, including civil rights. Beginning about 1970, a new generation of Democratic leaders emerged who embraced moderate stands on school desegregation and minority voting rights—people such as Albert Gore Sr., Jimmy Carter, Albert Brewer, and Reuben Askew. This moderation resulted in a cementing of black support for the Democratic Party in the South well below the presidential level, where blacks had swung massively against Goldwater and to Lyndon Johnson. The search by Democratic candidates for black support at the primary and general election stages alienated conservative whites who shifted toward the newly respectable GOP.<sup>3</sup> With a growing black electorate taking the place of disaffected conservatives, Democratic Party nominees such as Hubert Humphrey and George McGovern supported more liberal policies, which alienated additional conservatives and which left the Democratic Party electorate still more liberal as the cycle repeated itself. In time, the partisan gap in the South came to resemble that in the rest of the nation, with the ranks of the GOP extending from the very conservative into the moderate range, whereas whites who remained loyal to the Democratic Party tended to be moderate to liberal. This sorting out of the electorate paralleled what was happening among public officials as the conservative Southern Democratic member of Congress became extinct, replaced by the conservative Republican.<sup>4</sup>

Once the Democratic Party became the party of the left in the South, its core constituency consisted of its most liberal voters. For that region as well as in the rest of the nation, the core support group was comprised of African American voters. Although blacks remain a minority within the Democratic Party and most jurisdictions, their cohesiveness, manifest in rates of support for Democratic candidates that often exceed 90 percent,<sup>5</sup> has made them the core constituency within the party. When the Democratic nominee is black, African Americans often provide near-unanimous support. White

Democrats typically get a slightly smaller share of the black vote, but except when running against well-established Republicans, they poll at least 85 percent of the black vote.

No set of Republican supporters matches the cohesion found among blacks. Evangelical Christians, particularly those with high commitment levels, have slowly realigned into the GOP, but they are by no means monolithic.<sup>6</sup> The closest approximation to black Democrats can be found with the Religious Right, a theoretical subset of evangelicals, which exit polls show often cast at least 70 percent of their votes for GOP nominees. Invariably the level of support given Republicans by voters who identified with the Religious Right far exceeds the share of the vote received from more secular white voters. Often the secular Religious Right is so great that although GOP nominees attract overwhelming support from Christian conservatives, many secular whites vote Democratic.

In this chapter, we examine the success of candidates identified with the Religious Right who have run for high political office in the eleven Southern states. The offices considered are governor, U.S. Senate, and U.S. House. The period covered is from 1994 through 2000. The emphasis here is on the South because it is in that region that the Religious Right has been particularly active and enjoyed some of its greatest successes.<sup>7</sup> Because of its activity in this region, we are more likely to have a sufficient number of cases to test the theoretical propositions.

### THE CORE GROUP'S DILEMMA

Strong support from the core constituency is essential for the success of a party's nominee in competitive environments. Obviously in an area that is overwhelmingly made up of supporters for a party, hesitancy on the part of the core group will not be determinative. But in an environment in which the parties are evenly matched, lower turnout caused by the disaffection of the core constituency can defeat the party's candidates. Should some of the core constituency decide to "teach the party a lesson" and vote for the nominee of the opposition party in order to register disappointment with the choice of their own party, the result will almost certainly be victory for the opposition. A case in point is Senator Wyche Fowler's unsuccessful 1996 reelection bid as a Democratic incumbent, an election in which loyal, but not core, Democrats defected to open the way for a Republican upset while blacks remained steadfast in supporting Fowler.<sup>8</sup>

The cohesion of the core constituency provides a strong incentive for



party activists eager to stimulate turnout among group members. Democrats, knowing that there is a .9 probability that each additional black voter who goes to the polls will vote for their ticket, concentrate get-out-the-vote resources on the minority community. Similarly, Republicans seek to encourage voting among Christian conservatives through use of targeted mail and telephone calls. Interest groups have also focused on parties' core constituencies. The Christian Coalition, although purporting to be nonpartisan, has distributed voting guides designed to make Republican candidates attractive to Religious Right fundamentalists at churches attended by Christian conservatives. The activities of figures such as Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and James A. Dobson of Focus on the Family often parallel those of the Christian Coalition in this respect.<sup>9</sup>

