

dilemma in each of these approaches, however, surfaces almost as soon as they are enunciated.

The first approach—social conservatism triumphant—attempts to build a majority coalition by adding socially conservative groups, including religious (largely Protestant) fundamentalists and traditionalistic (largely Catholic) urbanites, to the normal Republican vote. As a result, it requires emphasizing culture and laying off economics, since conservative economic doctrine runs counter to the economic interests of these lower-middle- and working-class individuals. Yet this approach simultaneously *drives away* the socially liberal members of the upper-middle class, who comprise the largest share of those self-styled “independents” who, in turn, bulk increasingly large in American politics.

The second approach, conversely—economic conservatism revisited—makes its primary appeal to this new and growing population of highly educated, comparatively wealthy, “independents,” who would logically be Republicans on the basis of the old organizing issue, that is, on the basis of economics. But to attract them, it is necessary to re-emphasize economics and at least to remain silent on social policy—thereby aborting the drift of religious evangelicals and traditional working folks to the Republican party. To make matters worse, finally, an attempt at moderation on both dimensions, rather than bringing both groups into the fold, may well fail to hold the upper-middle-class independents, while it fails to attract the lower-middle- and working-class traditionalists.

### **The Future of Cultural Politics**

Even then, caveats abound. Nothing guarantees that the Democrats will not find a candidate with such a blend of personal, ideological, and constituency attractions that he can overcome internal party dilemmas and recapture the presidency in the face of these (apparently intractable) strategic problems. Indeed, that is one view of what the Republicans have actually done. President Ronald Reagan may only have managed to camouflage the strategic choices which a

Republican candidate must apparently—inevitably—face, through just such a (unique) blend of personal assets and historical accident. A successor, however, if he cannot count on continued strategic errors by the Democratic party, also cannot necessarily plan to continue the same balancing act within the Republican party, since he will almost surely have to mobilize one side or the other of the cultural divide in order to seek the Republican nomination.

The possibility of yet another grand issue, or even of a return to some prior grand issue, must also be acknowledged. A severe economic downturn, a continuing crisis in foreign affairs, epidemiological, climatic, or genetic disaster, all might overshadow culture as rapidly as it appeared to overshadow economics. But in their absence, the genie of culture is out of the bottle and moving rapidly across the political landscape. Where it will appear, in what guise, and to what effect, may not yet be known. But its role at the center of American politics already seems assured. And that role will be no less significant for any current inability to divine the future in the detail with which we experience the present in the era of cultural politics.

## **The Runoff: The Case for Retention**

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Alexander P. Lamis, without arguing for or against the runoff, recently called attention to the political situation elimination of the runoff would threaten.<sup>1</sup> This

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<sup>1</sup>“The Runoff Primary Controversy: Implications for Southern Politics,” *PS* 17 (Fall 1984), 782-787.

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article follows up Lamis's account by analyzing the case for the elimination of the runoff. Since the runoff is not the cause of the electoral defeats of black candidates, ending the runoff will not provide the cure. Moreover, the removal of the runoff runs the risk of reducing black political influence. Consequently, those seeking to abolish the runoff may be better served by the retention of the runoff.

Nomination under the runoff rule requires the support of a majority of the voters.<sup>2</sup> If no one acquires majority support in the first primary, a runoff between the top two candidates is held. Since few election districts have black majorities, the runoff, some say, advantages white candidacies and disadvantages black. Jesse Jackson made this issue central to his 1984 presidential campaign, claiming, "The runoff has devastated the impact of the Voting Rights Act. . . ." and "We must end the second primary before it ends us."<sup>3</sup>

Advocates of the runoff's elimination envision the following scenario. Without the runoff's majority vote requirement, black candidates in minority black districts could gain the Democratic nomination by drawing on solid black voting support while two or more white candidates split the white vote. This would produce more black nominees and more black elected officials since these black Democratic nominees should enjoy—thanks to the party label—sufficient general election support from Democratic whites for victory. If this scenario would indeed result from elimination of the runoff, then the retention of the runoff promotes racial bias. Also, in the absence of black candidacies the runoff might depress the representation of minority interests by enabling white office-seekers and white

incumbents to serve primarily the interests of the majority white electorate. Examination of recent southern politics raises doubts about such possible racial biases of the runoff.

