



REGIONAL RESOURCE

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LEGISLATIVE PARTY DISTRIBUTION IN THE SOUTHERN STATES:

1996-2000

After decades of Democratic domination, a two-party system emerged in much of the South at the end of the century. Republicans made tremendous gains in the first half of the 1990s, but since then, their advance has been somewhat stymied. The latter half of the decade between 1996 and 2000 has seen a slight increase in Republican influence in Southern Legislative Conference (SLC) state legislatures, but Democrats continue to maintain sizable leads in the majority of chambers. While Republicans control only seven (up from four in April 1996) of a possible 32 chambers, the GOP has been slowly gaining on the South's traditional party of choice, the Democrats, in most SLC states.

In some cases, Republican increases have had momentous effects. Since 1996, Republicans have become the majority party in the Kentucky Senate, the Florida House, and both chambers in Virginia. On the other hand, Democrats have rebounded to regain control from the GOP in the Tennessee Senate and the North Carolina House.

In 1996, Democrats controlled 28 of the 32 chambers in SLC states. Republicans were the majority only in the Florida Senate, the North Carolina House, the South Carolina House and the Tennessee Senate.¹ In each case, with the exception of the North Carolina House, where the Republican majority would prove to be short-lived, the GOP enjoyed a relatively slim advantage. With the exception of the Florida GOP, Republicans have not yet reached the stage in the South where they can begin to consolidate their gains without fear of being overtaken by the Democrats. Since 1996, the GOP has managed to expand its lead only in Florida, but it is proving to be competitive in many SLC states.

¹In September 1995, two Democratic senators switched party affiliation, giving the Republicans a majority in the Tennessee Senate. However, the Democrats regained their majority as a result of the November 1996 elections.

TRENDS

There are three major, identifiable trends when considering party distribution in the SLC legislative chambers. The first is a major swing toward the Republicans, which has resulted in control of at least one chamber of the statehouse in three SLC states: Florida, Texas and Virginia. The second is a gradual increase in GOP members of the assembly, while still falling short of a majority. This has been the case in a number of smaller states. The third is continued allegiance to the Democrats. However, two states, North and South Carolina, follow none of these three trends. North Carolina has undergone a dramatic shift back to the Democrats after two terms of Republican rule in the House, while South Carolina's House has retained a Republican majority.

REPUBLICAN AWAKENING

In the second half of the 1990s, the GOP made substantial gains in both Texas and Florida, formerly solidly Democratic states. In April 1996, Democrats held a modest lead (63-57) in the Florida House and a large majority in the Texas House (87-63). However, two years later, Republicans in Florida had increased their numbers by six, enough to take control of the chamber. Their

Southern Legislative Conference

Alabama ■ Arkansas ■ Georgia ■ Kentucky ■ Louisiana ■ Maryland ■ Mississippi ■ Missouri
North Carolina ■ Oklahoma ■ South Carolina ■ Tennessee ■ Texas ■ Virginia ■ West Virginia

Texas counterparts gained five seats as well. The Republicans in Florida went on to further consolidate their hold on both chambers, and now boast an edge of 30 in the House and 10 in the Senate. The Texas Senate also shifted to a Republican-controlled chamber, with the GOP enjoying a slim, 16 to 15 edge, while their colleagues in the House have now closed the gap to six.

Virginia also fits in this category, entering 1996 with a slim Democratic majority in the

House and an evenly split Senate. By 1998 a one-member shift toward the Republicans had turned the Senate into GOP territory, and their victory in the House of Delegates in the 1999 elections resulted in full Republican control of the General Assembly.

All three of these states are relatively wealthy, have recently elected Republican governors and boast large suburban populations. Florida, Texas and northern Virginia also tend to attract newcomers from out-of-state who may have contributed heavily to a tilt toward Republicans. Therefore, GOP breakthroughs in these states' legislatures come as no major surprise.