On a number of dimensions, the members of the core constituency of a party have more extreme views than other partisans. Thus, African Americans are more enthusiastic in their support for affirmative action programs and are generally more liberal than many other Democrats. On the Republican side, the Religious Right is more conservative, especially on social issues such as access to an abortion, prayer in schools, and homosexual marriage than are other Republicans.<sup>10</sup> The continued enthusiasm of members of the core constituency comes at a price. As the most loyal partisans, the core group wants its preferences to be loudly and consistently articulated by the party's nominees and uncompromisingly set out in the party platform. To meet these expectations, the core group may recruit candidates. Even when they have not recruited a candidate, members of the core constituency often have a preference in the primary whom they support with money, volunteers, and get-out-the-vote efforts. To the extent that the core constituency supports a more extreme policy stance on highly salient issues, bidding for the support of the core constituency in a primary may result in the nominee being badly positioned for the general election. If a contested primary results in candidates vying to take more extreme stands in order to secure support from the core constituency, they may embrace positions unacceptable to the broader electorate whose support will be necessary in November.

Although nominating a candidate acceptable to the core constituency should ensure this group's enthusiastic support, it may diminish prospects for success in November. A nominee closely associated with the beliefs of the core constituency may be too extreme for independent voters or for those only loosely committed to supporting the party. Indeed, it is not only swing voters who may be turned off; internal battles between old-guard economic

conservatives and social conservative converts of the Religious Right may keep the GOP from presenting a united front, as occurred in Virginia's Senate races of 1994 and 1996. In 1994, Republican senator John Warner refused to support Marine Colonel Oliver North's challenge to Democratic senator Charles Robb. North's role in Iran-Contra was a bigger factor in Warner's decision than issues of abortion or school choice, but it still divided the GOP and prompted the independent candidacy of Marshall Coleman, a Republican moderate. Although 54 percent of Virginia's electorate rejected the morally suspect incumbent, only 43 percent rallied to North. Two years later, when Warner faced reelection, many of North's most fervent allies backed James Miller's unsuccessful insurgency in the GOP primary.<sup>11</sup> In the narrow-partisan balance of today's competitive South, division in the ranks spells doom for November.<sup>12</sup> An electoral majority will require strong support from the core constituency, votes from other partisans, and in addition, a share of voters who are not affiliated with the party. As Earl Black and Merle Black demonstrate for the South, neither party can claim the loyalty of most of the region's voters.<sup>13</sup> The same is true in each of the region's states and in many congressional districts. A nominee who has fully embraced the policy preferences of the core constituency will be poorly positioned to appeal to the broader range of voters who are essential for victory. The party leadership therefore seeks to retain the enthusiasm of the core group, but without allowing them to determine the party's candidates.

Although the presence of a representative of the core constituency may turn off less rabid voters in a general election, even the unsuccessful candidacy of someone enthusiastically supported by the core constituency may spell trouble for the general election. In a contested primary in which one of the candidates is closely aligned with the core constituency's policy preferences, the other candidates may be pulled in the direction of the extremists. It is well known that primaries disproportionately attract strong partisans. In anticipation of this skewed primary electorate, moderate candidates may be pulled in the direction of the extremists, fearing that otherwise they will forgo support from voters who are especially likely to participate in the primary. As a consequence, even if the extreme candidate does not win the nomination, the nominee may have been pushed so far toward the core constituency's preferences that he or she will have become unacceptable to more moderate voters, especially swing independents.

In a competitive environment, the ideal situation for a party may be to have its nomination uncontested. In the absence of a primary contest, a nominee need not spell out positions on controversial issues. By keeping

policy positions fuzzy, the nominee can retain the support of the party's core constituency while appearing to be reasonable to other members of the party and not alienate swing voters necessary for a November victory. If in the course of the general election campaign the nominee displays some deviation from the preferences of the core constituency, this may not prove fatal because in all likelihood the nominee, although not perfect for the core voters, will nonetheless be far more acceptable than the opponent.

Table 8.1 outlines the discussion of core constituency theory. It shows that a candidate who faces no primary competition on the way to nomination may have either adopted the positions of the secular or the core constituency. If the uncontested nomination goes to a secular candidate, then that individual can have adopted a set of mainstream policy stands that should be acceptable in the general election to all members of the party and that should position the nominee to make inroads among critical swing voters. An uncontested nominee who comes from the core constituency will bring a set of more extreme policy positions likely to appeal to the core constituency. If those positions have not been made too public, the uncontested nominee from the core constituency may still be able to attract enough secular support within the party and swing voters to secure victory in a competitive situation. Nominees who faced primary competition with individuals not associated with the core group will almost certainly have secular positions that should also place them in or close to the mainstream of the November electorate. These nominees may be less successful in uniting their fellow partisans as a result of criticisms directed at opponents during the primary. The degree to which the nominee can reunite the party may go a long way toward determining the outcome in November. Finally, candidates who have been opposed by core groups may have had to modify their positions, moving toward the extremes preferred by the core group. Under some circumstances, the winner may even appear to have close ties to the core group and have adopted a number of extreme positions. The nature of the general election coalition will depend on how far the candidate facing opposition from core group preferences has gone in trying to satisfy the core group.

In its early days as a competitive force, Republicans in the South had a weak candidate bench and often slated candidates with limited appeals for office. At times, any candidate who came forward and paid a filing fee would be the GOP nominee. Some of these early candidates were long on ideology but short on voter appeal, and they did little to alter the perception that the Republican Party in the region was filled with kooks. Aspirants who were

Table 8.1

## Primary Competition and General Election Outcomes

Primary Competition	Winner	Policy Stands	General Election Strategy
None	Secular	Mainstream	All fellow partisans and swing core and some secular and few swing
	Core	Extreme	Most fellow partisans and swing
Non-core group candidate	Secular	Mainstream	May lose some core, secular, and swing
Core group candidate	Secular	Mainstream	Core and some secular
		Extreme	
	Core	Extreme	

more politically skilled and perceived to have serious electoral prospects continued to run the Democratic Party. The transformation of the GOP into the majority of the Southern congressional delegation in 1994 indicated that the party could now often provide voters with credible candidates.

## THE DATA

This study focuses on candidates associated with the core constituency of the Republican Party. Reviewing copies of the *Southern Political Report*, edited by Hastings Wyman for election years 1994 to 2000, led to identification of candidates closely tied to the Religious Right. Although it is certainly possible that we missed some candidates with strong links to Christian conservatives, we believe that our approach turned up those who made the connection most explicit in their campaigns. We consider candidates for the offices of governor, U.S. senator, and U.S. representative. Because we focus on even-numbered election years, we exclude gubernatorial candidates from Louisiana, Mississippi, and Virginia, three states that elect their chief executives in odd-numbered years. Despite occasional references to Democratic candidates with strong ties to the Religious Right, we restrict our analysis to Republicans because it is in this party that the Christian conservatives constitute the core constituency.

Table 8.2

## Distribution of Republican Candidates by Office, 1994–2000

	Governor	U.S. Senate	U.S. House	Total
Religious Right	8 (50%)	6 (21%)	27 (8%)	41 (8%)
Secular	8 (50%)	23 (79%)	427 (92%)	458 (92%)
Total	16 (100%)	29 (100%)	454 (100%)	499 (100%)

## FINDINGS

Table 8.2 shows the distribution of Religious Right candidates for the three offices studied. Candidates identified with the Religious Right were most likely to seek the governorship. Half of the Republican candidates for governor in the study had ties to Christian conservatives. Among Republicans seeking a seat in the U.S. Senate, just over one-fifth were identified with the Religious Right. Candidates linked to Christian conservatism were least common among House nominees, where they comprised less than 10 percent.

Religious Right candidates are more commonly represented in statewide contests. A third of all Religious Right nominees have run for governor or senator. In terms of representation, the Religious Right, as a movement, is well represented in the Southern GOP at the state level but has been less successful in seeking House seats. The high incidence of Christian conservatives among gubernatorial nominees may reflect the greater openness in competition for that office. With Southern governors term limited except in Texas, there is more turnover in the office than in Congress. Open seat contests attract larger candidate pools, and it appears that the Religious Right is taking advantage of the opportunities offered by contests lacking incumbents.

In addition to the forty-one candidates linked to the Religious Right who appear in table 8.1, another eleven unsuccessfully sought the GOP nomination. Of these eleven candidates who lost in the Republican primary, four fell to other Religious Right candidates, and seven lost to more secular Republicans.

## ELECTORAL SUCCESS

The 1990s, especially beginning with 1994, witnessed unparalleled levels of Republican success in the South.<sup>14</sup> As Earl and Merle Black detail in their

comprehensive study, after close to a decade of Ronald Reagan in the White House, Southern Republicans finally came of age.<sup>15</sup> After decades of slow growth in contestation of offices below the presidential level, Republicans finally succeeded in getting conservative voters to bring their behavior for downticket offices in line with votes for the presidency.<sup>16</sup> The conversion of conservative white voters to full-fledged Republican loyalists, when accompanied by redistricting that separated black and white voters at levels heretofore not seen, increased the number of districts that Republicans could win with landslide support among whites, even if they were rejected overwhelmingly by black voters.