### **The Prospects for More Black Elected Officials**

Assume for the moment ending the runoff would mean more blacks secured the Democratic nomination. Could we then anticipate the election of more black officials? The appeal of Republicans to white southerners and the reluctance of southern whites to vote for black candidates suggest the answer is no. Gone are the days of the Solid South, the Democratic nomination is no longer tantamount to election. Even for electoral contests between white candidates, Democratic whites voting for Republicans have characterized the recent South. The added stimulus of race could make such defections even more common. The degree of racially polarized voting (particularly the reluctance of whites to vote for blacks) that makes it difficult for a black to gain a majority in a Democratic runoff in a nonblack majority district would work to favor Republican prospects, resulting in the defeat of the black candidate. Making southern whites choose between race and party when their party ties have loosened considerably might accelerate the decline of the Democrats, promoting Republican candidates to an extent Republicans themselves have not yet managed. Bert Lance, the Georgia State Democratic chairman, echoed the same thought: "I don't see how anyone who thinks this thing through could agree with Jesse. Quite simply, all it would do is help elect Republicans at every level."<sup>4</sup>

### **The Prospects for Black Nominees**

Removal of the runoff seems unlikely to produce more black elected officials, but would its removal produce more black nominees? To profess interest in such

<sup>2</sup>Eight states of the former Confederacy now have the runoff. The states presently without the runoff are Louisiana, Tennessee, and Virginia. Oklahoma also has a runoff but its relatively small black population sets it apart from the other eight states.

<sup>3</sup>*Newsweek*, 9 April 1984, 34; and Steven Roberts, "Ruing Jackson's Stand on Runoffs," *The New York Times*, 16 April 1984.

<sup>4</sup>Phil Gailey, "Runoff Issue Puts Democrats on Spot," *The New York Times*, 3 May 1984, b13.

losing causes may seem politically pointless—if blacks will not win general elections, why wonder if more blacks will gain the Democratic nomination? Yet, as with Jackson's presidential campaign, politically energizing effects of black candidacies on the black community can result from the candidacy itself, win or lose. The likelihood of black nominees gaining a plurality of the primary vote in a crowded field seems enticing enough to encourage some to argue for ending the runoff. However, in majority black districts, as supporters of the runoff point out, a single primary system might mean multiple black candidates split the black vote and allow a white candidate to gain a plurality nomination. Thus the runoff can protect and promote the prospects for black elected officials in majority black districts. After reapportionment produced an increase in single member districts, several with black majorities, the chairman of South Carolina's House black caucus noted, "Things have changed so that the runoff now can work in our favor."<sup>5</sup>

Such arguments depend upon more than two candidates seeking the nomination. If only two candidates seek the nomination, the winner must gain majority support, as in a runoff. Ending the runoff accomplishes little if political forces then tend to restrict contests to two candidates. Experience with single primary and runoff systems in the south and the border south indicates runoffs encourage multiple candidacies in the first primary but single primary systems work to limit the number of candidacies to two. Bradley Canon examined gubernatorial primaries, runoffs, and nominations in 16 southern and border south states between 1932 and 1977. Canon found that in the 10 states with runoffs, the top two candidates averaged 67 percent of the first primary vote, but in six states with single primaries, the top two candidates averaged 93 percent.<sup>6</sup> Under the

runoff, several candidates can enter the first primary striving to qualify for the runoff but, if failing in that quest, bargain productively with the first or second place finisher to deliver support in the runoff. Under a single primary system, such bargaining takes place before the primary as interested parties seek to line up behind a winner. The single primary system's tendency to limit contests to two serious candidates, in conjunction with the pressures provided by racially polarized voting, make it likely that a black candidate for the nomination would face a single white candidate. Under prevailing conditions this showdown would produce defeat for the black candidate in election districts not winnable by a black in a runoff.

### **The Prospects for Black Candidates Generally**

The willingness of Democratic white voters to back Republican candidates and their reluctance to vote for black candidates make the elimination of the runoff a recipe for reducing black political influence. Some may see such white voters as unfit shapers of the future of the Democratic party. Insofar as Democratic party leaders are motivated by a desire to win elections rather than mount losing crusades, current voter attitudes are to be worked with rather than assumed away. Southern blacks may be the most loyal Democratic group, but basing the party on that loyal but limited constituency is not promising for electoral success at the polls.<sup>7</sup> The prospects for general election

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C. Canon, "Factionalism in the South: A Test of Theory and a Revisitation of V. O. Key," *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 22, November 1978, 833-848.

<sup>7</sup>Advocates of abolition of the runoff have high estimates of the Democratic party's strength and resilience. For instance, Mickey Michaux, the most prominent victim of what some consider the runoff's racial bias, stated, "In North Carolina, Democrats outnumber Republicans 3-to-1. It'll take a long time for the Republican Party to catch up. So what if 400,000 or 500,000 whites defect?" (*Congressional Quarterly Weekly*, 5 May 1984,

<sup>5</sup>Jack Bass, "Democrats: Here's a 40% Solution," *Washington Post*, 22 April 1984, d1-d2.

