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Valdimer Orlando Key: Mapping Southern Politics, 1949

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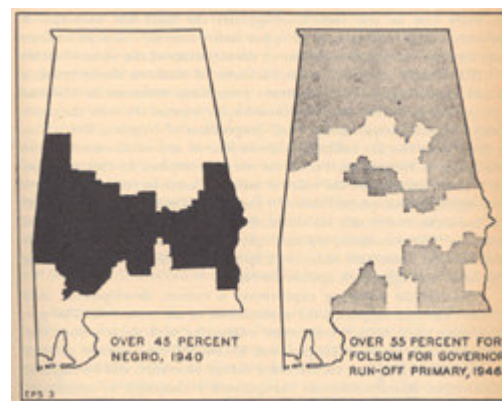
Background

Government is an inherently spatial phenomenon. States are created over a specific and limited amount of geographic space. Sharp boundaries, no matter how arbitrarily drawn, serve to separate the area under one state's exclusive control from that of another. In the United States, presidents are chosen by an electoral college, which was originally devised to generate candidates with support

across the country, rather than regional favorites. Both the the Senate and the House of Representatives are comprised of members that represent geographic areas, whether states or districts. The Civil War was fought largely over questions of geopolitical balance between the North and the South.

With such a spatial foundation at its intellectual core, it may come as some surprise that patterns of spatial behavior were not seriously investigated or mapped in political science until well into the twentieth century in the person of Valdimer Orlando Key. It is perhaps equally surprising that mapping political behavior in the United States continued to be neglected until relatively recently. Over the past decade, improved statistical methods, GIS techniques and even legal decisions have brought geography back into mainstream political science.

Born in Texas in 1908, Valdimer Orlando Key rose to become the prominent political scientist of the twentieth century, teaching at UCLA, John Hopkins, Yale, and eventually Harvard, as well as being elected President of the American Political Science Association and serving on a campaign expenditures commission under President John Kennedy.



While Key wrote numerous books on a wide variety of topics, he is best remembered for his seminal 1949 book, *Southern Politics in State and Nation*. Delving deep into the political mechanisms of the American South, Key demonstrated through exhaustive research how traditional Democratic party dominance hindered the development of multiparty democracy across the region in a variety of ways. While the book played a major role in explaining the politics of the South in the years leading up to the civil rights movement, it was also among the first to utilize maps to clearly depict spatial patterns of behavior that would have been invisible in traditional statistics and tables.

Innovation V.O. Key's *Southern Politics in State and Nation* aimed to take a comprehensive look at the inner workings of the South's infamous political institutions. Once the era of Reconstruction came to end in 1877, the South had gradually moved to disenfranchise newly liberated African-American slaves and instituted a strict system of segregation and white supremacy. Accompanying the disenfranchisement of black voters was the rise of what became known as the "Solid South," in which the white-dominated political institutions routinely elected Democratic candidates at every level from the presidency down to governors and mayors.

By 1949 the disenfranchisement of blacks was coming increasingly under attack. In 1944 the Supreme Court in *Smith v. Allwright* banned the practice of excluding blacks from Democratic primaries, which was where elections for public office were effectively decided. Four years later, President Harry Truman ordered the desegregation of the Armed Forces, leading to a third-party presidential campaign by arch-segregationist Strom Thurmond. Through all of these events, the common image of the South was a region that voted in relative harmony for Democratic candidates with the singular purpose of maintaining white supremacy.

Key's book set out to disabuse such notions. The first portion of his book dealt with each southern state in turn, showing a wide variety of political climates, from the "oligarchy" machine in Virginia to the relative free-for-all in Alabama. In later chapters, Key dealt with issues such as voter turnout, literacy tests, and primaries.

Key resorted to mapping election and primary results to illustrate several common themes throughout the book. He believed that spatial patterns of votes could tell a great deal about voter preferences and motivations. For example, Key asserted that without a formal two-party structure in the South, a "friends-and-neighbors" system of electing local favorites often prevailed over issues or platforms. He showed a map displaying results from a 1946 Democratic gubernatorial primary in Alabama, in which "Big Jim" Folsom drew votes most heavily from the counties immediately surrounding his then-current and boyhood

homes in the northern and southeastern parts of the state. Similar instances were shown in South Carolina, Mississippi, and Florida.

Perhaps Key's most important thesis was that support for economic and social conservatism was by no means uniform over the Solid South. In observing the impoverished state of many lower-class whites throughout the South, Key noted that "the South ought, by all the rules of political behavior, to be radical." In looking at the above-mentioned 1946 gubernatorial primary between Folsom and Handy Ellis, Key's map showed a striking cleavage in voting patterns. Folsom, who called himself "The Little Man's Big Friend," supported increased spending on teacher's salaries, infrastructure, and elderly care. Ellis, his opponent, focused on keeping taxes low and supporting businesses. Folsom wound up winning counties in the northern and southeastern parts of Alabama in which blacks were not very numerous and incomes were fairly low. Ellis, on the other hand, gained much of his support from the "black belt," a group of politically active counties in central Alabama which had populations of 45 percent or more black.

Key demonstrated similar examples elsewhere. Elections in Mississippi showed a split between support for candidates in the rural hills of the east and the black belt counties of the Delta region in the west, and South Carolina showed a similar division between the black counties of the Coastal Plain and the poor white counties of the western Piedmont.

Such spatial trends convinced Key that a major political phenomenon was at the root of it all. "A poor, [largely white] agrarian area, pressed down by the colonial policies of the financial and industrial North and Northeast," Key observed, "offers fertile ground for political agitation." In contrast, in the black belt "the overshadowing race question, in which the big farmers have the most immediate stake, blots up a latent radicalism by converting discontent into aggression against the Negro." In many parts of the country, such divergent constituencies would be expressed by support for two opposing parties. In fact, the South had seen multiparty democracy before the Civil War. Again using geographic evidence, Key pointed out that black belt counties had supported conservative Whigs during the 1840s. "The conservative black-belt Democrats of today," Key summarized, "are the heirs of the Whigs of a century ago." The Democratic party monopoly, then, was only a mechanism "to insure locally a subordination of the Negro population and, externally, to block threatened interferences from the outside with these local arrangements."

Key's book was a highly influential work in terms of its comprehensive study of southern politics, and to this day continues to be a valuable resource for those who study the South. Key's employment of spatial data to uncover hidden trends and behavior sparked a small movement within political science to further

develop spatial data collection and interpretation.

With the advent of the civil rights era, the emphasis on spatial modeling focused on Key's subject of socio-economic voting patterns in the form of "ecological inference" (or EI), which seeks to derive information on individual behavior from aggregate spatial data. Otis Dudley Duncan and Beverly Davis developed a method of "bounds" in 1953, which derived the proportion of support for a given candidate from a given population subgroup by estimating the upper and lower limits (bounds) of possible support over multiple districts. In the same year, Leo Goodman introduced a single-equation ecological regression model.

Both of the above methods became important for legal reasons, as the Supreme Court and many lower courts dramatically expanded the definition of discrimination and equal voting rights during the 1960s and 1970s by citing the containment of racial voting blocs as minorities in winner-take-all voting districts, a practice known as "minority vote dilution." Its reverse, "packing," involved redistricting minorities overwhelmingly into single districts to minimize their impact. Over the past decade, GIS systems have been developed to detect evidence of both practices, as well as to facilitate new redistricting efforts.

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