GOP ON THE MOVE, SLOWLY

In other states, especially those where the Democrats have enjoyed total domination in the legislature, the GOP is slowly making progress. The two best examples are Arkansas, where term limits are beginning to play a major role in the legislature, and Georgia. Since April 1996, when they accounted for only 12 percent of seats in the House, Arkansas Republicans have doubled their total to 24 seats, still not enough to threaten the Democrats but a considerable advancement nonetheless. Republican hopefuls have not been as successful in the Senate, however, where Democrats have increased their margin by one seat.

Georgia has experienced a slight swing to the GOP. House Republicans have increased their numbers by 12, while the Senate has three more GOP members than it did four

years ago. Democratic dominance, however, is threatened in neither chamber, and Georgia has not elected a Republican governor since the days of Reconstruction.

STILL THE SOLID SOUTH

The majority of SLC states remained under Democratic control, even in the second half of the 1990s. Alabama, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, Oklahoma, Tennessee and West Virginia experienced either little change in party distribution or a consolidation of Democratic control of their legislatures during this period. The one exception is in the Kentucky Senate, where two Democrats tipped the scales by switching parties and giving Republicans the majority.

These states saw Republican gains in the first half of the decade, but the GOP has since hit a plateau. In some, such as Alabama and Oklahoma, the GOP has made small gains in both chambers, while in others, notably in the Maryland House and both chambers in West Virginia, Democrats have increased their already impressive margins.

THE EXCEPTIONS

The Carolinas fit none of the above categories. South Carolina's House has been firmly in Republican control since 1996, but Democrats have narrowed the GOP margin to 10 seats. However, Republicans have made headway in the Democrat-controlled Senate. South Carolina, like Alabama, also elected a Democrat as governor in 1998.

North Carolina stands out as one of only two

SLC states to post gains for the Democrats in each chamber during the last two elections. Facing a deficit of 16 in the House in 1996, Democrats added seven members that year and an additional seven in 1998, when they regained their majority. They now have a 12-member advantage. During the same period, the Democratic Senate majority increased from two to 20 members. Democrats now occupy 35 of the 50 seats in the North Carolina Senate.

CONCLUSION

While the GOP posted impressive gains from 1990 to 1995, the Democrats have largely rebounded to hold their ground in Southern state legislatures. Some richer and more suburbanized states have turned toward the GOP, but most SLC states have retained clear Democratic majorities in both chambers, with several states continuing to elect Democrats almost exclusively.

Changes in Party Distribution from April 1996 to January 2000				
State	House 1996-1998	Senate 1996-1998	House 1998-1999	Senate 1998-1999
Alabama	GOP + 2	GOP + 1	GOP + 2	Democrats + 1
Arkansas	GOP + 2	No change	GOP + 10	Democrats + 1
Florida	GOP + 6	GOP + 1	GOP + 12	GOP + 2
Georgia	GOP + 12	GOP + 2	No change	GOP + 1
Kentucky	Democrats + 3	GOP + 1	GOP - 1	GOP + 2
Louisiana	No change	GOP + 1	GOP + 3	Democrats + 2
Maryland	No change*	No change	Democrats + 7	No change
Mississippi	GOP + 2	No change	Democrats + 3	No change
Missouri	Democrats - 1	No change	Democrats + 1	GOP + 1
North Carolina	Democrats + 7	Democrats + 4	Democrats + 7	Democrats + 5
Oklahoma	No change	GOP + 3	GOP + 4	No change
South Carolina	GOP + 6	GOP + 2	Democrats + 5	GOP - 1
Tennessee	Democrats + 2	Democrats + 2	GOP + 2	No change
Texas	GOP + 5	GOP + 3	GOP + 4	Democrats + 1
Virginia	GOP + 1	GOP + 1	GOP + 4	No change
West Virginia	Democrats + 5	Democrats + 1	Democrats + 1	Democrats + 4

Bold + italics indicates a change in the majority party.

* In April 1998, there was one vacancy in the Maryland House of Delegates.

