

Is America Going South?

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The U.S. can be divided into four cultural/geographic regions: Northeast (11 states), Midwest (12 States), Pacific/Mountain West (13 states), and South (14 states). This division excludes D.C., puts Alaska and Hawaii in the West and divides the border states as follows: Kansas and Missouri in the Midwest, West Virginia and Kentucky in the South, and Maryland in the Northeast.

The Northeast enjoys a rich history of cultural, educational and economic leadership. The Midwest is known for fertile farmlands and great industrial cities. The West has spectacular natural beauty and is home to many high tech industries. And the South is best known for racial strife, conservative politics and rural poverty.

Which of the four regions has the smallest population? Which has the smallest Gross Domestic Product? And which has the least influence on presidential elections? If you accept the common wisdom you might be surprised.

In percentage of U.S. population, as of 2003, the regions rank as follows: South (33.64%), West (22.90%), Midwest (22.53%), and Northeast (20.92%).

The percentage of U.S. GDP in 2001 was distributed as follows: South (30.41%), Northeast (24.13%), West (23.77%), and Midwest (21.69%).

On the political front, from 1952 to 2004 the number of elected presidents from each of the regions was: South (5), West (2), Midwest (1), and Northeast (1). That is, five of the last nine men elected president established their political identity in the South.

Do the data surprise you? In population, production, and political clout the South leads the nation, and the lead has been increasing in all three categories.

In the middle of the twentieth century, southerners were still leaving the South to find jobs in the Midwest. Southern economic planners realized that for the South to catch up with other regions, it had to attract more industry. Initially progress was slow as the South struggled to escape its past, but decades of planning finally paid off. South Carolina brought in BMW, Tennessee got Saturn and Nissan, Kia went to Georgia, Nissan located in Mississippi, and Alabama attracted Mercedes, Honda, Toyota and Hyundai. Critics complained that these automotive giants went south to find cheap labor, but in fact the wages paid at the new factories were very good and are looking even better as GM and Ford plan more U.S. plant closings. Furthermore, these manufacturers

industries came from Europe and Asia, not the Midwest. And it wasn't just automobile manufacturing that was growing in the South.

As Joe Hollingsworth pointed out in 2003 in The Southern Advantage, the South not only has more business startups than any other region, a larger percentage of them succeed. Entrepreneur.com listed American's "hot" entrepreneurial large and mid-sized cities for 2005. Six of the top-ten large cities and eight of the top-ten mid-sized cities were in the South. In other words, 60-80% of the nation's top entrepreneurial cities are in the South.

If you still have "Yes, but..." on your lips, loathe to miss an opportunity to assert the South trails the nation in education, per capita productivity and wealth, and average standard of living, then you have missed the point. The South is leading in population, production and presidential politics in spite of its historical problems and handicaps.

The stereotype of a red-state South may lead conservatives to take heart in the South's political power, but in fact the South has often supported liberal presidents. John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton did well in the South. The South rejected Humphrey, McGovern, Mondale and Dukakis as too liberal, but so did most states outside the South. The core of the national conservative movement is still centered in the Midwest and West, not the South. Indiana, Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming, Idaho, Utah, Arizona, Alaska, Oklahoma and Virginia are the only states that voted against Kennedy in 1960, Carter in 1976, and Clinton in 1992. Only the last two of these states are in the South.

The last time a conservative candidate won only the South was over forty years ago when the white South voted against Johnson because he was presiding over the last battle of the Civil War—the battle over the Civil Rights Act.

Those who still cling to the stereotype of a rural, racist, backward, divided and conservative South, slipping further and further behind in an otherwise productive and progressive nation, are missing one of the biggest stories of our day. An industrial and culturally diverse South has emerged as the nation's economic and political engine.