From Yellow Dog Democrats to Red State Republicans: Florida and Its Politics since 1940 by David R. Colburn

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David Colburn, one of Florida’s most prolific and significant historians, has added to his already impressive list of books and articles about Florida’s history and politics. His most recent book, From Yellow Dog Democrats to Red State Republicans, is an impressive piece of scholarship that blends history, politics, and demographics in an effort to explain partisan transformation in Florida since 1940.

Colburn’s chronological history of Florida’s politics argues that the state gradually abandoned its southern “racist traditions” in moving from a one-party Democratic state to the one currently dominated by the Republican Party. Colburn’s effort is extraordinarily evenhanded, pointing out partisan strengths as well as warts and blemishes.

In his introduction and opening chapter, Colburn paints the portrait of demographic change that has so influenced its politics. Florida went from being the least-populated southern state in 1950 to the fourth-largest in 2000, with its Hispanic population rising from 1 percent in 1945 to 19.6 percent in 2005; with its senior population rising from 6.9 percent in 1945 to 21.8 percent in 2005; and with a population that grew by 13 million between 1950 and 2000. No other state has experienced such profound demographic change. That massive population boom resulted in Florida having only a third of its residents being born in the state, with almost 50 percent coming from other states and 18 percent being foreign-born. This has caused citizens to feel disconnected from the pressing political issues facing Florida. This lack of community leads to political isolation among the state’s voters and creates a burden for its politicians who must appeal to a continually changing electorate.

Colburn traces political change mostly by focusing on gubernatorial elections from the 1950s to 2006. Greater attention to U.S. Senate and House elections, state cabinet races, and state legislative races would have provided a broader understanding of how partisan change took place in the Sunshine State. There is no reference to “presidential Republicanism” in Florida, the process by which the Republicans began making inroads in elections first at the presidential level, then congressional, followed by state-level races and finally at the local level.

Colburn does an excellent job summarizing over a half century of Florida’s
political history, talking about the key races, personalities, and issues. Race and reapportionment receive special attention. As the national Democratic Party became more supportive of civil rights for African Americans, many white southerners abandoned the party and fled to the Republicans. Colburn points out correctly that race alone was not the overriding reason for partisan change. Florida's court-ordered reapportionment in the 1960s in *Swann v. Adams* opened up underrepresented urban areas in Florida, a key factor in the emergence of the Republican Party. I would differ with Colburn's interpretation of the impact of reapportionment in 1992. Colburn, like others, argues that the reapportionment led to huge Republican gains. That is true, but it ignores the fact that Democrats were still in full control of the Florida legislature and the reapportionment process. Because of recent federal court decisions, Florida was under order to create as many “majority-minority districts” as possible. When Florida's African Americans--12 percent of the state's population but 25 percent of the Democratic vote--asked for more seats in the state legislature and congressional delegation, the Florida Democratic Party leadership said no. Realizing that the creation of black districts would “bleach” surrounding districts and make them more likely to elect Republicans, the Democratic leadership asked blacks to trust white Democrats to represent their interests. Having been denied a seat in Congress for over a century, blacks joined forces with Republicans. The three blacks elected to Congress from Florida in 1992 were the first since Reconstruction, and Republicans took over control of the congressional delegation.

There are a few other points that need clarification or correction in the book. Colburn constantly refers to “Crackers,” “Yellow Dogs,” and “native and rural Floridians,” but never differentiates those groups. The most glaring factual error occurs on page 192: In discussing the disputed 2000 presidential election and the contested overseas military vote, Colburn talks about the ongoing war in Iraq and Afghanistan as a reason to have counted military votes. Those wars had yet to begin.

Overall, this is an impressive addition to the literature on Florida's history and politics, and anyone interested in learning more about Florida's past or future political history would be hard-pressed to find a better starting point than David Colburn's *From Yellow Dog Democrats to Red State Republicans*.

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