Missouri Democrats lost one seat to an independent in the 1996 elections.

There is one vacancy in the Kentucky House.

There is one vacancy in the South Carolina Senate.

Party Distribution - April 1996								
State	House				Senate			
	Dem.	Rep.	Ind.	Vacant	Dem.	Rep.	Ind.	Vacant
Alabama	73	32			23	12		
Arkansas	87	12		1	28	7		
Florida	63	57			18	22		
Georgia	114	66			35	20		1
Kentucky	61	37		2	21	17		
Louisiana	78	27			26	13		
Maryland	100	41			32	15		
Mississippi	85	34	3		34	18		
Missouri	87	76			19	15		
North Carolina	52	68			26	24		
Oklahoma	65	36			36	12		
South Carolina	54	65	4	1	26	19	1	
Tennessee	59	40			16	17		
Texas	87	63			17	14		
Virginia	52	47	1		20	20		
West Virginia	69	31			26	8		

Figures are taken from *The Book of the States, Volume 31*.
Bold + italics indicates a Republican majority

Party Distribution - April 1998								
State	House				Senate			
	Dem.	Rep.	Ind.	Vacant	Dem.	Rep.	Ind.	Vacant
Alabama	71	34			22	13		
Arkansas	86	14			28	7		
Florida	57	63			17	23		
Georgia	102	78			34	22		
Kentucky	64	36			20	18		
Louisiana	78	27			25	14		
Maryland	99	41		1	32	15		
Mississippi	84	36	2		34	18		
Missouri	85	76	1	1	19	15		
North Carolina	59	61			30	20		
Oklahoma	65	36			33	15		
South Carolina	52	71	1		25	21		
Tennessee	61	38			18	15		
Texas	82	68			14	17		
Virginia	51	48	1		19	21		
West Virginia	74	26			25	9		

Figures are taken from *The Book of the States, Volume 32*. There were neither vacancies nor independent members in the SLC state senates in April 1998.

Bold + italics indicates a Republican majority.

Party Distribution - January 2000								
State	House				Senate			
	Dem.	Rep.	Ind.	Vacant	Dem.	Rep.	Ind.	Vacant
Alabama	69	36			23	12		
Arkansas	74	24		2	29	6		
Florida	45	75			15	25		
Georgia	102	78			32	23		1*
Kentucky	64	35		1	18	20		
Louisiana	75	30			27	12		
Maryland	106	35			32	15		
Mississippi	86	33	3		34	18		
Missouri	86	76	1		17	16		1 †
North Carolina	66	54			35	15		
Oklahoma	61	40			33	15		
South Carolina	57	67			24	21		1 ‡
Tennessee	59	40			18	15		
Texas	78	72			15	16		
Virginia	47	52	1		19	21		
West Virginia	75	25			29	5		

Figures were obtained by telephone survey of each legislative chamber.

Bold + italics indicates a Republican majority in the highlighted chamber.

* Senator Diana Harvey Johnson (D-Savannah) resigned in 1999 after being convicted of federal mail fraud.

† Senator J.B. "Jet" Banks (D- St. Louis) resigned in December 1999, citing health problems. His successor is expected to be a Democrat.

‡ Senator Holly A. Cork (R- Port Royal) resigned on December 31, 1999.

This report is based on information taken from the two most recent volumes of The Book of the States, which is published biennially by The Council of State Governments. The political party information presented in each edition is current at the beginning of each biennium. Since Louisiana, Mississippi and Virginia elect state legislators in odd-numbered years, the party distribution in these three states may change at a different time during a given two-year cycle.

This *Regional Resource* was prepared by Douglas Jacobson, SLC Research Associate. Information was gathered from the office of each SLC state's House clerk and Senate secretary.

The SLC is a non-partisan, non-profit organization serving Southern state legislators and staff. First organized in 1947, the SLC is one of four regional components of The Council of State Governments (CSG), a national organization which has served all levels of state government for more than 65 years. The SLC is headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia.