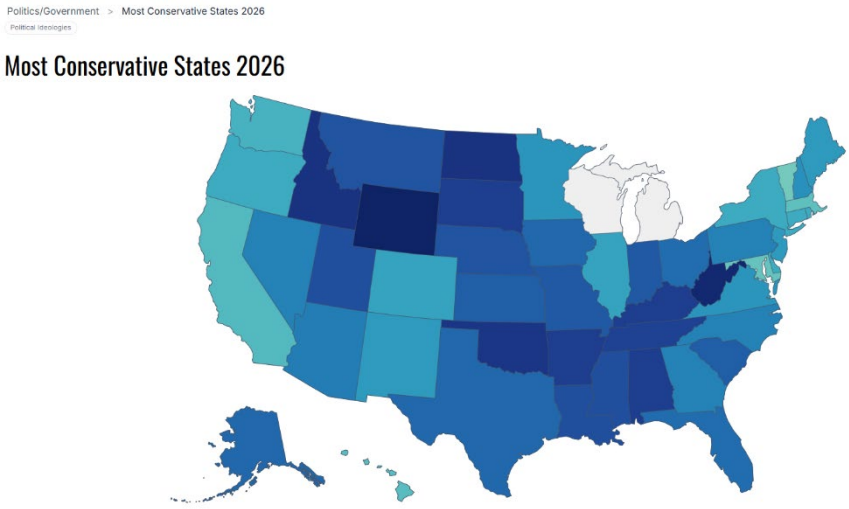
Why the South Swings Right

By Will McLain

The southern United States is the poorest region in the country and is also the most conservative. Every state in the American South is "red." My family's longtime home state of Alabama leans far to the right, with more than 60 percent voting for Trump in 2024. This is a long-term trend; states in the South have voted Republican for the last 40 years. Many Southerners seem to accept this as an inevitable reality, some feeling like their votes don't matter because the results are always the same. Other Southerners, however, including myself, are looking to understand *why* the South leans right, especially during the current affordability crisis, which disproportionately hurts poorer voters and is happening in Donald Trump's second presidency. Why does this voting dynamic occur? And will it always be this way?

For starters, religion plays a large part in why the South votes red. The Pew Research Center found that over 70 percent of Alabama identifies as Christian, and other states in the South show similar, if not higher, proportions of religious self-identification. Pew Research also found that religious (especially Protestant) voters tend to vote Republican. This is likely due at least in part to conservative Republicans loudly embracing what they call Christian values; as author Camilla Klein notes, "There can be no doubt that the Republican Party has become synonymous with evangelical Christianity in modern America." Within the Trump campaign particularly, we can see the pattern of Republicans publicly embracing Christian values. Trump openly identifies as Christian and campaigned on "returning Christian values to America," saying, "We're going to *protect* Christianity." Trump and others have fearmongered many Christians into believing that Christian values are under assault by the left and by people of other religions. Trump's embracing Christianity has clearly connected with Southern voters, as Trump won almost every Southern state in the 2024 presidential election. Christianity and right-wing politics have become intertwined in the United States, leading to a rise of Christian nationalism that's arguably possible only because of significant support from Southern voters. Clearly, aligning with Christian values is one way Republicans have come to dominate politics in the South.



Media bias and misinformation also play a large part in how the South votes. As media becomes increasingly partisan, people tend to consume media that aligns with their own opinions. This trend reinforces voters' preexisting beliefs and decreases the chances of citizens voting against "their" party or their family's party. This is especially true in the South, where voters are already likely to vote Republican. The consumption of Republican-leaning media doesn't help change that dynamic either. Right-wing news sources like Fox News tend to villainize left-leaning leaders and embrace conservative values, attempting to gain and maintain support from Southern viewers and voters while at the same time shaping what they believe.

That seems to be continuing or even accelerating in the second Trump Administration, as the President sues and threatens to revoke the broadcast licenses of stations that report anything negative about his actions or policies, which has a chilling effect on critical reporting and worsens the right-wing media skew; Southerners are already far more likely to be exposed to right-wing media sources, and the Trump Administration isn't exactly eager to balance that out. We're more likely to align with the political views of our parents, our friends, or what our communities subtly or overtly pressure us to believe, so the combination of parents' beliefs, highly partisan media, and societal pressure causes many young people in the South to feel obligated to vote Republican.

Historical race-based patterns influence how Southerners vote, too. The "Southern Strategy" employed by the Republican Party in the 1960s used racial bias to motivate prejudiced white Southerners to leave the Democratic Party and align with Republicans. By promoting policies like segregation, the Republican Party gained massive support in the South, allowing it to move forward with other conservative policies on immigration, taxes, and welfare. Many Southerners began to support these conservative policies simply because of racial prejudice, despite not understanding the ramifications, including for themselves. This pattern continues today. A study by Princeton Economics finds that many Democratic losses in the South can be attributed to racially conservative views. We see this in Trump's campaign, which advertised harsh immigration policies, deportation policies, and anti-DEI measures, all of which helped him win the South.