Overall, Religious Right Republicans enjoyed levels of success in general elections comparable to those of secular Republicans. Among the Religious Right candidates, 59 percent were elected, as were 62 percent of the secular Republicans. Although the general election success rates are similar, they mask differences that become apparent with a bit of probing.

When we compare the first and fourth rows of table 8.3, we find that 302 (66 percent) of 458 secular Republicans faced no opposition on their way to nomination. In contrast, only 17 (41 percent) of 41 of the Religious Right Republicans avoided primary competition. Even so, some of the primary opposition overcome by Religious Right candidates was minimal; nonetheless, as a whole, the group had to expend more resources on the way to nomination than did secular Republicans. Although much more research would be needed to substantiate the point, it may be that the secular wing of the GOP is reluctant to allow candidates of the Religious Right to secure nominations and therefore encourages challenges to candidates whom it perceives to be extremists and, consequently, unelectable.

Religious Right nominees who overcome secular opposition in the primary have success rates similar to those for Religious Right nominees who face no primary opposition. Both groups win general elections at least 60 percent of the time. The experience of secular Republicans who face primary opposition but not Christian conservatives is much less favorable; they win the general election only 37 percent of the time.

The impact of primary opposition from Religious Right candidates appears to have very different results depending on the nature of the primary winner. Contrary to expectations, there is no evidence that when a secular Republican defeats a candidate associated with the Religious Right in the primary that the victory is Pyrrhic, because all seven secular Republicans who triumphed over Religious Right favorites won general elections. Again, keeping in mind that the number of cases is quite small, only one of four

Table 8.3

General Election Results for Secular Republican Candidates, 1994–2000  
(Governor, U.S. Senate, and U.S. House)<sup>a</sup>

Candidate	Victory	Defeat
<b>Secular candidates</b>		
Nominee with no primary opposition	223 (74%)	79 (26%)
Nominee with primary opposition non-RR	55 (37%)	94 (63%)
Nominee defeats RR candidate in primary	7 (100%)	0 (0%)
Total	285 (62%)	173 (38%)
<b>RR candidates</b>		
RR nominee with no primary opposition	11 (65%)	6 (35%)
RR nominee with primary opposition	12 (60%)	8 (40%)
RR nominee defeats RR candidate in primary	1 (25%)	3 (75%)
Total	24 (59%)	17 (41%)

<sup>a</sup> RR, Religious Right. Figures do not include forty-six races in which the GOP did not field a general election candidate.

Religious Right primary winners who defeated another Religious Right candidate managed victory in November. We find no evidence for the proposition that fending off a Christian conservative in the primary will force a more secular Republican to take positions unacceptable to the bulk of the electorate. It may be, however, that a contest between two Christian conservatives may prompt the winner to take such extreme positions that essential swing voters are alienated.

Table 8.4 presents an analysis similar to that in table 8.3 but is restricted to incumbents. The first thing to note is that most of the secular Republicans are incumbents, whereas most of the Religious Right–affiliated candidates were not. Although the numbers of cases were small, Religious Right nominees were more likely to face opposition than were secular nominees. Eight (44 percent) of 18 of the Religious Right nominees had a primary opponent, compared with only 31 (13 percent) of 246 of the secular nominees. Having a primary opponent did not result in a higher rate of defeat for the secular Republicans. In contrast, three of eight Religious Right nominees who overcame a primary opponent lost the general election. A possible explanation for this difference would be if secular voters were less likely to rally to the side of an incumbent identified with the Religious Right. Black and Black present a number of examples in which positions embraced by Christian conservatives turned off critical shares of the electorate needed to attain the landslides among white votes that Republicans often need to win in the South.<sup>17</sup>

Table 8.4  
General Election Results for Southern Republican Incumbents,  
1994–2000 (Governor, U.S. Senate, and U.S. House)<sup>a</sup>

Candidate	Victory	Defeat
<b>Secular candidates</b>		
Nominee with no primary opposition	212 (99%)	3 (1%)
Nominee with primary opposition non-RR	29 (97%)	1 (3%)
Nominee defeats RR candidate in primary	1 (100%)	0 (0%)
Total	242 (98%)	4 (2%)
<b>RR candidates</b>		
RR nominee with no primary opposition	9 (90%)	1 (10%)
RR nominee with primary opposition	5 (63%)	1 (10%)
RR nominee defeats RR candidate in primary	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Total	14 (78%)	4 (22%)

<sup>a</sup> RR, Religious Right.



