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“Goldwater in Dixie:  
Rhetoric and Reality in the Growth of the Postwar Republican South”

This paper examines Barry Goldwater’s role in both promoting the growth of the Republican Party in the American South and in shaping the narrative of how and why that growth occurred. Conventional wisdom has long held that the growth of the GOP was driven by a top-down “southern strategy” in which Republican leaders used subtle appeals to race to win Democratic converts. More recently, however, scholars have begun to carve out an alternative interpretation, one that argues that class—and, in particular, the rise of the postwar Sunbelt economy and the middle-class professionals that populated it—not race was the central factor explaining GOP growth.

Historians have failed to appreciate how this debate itself has its own history, one in which politicians like Barry Goldwater and political operatives surrounding him played a major role. This paper examines how Goldwater attempted to shape the discourse about GOP prospects in Dixie in the 1960s and what impact Republican growth in the South would have on the party as a whole. In his countless speeches and appearances across the region in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Goldwater, as much as anyone, was responsible for advancing the idea of a “New Breed” of modern southern Republicans, a party led by white collar, college-educated professionals, many of them migrants to the region, who were the drivers of the economic transformation of the postwar South. Yet it is important to place alongside this interpretation a close look at the actual operation of Republican organizations during this time. The picture that emerges is a more complicated view of an inchoate Republican South, one in which racial and class consideration were constantly in flux. It is a portrait that undermines easier, more straightforward historiographical interpretations about the sources of the modern Republican South.