Another example of this racial prejudice playing out in voting dynamics is gerrymandering and the resulting voting districts that preserve Republican control. In the South, African-American voters make up the large majority of Democratic votes. As Seth McKee from Oklahoma State University finds, "African-American validated voters are staunchly Democratic, only dipping below the 90-percent level in two states (Mississippi and South Carolina)." This has posed a threat to the Republican Party's control of the South, leading to gerrymandering by Republicans. Gerrymandering, according to Merriam Webster, is "the practice of dividing or arranging a territorial unit into election districts in a way that gives one political party an unfair advantage in elections." Historically, this process has occurred throughout the South. For example, the Louisiana voting-age population is 33 percent Black and 58 percent White. But in 2021, state officials passed a congressional map where Black Louisianans are the majority in only *one* of the state's six districts. This process splits Black populations by district to decrease their voting power which, in turn, ensures that white Republican candidates win more districts.

Unfortunately, this issue is only getting worse; in 2024, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled gerrymandering on the basis of race to be constitutional. The history of racial bias in the South still greatly influences Republican voting patterns in the South and beyond today.

Lastly, a lack of quality education in the South leads to pre-existing political views being almost unshakeable, or practically written in stone in Southern politics. According to U.S. News & World Report, Southern states like Alabama, Louisiana, and South Carolina rank in the bottom 40 for education. Throughout the past four decades, the South has consistently fallen into the lowest rankings for education, with low graduation rates, low math and reading proficiency, and some of the lowest rates of per-pupil spending and teacher wages in the country. The lack of quality schooling means that proportionately more Southerners don't seek higher education. Not being exposed to new political views or ways of thinking causes many to stick with what they know: Republican viewpoints. In an interview from NPR, Political Editor Domenico Montanaro put it simply: "You have a college degree, more likely than not, you're voting Democratic. If you don't, more likely than not now, you're voting Republican."

The effects of less education, less information, less reading, less exposure to new ideas, and less practice evaluating and thinking critically are worsened by polarized media: Many without substantive education struggle to differentiate between real and fake news. An MIT Sloan study finds people who "had a college education or earned more than $60,000 annually were more likely to confidently recognize true news stories." The converse leads to a vicious cycle, as less-educated Southerners are continuously indoctrinated into the political right, often unable to separate real news from fake news, or at least biased, unreliable news from objective, fact-based reporting. As Dr. Julianne Malveaux writes for the Atlanta Tribune, "The 47th President loves the poorly educated because he knows how to manipulate them, and because the less you know, the more you can be persuaded by false rhetoric. The cuts in education, including cuts in educational services for the differently abled, both physically and intellectually, will likely have a long-term deleterious effect on the condition of education in our country." The vicious cycle of poverty and relative lack of education has lasting effects, including reflexively voting Republican in the South.

The voting dynamics of my home state are in no way monocausal; there are dozens of reasons why the South votes the way it does. However, we can attempt to understand the underlying causes of voting patterns and work for a level political playing field and improving the Southern condition. It's important to avoid labeling Southern voters as "stupid" or "bad people." Southern voters have unique interests and values they feel are represented by certain candidates. Labeling the South "stupid" only proves the failure of the parties who have left the South abandoned. Instead, policymakers should seek to represent Southern interests in their campaigns and policies. This is especially true as many Southerners have felt abandoned by the Democratic Party. Democratic administrations were in office during many crises that hit the South hard, like the 2008 financial crisis, Hurricane Helene, and the economic instability of the Covid Pandemic, planting distrust of Democrats among many Southern voters.

But the South has not *totally* shifted to the right, and giving up on representing Southern interests would be a mistake by left-leaning candidates. The South has been making a slow and steady shift to the left. States like North Carolina, Georgia, and Florida are becoming or already are swing states, and Southern states like Texas and Virginia are having unexpectedly close midterm races. Not only should we have hope for the future competitiveness of politics in the South, but we should also recognize the diversity that already exists here. Groups like the Poor Peoples Campaign of Alabama and other left-leaning organizations have strongholds in the South. It's not hopeless to believe that left-leaning politics can grow popular here; it might even be just a matter of time. For the South to swing, it would take parties or groups to step up and show they value Southerners, a position currently filled by Republicans.

Southern voting patterns are not reflections of the "quality" of Southern people, but rather the result of media, socio-economic factors, *and* failures of Democratic and left-leaning politicians. The future of Southern politics is not guaranteed to be forever dominated by the right; it can be changed by progressive politicians if they demonstrate a care for Southern interests and values.