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Politics

The Black Radical Tradition in the South Is Nothing to Sneer At

Dismissing the South as backward “Trump country” is just plain wrong.

BY **TAYLOR CRUMPTON**

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On Election night, the South was demonized and vilified for being unable to produce enough voters to sway states like Texas and the Carolinas in favor of Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden.

Instead of drawing attention to the systematic political inequalities in the region — evidenced by **an influx of discriminatory legislation** that hinders Black voters’ right to participate in the nation’s electoral process — users across social media elected to criticize the region, often drawing on its historical past of white supremacy to evidence the lack of social and political change. A recurrent theme was “This is why I could never live in a red state,” jokes about **not helping Southern states** during future natural disasters, and comments like, “No matter how cheap it is to live in the South, I would never move down there.” Those comments reminded me of anti-Southern backlash on social

media after the video of Ahmaud Arbery's fatal shooting in Georgia went viral. Yet months later, voters in that state ensured **Jackie Johnson**, the district attorney who initially handled Arbery's case, lost her reelection on election night.

So it's worth reminding those social media critics of something: Whenever political change occurs in the South, it's not because of the influx of college students, transplants from the coasts, or a revolt among voters in the suburbs — it's because of Black communities. It's because of the region's **rich history of grassroots organizing** that preceded the nation's electoral system. In the colonial era, what were known as maroon communities, composed of enslaved Africans who had escaped and Indigenous Americans, **launched the nation's first organized resistance against fascism** and white supremacy. Before the formation of the nation's modern political institutions, southern Black people organized, mobilized, and fought against oppressive state regimes because, inherently, we've always known that our struggle for liberation and freedom would always be something we had to handle on our own.

Under the Trump administration, Black politicians in the South have acquired political office in a wave that merits comparisons to the **post-Civil War Reconstruction era**. On a **mayoral level**, Black women such as Washington, D.C.'s Muriel Bowser and Atlanta's Keisha Lance Bottoms have emerged as rising stars in the Democratic Party, reflective of the historical lineage of Black women in politics. Andrew Gillum and Stacey Abrams, former gubernatorial candidates in their respective states of Florida and Georgia, shifted political perceptions about the changing tides in the region's politics; their campaigns highlighted the issues of voter suppression and disenfranchisement among Black voters in the South. **Jaime Harrison**, the Democratic challenger to Senator Lindsey Graham, **earned 44% of the state's vote** in his campaign against one of the highest-ranking members in the Republican Party, with Black voters showing Democrats that their state *is* worthy of national investment.

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Mauree Turner also made history this year, winning election as the first nonbinary state legislator in the country and the first Muslim politician in Oklahoma. Katrina Rogers organized voters against **Amendment 1**, an anti-abortion ballot that would amend Louisiana's constitution to deny residents' right to an abortion and funding towards abortion clinics. Rogers, reportedly the only Black woman to run a statewide campaign around abortion in the country, implemented a reproductive justice framework through **Louisiana for Personal Freedoms**, centering the needs of marginalized communities in Louisiana, where more than 30% of the state's population is Black.

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Throughout history, as Walda Katz-Fishman and Jerome Scott wrote in their **2002 article "The South and the Black Radical Tradition: Then and Now,"** the South has "been a key site of struggle between forces seeking to impose fascist rule and forces seeking the revolutionary reconstruction of society." It has been the "location of the most intense repression, exploitation, and reaction directed toward Africans Americans as well as Native Americans and working people generally."

Think of slave raids and rebellions in the 18th and 19th centuries, famously led by Nat Turner in the United States, and of political organizing in the Postbellum South, where Southern Blacks saw gains in political representation and **launched a fight for fair wages as sharecroppers in local labor unions** while facing the terroristic violence of white societies like the Ku Klux Klan. Representation in politics does not undo centuries of institutionalized white supremacist ideologies and practices that inherently endanger the lives of Black people. As the Klan and other white vigilante groups ascended to political power, organizers in the Black South entered an era of militarism, where Southern Black residents were encouraged to participate in armed self-defense. The Black panther was first introduced

as a cultural and social symbol of the Black Power movement in Alabama in 1965 via an organization known as [the Lowndes County Freedom Organization](#). The Black South, especially the rural areas, are crucial to understanding the region's — and the country's — political history.

We've always organized and fought back for a greater purpose. We've never had a choice to trust the nation's institutions, and instead, organizers from the Black South challenged their white supremacist structure and ideology in every era. Nearly 60% of the nation's Black population resides in the South, with the largest percentages in [Texas, Georgia, Florida, North Carolina, Maryland, Virginia, and Louisiana](#), according to July 2017 data from the [Census Bureau](#). Despite migration patterns to Eastern, Midwestern, and Western regions of the United States, where descendants of Southern Black people started their own localized movements for racial justice, their ideological and institutional foundations originated in the South.

In the same week where Black Southerners were criticized for the Electoral College votes of Republican-leaning states, [Black voters in Georgia helped ensure that Joe Biden](#), the Democratic presidential candidate, would likely become the 46th president. The Democratic Party didn't win the 2020 presidential election because of the Biden-Harris ticket, they won because of Black Southern organizers who mobilized their communities outside of election years and in highly contested gubernatorial and senatorial races. They won off the backs of Southern Black women, some of whom believe in electoral politics and fulfilled their civic duty through voting, and others who educate residents about their power as individual actors against the state. The Black South is not a monolith, but the region needs to be centered because of our history and contributions as a community. After this presidential election, y'all damn sure need to respect us.

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