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DAVID BOWEN

Politics today: GOP power, racial hostility



Columnist

It has been only a few years since people were saying they felt obligated to vote Republican to help develop a two-party system in Mississippi. Now it's the poor ol' Democratic Party which needs their help.

Never in our national history has there been a more obvious justification of the famous Will Rogers aphorism: "I belong to no organized political party. I am a Democrat."

Times have sure changed

When I was a boy, my father once pointed to a man crossing the street in my Mississippi Delta hometown and told me to look at him but not stare.

I asked what was so strange about the man and he told me he was a Republican — I might never see another one.

Times they have changed.

It is difficult now to foresee election of another Democratic governor or lieutenant governor. Democratic statewide officials with more technical functions, such as insurance and agriculture commissioners and even secretaries of state, may continue to be re-elected.

There may even be occasional newly elected Democrats, such as Attorney General-elect Jim Hood, when better qualified than opponents and retiring incumbents work aggressively for them.

But don't count on many of those.

We will not in any foreseeable future find a black Democrat elected to statewide office. It is quite possible that a well-qualified, moderate African American, such as Gary Anderson, could be elected as a Republican.

The two dominant forces in Mississippi politics today are racial hostility — on both sides, black and white — and Republican power (conservative social and cultural values linked to organizational skills and money).

At the county level, the paradigm may become the Jackson metro area. Madison County is 60 percent white, and Rankin is 80 percent white. Both have exclusively white and Republican countywide officeholders.

Hinds County, more than 60 percent black, is unlikely ever again to elect a Republican countywide.

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Era Over in Hinds County

With the defeat of white Republican Tax Collector Bill Burrow and white Republican Chancery Clerk Glynn Pepper, the era of countywide Republican officials in Hinds is over.

We do, of course, have several white Democratic countywide officials in Hinds County, but don't expect white successors when they retire.

State legislators are traditionally elected because of seniority and service to constituents, so loyalty to friendly local incumbents shows fewer GOP gains in the Legislature.

The most potent force in the politics of Mississippi and the South, to a lesser extent the nation, is race. We are embroiled in a new kind of race war, now that the civil rights battles of the past are over and won.

The black perspective is that whites are discriminatory and racist.

The white perspective is that black public officials are incompetent, discriminatory and racist.

There is a bleak future for our state and indeed our nation unless we can find a way to bring our disparate and diverse racial and ethnic groups together.

This conflict has almost destroyed the Democratic Party in the South, certainly in Mississippi. There are still many who run for office successfully in Mississippi as Democrats, but there is no organized, effective political party.

Republicans have found an appealing and successful political solution, uniting white Americans, with others joining in small numbers. The Democrats, who depend more heavily on minorities, are still seeking a solution.



David Bowen of Jackson is a former member of Congress who represented Mississippi's 2nd District. Bowen, a writer and consultant, is a regular contributing columnist.