<sup>6</sup>Such differences could not be explained by other considerations such as the degree of Republican competition in the state. Bradley

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majorities based primarily on black votes are restricted to very few southern districts, indicating the election of black (or black-backed) candidates hinges on biracial coalition politics. Few southern Democratic elected officials have gained office without a sizable share of white votes; most Republican officeholders have gained office with very few black votes. For Democratic candidates, nomination rules encouraging the seeking of biracial support promote prospects for election. Retaining the runoff may lead to more black-white coalitions backing white Democratic candidates who can successfully make biracial appeals. Courting and composing these biracial coalitions requires a politics capable of reducing rather than reinforcing the politics of race. Such political cooperation between the races provides a more promising basis for collaboration leading to the eventual nomination and election of southern black candidates. On the other hand, eliminating the runoff in the face of strong racially polarized voting should mean continued racial polarization, lower Democratic chances of succeeding in the general election and an acceleration of the movement of southern whites into the Republican Party as white voters and politically ambitious whites find the GOP an increasingly attractive party.

### **Recent Experience with the Runoff: White Responsiveness to Black Voters**

Black political influence is not restricted to the nomination and election of blacks. If black votes, even though a minority, can influence which white wins, candidates should respond to the minority. Yet if the runoff's majority requirement dilutes black votes by encouraging candi-

dates to favor the white majority and slight the black minority, candidate shifts in response to the black vote should not have occurred. Did such responsiveness occur?

Before blacks voted in large numbers throughout the South, runoff campaigns often consisted of one candidate charging the other had secured the black vote in the first primary, black support constituting "the kiss of death." Even as blacks gained an effective right to vote, some white officials hoped this would continue. The following speculation occurred shortly before passage of the Voting Rights Act and pointed to hopes the runoff would help minimize black political influence.

Eli Howell, director of the Sovereignty Commission, pointed out the comfort that politicians see in Alabama's two-primary system. They reckon that the Negroes will vote as a bloc in the first primary and it will quickly become visible which candidate they supported. If the Negro-supported candidate is in the runoff, most of the white voters will swing behind his opponent, Howell said. This has happened many times in Alabama in local as well as state elections. "There will always be at least one candidate who is strong on segregation," Howell said. "He may not win the election, but he will have a big voice in determining who does win it."<sup>8</sup>

Did the runoff meet such expectations in the post-Voting Rights Act south?

Southern gubernatorial candidates provide the best measure of electoral responsiveness. Until recently, few could seek reelection, removing the advantages of incumbency from contests for governor. The shifting racial and economic stances of Democratic gubernatorial runoff winners suggest without proving that since passage of the Voting Rights Act the runoff may have helped sensitize candidates to minority voters.

Earl Black analyzed the racial and economic stances of all southern guber-

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1035). In North Carolina, Democrats have won 8 of 9 gubernatorial elections and 12 of 15 contests for the U.S. Senate since 1948, the Democratic plurality exceeded 500,000 only in the 1976 gubernatorial election (517,191). Democrats nonchalantly writing off one quarter of the entire electorate, and a formerly supportive quarter at that, is not and would not have been a winning strategy even with North Carolina's three-to-one registration edge.

<sup>8</sup>Tom Johnson, "In Alabama—State's White Voters Far Outnumber Negroes," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 6 June 1965, section 5, 2 (*Facts on Film*, 1964/5, J9 5535).

natorial candidates from 1954 to 1973. Black notes that from 1954 to 1965 (a period in which the Supreme Court's 1954 Brown decision made race a prominent issue in southern campaigns) strong segregationists won 76 percent of the southern Democratic runoffs, but from 1966 to 1973 (the immediate aftermath of the Voting Rights Act) nonsegregationists won 73 percent. As racial stances changed, a marked shift also occurred on economic issues. Prior to the Voting Rights Act, 71 percent of the runoff winners did not call for substantially increased educational expenditures. After 1965, 87 percent of the runoff winners called for such expenditures. Prior to the Voting Rights Act, only 12 percent of the runoff winners championed the cause of the "have-nots" and saw their struggle with the "haves" as the essence of politics. After 1965, 47 percent of the runoff winners took such a position.<sup>9</sup> Assuming black voters favored increased educational spending and the "have-nots" rather than the "haves," the shifting economic stances of runoff winners match the movement one would expect in response to new black voters.

The runoff did not prevent responsiveness to the new black electorate; it may have helped promote it, making candidates faced with the necessity of marshalling a majority of the Democratic vote more sensitive to the new voters within the party. Prior to blacks' voting, staunchly segregationist whites could exert controlling influence; after blacks gained an effective right to vote, black votes entered candidates' political calculations. Initially, open solicitation of the black vote was rare in some states, but many Democratic candidates found it helpful if not essential to have black support in the primary and runoff, and—given the growing Republican threat—in the general election. Apparently, in recent years the runoff has not diluted minority votes.