The recent experiences of two Republican governors who failed in reelection bids illustrate how a Christian conservative may adopt stands out of step with the bulk of the electorate. In Alabama, Fob James ran for reelection in 1998 by opposing the teaching of evolution in schools and supporting Etowah County circuit judge Roy Moore, who wanted to post the Ten Commandments in a courthouse despite clear indications that the latter action violated the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. The positions sparked a major challenge in the primary from old-guard business conservative and mining magnate Winton Blount. James narrowly prevailed. Even more damaging to James, though, was his opposition to a proposal to emulate Georgia's institution of a lottery to fund education programs. Although the Georgia experience (the brainchild of Democratic strategist James Carville) has become widely popular, especially for the use of funding college scholarships—and there were clear indications that Alabamians crossed the state line to buy tickets in Georgia's and Florida's lotteries, and to gamble in Mississippi's casinos—Governor James stood firm in his opposition. He lost by a 58–42 margin to Democrat Don Siegelman, who vowed to institute a lottery for education purposes as soon as he was elected—a promise that he failed to keep, thanks to a massive mobilization of the state's Christian Coalition against the referendum.<sup>18</sup>

The education lottery also played a role in David Beasley's unsuccessful quest for a second term as South Carolina's governor. Beasley also opposed instituting a lottery with proceeds earmarked for education. Democrat Jim Hodges, his general election opponent, used a clever television ad in which an actor representing a convenience store owner operating just across the Georgia state line thanked South Carolinians for buying tickets that helped pay for Georgia students' college educations. Perhaps even more damaging to Beasley was his opposition to video poker, which stimulated convenience store operators to display materials and contribute to the campaign treasury of the Democratic challenger. Ultimately, Beasley came up short in a 53-to-45 contest.<sup>19</sup>

Table 8.5 presents results for Republicans in open seat elections. Among these candidates, secular Republicans did much better than those with ties to the Christian right. Secular candidates were successful by more than a two-to-one margin, compared with only 40 percent of the Religious Right nominees. Among candidates who faced primary opposition but not from Religious Right opponents, secular nominations won general elections 59 percent of the time. In contrast, Religious Right nominees who faced primary opposition succeeded in November only 40 percent of the time. Table

Table 8.5  
 General Election Results for Southern Republican in Open Seat  
 Elections, 1994–2000 (Governor, U.S. Senate, and U.S. House)<sup>a</sup>

Candidate	Victory	Defeat
Secular candidates		
Nominee with no primary opposition	6 (75%)	2 (25%)
Nominee with primary opposition non-RR	19 (59%)	13 (41%)
Nominee defeats RR candidate in primary	6 (100%)	0 (0%)
Total	31 (67%)	15 (33%)
RR candidates		
RR nominee with no primary opposition	1 (33%)	2 (25%)
RR nominee with primary opposition	4 (40%)	6 (60%)
RR nominee defeats RR candidate in primary	1 (50%)	1 (50%)
Total	6 (40%)	9 (60%)

<sup>a</sup> RR, Religious Right.

8.5 presents further evidence that secular candidates who defeat opponents affiliated with the Religious Right in a primary are not handicapped in the general election: all six in this category won. Thus the speculation offered earlier that the presence of a candidate close to the Christian right would induce other candidates to move in that direction and potentially forfeit widespread support in the general election is not substantiated by the research here.<sup>20</sup>

## THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT AND REPUBLICANS

Candidates who clearly identified with the Religious Right constitute about 10 percent of the Republicans who competed for high office from 1994 through 2000 in the South. Although we do not have comparable data on other regions, our expectation is that the presence of Religious Right candidates in the GOP is higher in the South than elsewhere. Although we cannot discount the plausibility of “stealth” candidates whose close ties to the Reli-

gious Right escaped our efforts at detection, the evidence does not support contentions that Christian conservatives have taken over candidate recruitment in the GOP across the South. Perhaps the attention accorded the Religious Right results from their greater presence among Republican nominees for high statewide offices.

Data for the South bear out parts of the core constituency theory outlined here. Among incumbents, secular Republicans won reelection, with rare exceptions. The success rate for secular incumbents stood at 98 percent. In contrast, even though most Religious Right Republicans also achieved additional terms, their success rate fell below 80 percent. These differences become starker in statewide contests. Secular incumbents won 94 percent of these races, whereas Religious Right candidates succeeded only 25 percent of the time. Again, the number of cases is small (only four Religious Right incumbents sought reelection to statewide office from 1994 to 2000), but the inability to exploit the natural advantages of incumbency might severely limit the Religious Right's influence in the South and in the Republican Party.

