



Whistling Past Dixie: How Democrats Can Win Without the South

Thomas F. Schaller

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Two generations ago Kevin Phillips challenged Republicans to envision a southern-based national majority. In *Whistling Past Dixie*, Tom Schaller issues an equally transformative challenge to Democrats: Build a winning coalition *outside* the South.

The South is no longer the "swing" region in American politics -- it has swung to the Republicans. Most of the South is beyond the Democrats' reach, and what remains is moving steadily into the Republican column. The twin effects of race and religion produce a socially conservative, electorally hostile environment for most Democratic candidates. What's wrong with Kansas is even more wrong in the South, where cultural issues matter most to voters.

Yet far too many politicians and pundits still subscribe to the idea that Democrats must recapture the South. This southern nostalgia goes beyond sentimentality: It is a dangerously self-destructive form of political myopia which, uncorrected, will only relegate the Democrats to minority-party status for a generation. The notion that Democrats should pin their hopes for revival on the tail of a southern donkey is no less absurd than witnessing the children's variant of the party game, for both involve desperate attempts to hit elusive targets while wandering around blindfolded.

Meanwhile, political attitudes and demographic changes in other parts of the country are more favorable to Democratic messages and messengers. The Midwest and Southwest are the nation's most competitive regions. There are opportunities to expand Democratic margins in the Mountain red states while consolidating control over the reliably blue northeastern and Pacific coast states. Before dreaming of forty-nine-state presidential landslides like those of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, the Democrats ought to first figure out how to win twenty-nine states. And that means capturing Arizona -- or even Alaska -- before targeting Alabama.

Republicans cannot win without the South, Schaller argues, but they also can't win with the South *alone*. Much as Democrats were confined to the South for decades prior to the New Deal, the Democrats should South but little else. After winning and governing successfully elsewhere, Democrats can then present their record of achievement to the South -- the nation's most conservative region, but one that is steadily assimilating with the politics of the rest of America and, therefore, will become more competitive in the future.

But for now, Democrats must put strategy ahead of sentimentality. To form a new and enduring majority coalition, they must whistle past their electoral graveyard. They must whistle past Dixie.

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