<sup>9</sup>Earl Black, *Southern Governors and Civil Rights: Racial Segregation as a Campaign Issue in the Second Reconstruction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 209, 350-351.

### Why Was the Runoff Adopted?

Viewing the runoff as racist in practice goes along with convictions about its racist origins. But its origins, like its operation, are apparently less racist than critics contend.

A typical view holds that "Part of the impetus for establishing runoffs . . . came from white supremacists bent on discouraging blacks from voting."<sup>10</sup> Such motivations would have been anachronistic. When southern states adopted the runoff, few blacks voted in general elections and even fewer voted in Democratic primaries.<sup>11</sup> Disfranchising measures such as poll taxes and literacy tests had already drastically reduced the number of black voters. Since most blacks considered themselves Republicans before the New Deal, for the blacks still voting, taking part in Democratic primaries was not a pressing concern. Not that Democrats welcomed black participation—the white primary rules formally excluded blacks from voting in Democratic primaries. The runoff cannot be viewed as an important component of the southern attempt to squelch black political influence because of the potent limits on black participation in place before the adoptions of the runoff.

Discounting the political threat posed by the black vote when the runoffs were established might be considered beside the point if white supremacist legislators and party leaders were acting with farsighted willingness to strengthen segregation further: ". . . [S]ome whites saw the runoff as protecting their dominance even if, as eventually happened, the courts declared the blatant tools of political segregation unconstitutional."<sup>12</sup> This

<sup>10</sup>Phil Duncan, "Jackson's Anti-Runoff Push Divides Southern Democrats," *Congressional Quarterly Weekly*, 5 May 1984, 1034.

<sup>11</sup>For a more detailed presentation of runoff adoption dates and an elaboration of the arguments made here, see my "Race and the Runoff," Public Policy Discussion Paper No. 8403, University of Rochester, November 1984.

<sup>12</sup>Duncan, "Jackson's Anti-Runoff Push," 1034.

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argument, if true, suggests white supremacists should have taken comfort from the existence of the runoff when the Supreme Court declared the white primary unconstitutional in *Smith v. Allwright* in 1944. Instead these legislators scrambled frantically to find a constitutional substitute for the white primary.<sup>13</sup>

A review of the timing and context suggests the runoff did not have strongly racist origins. But as previous discussion reveals, even if the runoff had racist origins, such origins are divorced from the current results of the runoff in political practice.

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The ultimate results of abolishing the runoff now would be few if any additional black Democratic nominees, few if any additional black elected officials and perhaps more Republican victories. Such an outcome would serve to exclude black voters from more winning coalitions, thereby reducing black political influence.

The racial bias some see in the runoff's operation is rooted not in the runoff but in the reluctance of southern white voters to back black candidates. Removing the runoff will do little to alter that white attitude. Even if more black candidates gained the Democratic nomination in the absence of the runoff, which seems unlikely, white support for those black candidates in the general election seems apt to be insufficient for election.

Blacks for the foreseeable future are critical to electing southern Democrats, but a Democratic candidate without white support is not electable in most of the South. More Republican victories seem certain in the absence of white and black cooperation. The black-white alliances made more likely by majority vote requirements such as the runoff facilitate the cooperation essential to erode white reluctance to vote for blacks and thus foster fairer divisions of patronage and elective posi-

tions. Blacks do have more extensive and effective political organizations than do whites and the two races have differential abilities to deliver on explicit terms of such a political alliance. Black and white cooperation means more Democratic candidates would be elected and blacks have a greater claim to gaining more elective offices. Insofar as those are the terms for continuing black loyalty to the Democratic party, and those terms are enforced, blacks stand to gain more by retaining than by rejecting the runoff.

Evidence suggests the runoff has not reduced black political influence. Maintaining and maximizing black political influence requires removing the remaining racially discriminatory barriers blacks face. As reports have noted, some southern blacks still face harassment and intimidation in registering, voting, and running for office; uncooperative or even hostile registration and polling officials depress the black vote; black access to the polls is made more difficult by the location of the polling places and the lack of effective assistance at the polls; restrictive registration practices also affect whites, but given the legacy of past educational and economic discrimination, such practices have a greater impact on blacks; limited access for black candidates to the white community—particularly civic organizations and sources of campaign funds—can reduce chances of election; absentee ballot abuse can reduce the chances for ousting incumbents; and racial gerrymandering can carve bleak constituencies for black electoral prospects.<sup>14</sup> The runoff does not deserve inclusion among lists of such barriers to the election of blacks and black political influences. Consequently, drawing attention to the runoff diverts attention from efforts to remove the real barriers to the election of blacks and black political influence.

<sup>13</sup>V. O. Key, Jr., *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York: Vintage, 1949), 619-643.

<sup>14</sup>U.S. Civil Rights Commission, *The Voting Rights Act: Unfulfilled Goals*, September 1981.