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20th Century History

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America's Rise to the Right from the South

In the 1970's, a political shift to right wing conservatism took over and dominated the nation. Geographically, the shift moved majority power from the Northern Industrial States to the Southern Sun Belt. While authors Dan T. Carter and Bruce J. Schulman agree that the new Southern political agenda called for major reductions in federal government power, they offer different explanations for the precipitating factors that caused the shift. Carter states that the right conservative shift that reshaped "American Politics" in the 1960's and 1970's was fueled by racist Alabama Governor, George Wallace. Specifically, Carter gives Wallace credit for laying a "foundation for the new ground rules of political warfare" with "angry rhetoric" aimed at "the marginal beneficiaries" of federal government assistance. Painting a different point of view, in his book, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics*, Schulman explains that the south was able to take control of politics because they had experienced an economic and population boom. Thus, Schulman believes that the economic and population gain in the South allowed southern culture and politics to dominate and permeate America.

According to Carter, Wallace voiced the backlash many Americans were feeling in response to the Civil Rights Movement and the perceived moral decadence that followed with race riots and anti-patriotic demonstrations. Attacking both political parties and the Supreme Court, Wallace raged about the politicians "kowtow(ing)" to "anarchists" who burned flags and the justices making "'perverted' decisions" like "disallowing prayer" in school. Angry with the way the Republicans and Democrats had been mishandling the government, Wallace launched a political attack on the federal government aimed at "'elitist' bureaucrats" who were spending tax dollars on social programs. Wallace believed that using the tax dollars of hard working American people to pay for federally sponsored social programs was irresponsible and unfair.

In contrast to Wallace's radical rhetoric, Nixon's 1968 Presidential Campaign "Southern Strategy" hinged on maintaining a moderate platform that stressed "traditional Republican economic" and political "conservatism". In order to gain the Republican nomination and win the presidency, Nixon needed to "deftly" align himself with "critical" and influential southern politicians. Since "most southern GOP leaders" leaned to the right on all issues, Nixon was seriously concerned that they would support Wallace. Nixon privately sympathized with southern racist views but pointed out to the southern politicians that Wallace's overt extremism would not gain enough votes in the north and might cause some Republicans to vote for the Democratic candidate. While Carter gives full credit for the right wing political shift to Wallace, it seems that Nixon accomplished more by taking Wallace's southern hate rhetoric and making it more sensible and palatable for the rest of mainstream America.

Shulman states that for over thirty years after World War II, Jobs and people migrated to the "hospitable" south. With non-union labor markets, state subsidies, long-term tax abatements and suburbanized cities, the south was attractive to both northern industries and migrating professionals. Shulman claims that along with this migration came a reassertion of southern cultural identity and regional pride. Due to the influx of new industry and working people, the south was "no longer...captive to extremist politics of overt racial demagoguery". However, old and new southerners remained opposed to liberal bureaucrats. This new breed of Southerner, Shulman insists, "formed the foundation for conservative populism, the tax revolt, and the Reaganite assault on the welfare state".

Both authors present many valid factors that contributed to the rise of the new right. Certainly, Carter's argument is convincing. Nixon's cunning determination to utilize Wallace's southern popularity to position himself and his conservative political values in the White House had an effect on the swing of national politics at that time. However, it seems that Shulman uncovers a more viable root explaining the widespread growth of a right wing political orientation by revealing that the majority of voters during the rise were a burgeoning constituency of long-time and newly transplanted southerners.