An even greater disparity exists between secular and Religious Right Republicans who sought open seats. The secular Republicans did not enjoy the immunity from defeat of incumbents, but they did manage to win two-thirds of the time. Among Religious Right contests for open seats, only 40 percent succeeded, providing further evidence that candidates closely linked to the GOP core constituency may be less electable than those not so tied to the more extreme positions of the core partisans.

The second aspect of the core constituency theory suggested that even secular Republicans who survive primary challenges from candidates supported by the Religious Right would face greater electoral difficulties than secular candidates who did not confront this kind of challenge. Although the numbers of cases are small, no secular Republican lost in November after defeating a candidate linked to Christian conservatives in the primary. If anything, then, there is some evidence to suggest that GOP secular nominees who faced a primary challenge but not from the Religious Right emerged as less electable. Thus we do not find evidence to suggest that a challenge from a candidate of the core constituency will induce competitors to adopt issue stands so extreme as to impede general election success.

## NOTES

1. David W. Brady, *Critical Elections and Congressional Policy Making* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

2. Earl Black and Merle Black, *Rise of Southern Republicans* (Cambridge: Belknap, Harvard University Press, 2002).

3. Stanley P. Berard, *Southern Democrats in the U.S. House of Representatives* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001); Black and Black, *Rise of Southern Republicans*.

4. Black and Black, *Rise of Southern Republicans*.

5. Charles S. Bullock III and Richard E. Dunn, "The Demise of Racial Districting and the Future of Black Representation," *Emory Law Journal* 48 (Fall 1999): 1209–53.

6. John C. Green, Lyman A. Kellstedt, Corwin E. Smidt, and James L. Guth, "The Soul of the South," in *The New Politics of the Old South: An Introduction to Southern Politics*, ed. Charles S. Bullock III and Mark J. Rozell (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998).

7. Clyde Wilcox, *Onward Christian Soldiers? The Religious Right in American Politics* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2000); Mark J. Rozell and Clyde Wilcox, *Second Coming: The New Christian Right in Virginia Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

8. Charles S. Bullock III and Paul P. Furr, "Race, Turnout, Runoff and Election Outcomes: The Defeat of Wyche Fowler," *Congress and the Presidency* 24 (Spring 1997): 1–16.

9. Charles S. Bullock III and John Christopher Grant, "Georgia: The Christian Right and Grassroots Power," in *God at the Grassroots: The Christian Right and the 1994 Elections*, ed. Mark J. Rozell and Clyde Wilcox (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995).

10. Black and Black, *Rise of Southern Republicans*.

11. Hastings Wyman Jr. identifies Virginia as one of the states in which the Religious Right and the old-guard intramural battles have been most open. See "Southern GOP Grapples with Christian Mainstream Tensions," *Southern Political Report*, September 30, 1997.

12. See discussions in Black and Black, *Rise of Southern Republicans*.

13. Black and Black, *Rise of Southern Republicans*.

14. Berard, *Southern Democrats*.

15. Black and Black, *Rise of Southern Republicans*.

16. Charles S. Bullock, R. K. Gaddie, and D. R. Hoffman, "Regional Realignment Revisited" (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., August 31–September 3, 2000).

17. Black and Black, *Rise of Southern Republicans*.

18. The lottery referendum's failure suggests that James was not entirely out of touch with public preferences in his state. However, the referendum attracted fewer participants than the general election for governor.

19. The support lavished on Democratic Jim Hodges by the video poker industry proved misplaced as the new governor quickly drove this activity out of his state. Hodges proved more successful than Siegelman in getting the necessary changes made, and South Carolina now has a lottery in place.

20. Election returns used in this chapter are from several sources. See Richard M. Scammon and Alice V. McGillivray, *America Votes: A Handbook of Contemporary American Election Statistics* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 1995); Richard M. Scammon, Alice V. McGillivray, and Rhodes Cook, *America Votes: A Hand-*

*book of Contemporary American Election Statistics 22* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 1998); 1998 U.S. House and Senate Races at <http://www.fec.gov/pubrec/fe98/cover.htm>; 1998 Gubernatorial Races from Michael Barone and Grant Ujifusa, *The Almanac of American Politics* (Washington, D.C.: National Journal, 1998); 2000 U.S. House and Senate Races at <http://www.fec.gov/pubrec/fe2000/cover.htm>; 2000 North Carolina Gubernatorial Race at <http://www.sboe.state.nc.us/voterweb/elections.htm>.