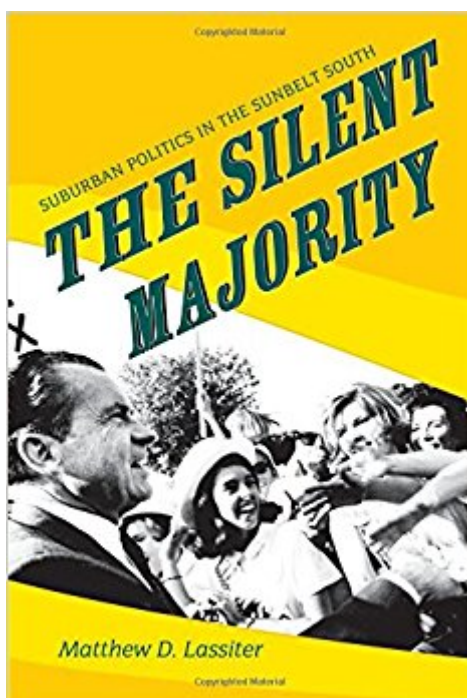


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# The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics In The Sunbelt South (Politics And Society In Modern America)



## Synopsis

Suburban sprawl transformed the political culture of the American South as much as the civil rights movement did during the second half of the twentieth century. *The Silent Majority* provides the first regionwide account of the suburbanization of the South from the perspective of corporate leaders, political activists, and especially of the ordinary families who lived in booming Sunbelt metropolises such as Atlanta, Charlotte, and Richmond. Matthew Lassiter examines crucial battles over racial integration, court-ordered busing, and housing segregation to explain how the South moved from the era of Jim Crow fully into the mainstream of national currents. During the 1960s and 1970s, the grassroots mobilization of the suburban homeowners and school parents who embraced Richard Nixon's label of the Silent Majority reshaped southern and national politics and helped to set in motion the center-right shift that has dominated the United States ever since. *The Silent Majority* traces the emergence of a "color-blind" ideology in the white middle-class suburbs that defended residential segregation and neighborhood schools as the natural outcomes of market forces and individual meritocracy rather than the unconstitutional products of discriminatory public policies. Connecting local and national stories, and reintegrating southern and American history, *The Silent Majority* is critical reading for those interested in urban and suburban studies, political and social history, the civil rights movement, public policy, and the intersection of race and class in modern America.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"This is a powerful book on a powerful subject. It should have a lasting impact on the way historians think about modern southern politics, urbanization, civil rights, and race relations."--Raymond A. Mohl, *Journal of American History*"Matthew Lassiter persuasively argues in *The Silent Majority* that the Republicans gained in the South not because of regional racism but because of the meteoric growth of the Sun Belt suburbs, which created a new class of middle-income, socially moderate and fiscally conservative voters."--Clay Risen, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*"Matthew D. Lassiter argues convincingly that academics and pundits alike are wrong to point to a top-down 'southern strategy' to explain why the South transformed from a Democratic Party into a Republican stronghold. The book presents a fresh way of thinking about not only late-twentieth-century American political history but also the impact of the postwar civil rights movement."--Damon Freeman, *Journal of Southern History*"In this engaging and important book, Matthew Lassiter recasts the history of the postwar sunbelt South. By focusing on the complex interactions of race, class, consumerism, and the politics of metropolitan space, he supplants the familiar 'southern strategy' interpretation with one of a 'suburban strategy' driven by color-blind arguments, individualism, and free-market consumerism at the grassroots. . . . At a time when once solidly Republican enclaves . . . are becoming more diverse and susceptible to incursion by Democrats, Lassiter's fine book offers provocative ways to examine the role of race, class, consumerism, and metropolitan space in our local and national politics."--Craig A. Kaplowitz, *H-Net Reviews*"Lassiter makes a major contribution . . . by examining the importance of the suburb. . . . Lassiter offers first-rate, path-breaking scholarship that covers new ground and raises key questions. This book is quite well suited for graduate courses in urban studies."--Timothy K. Kinsella, *Historian*

"Matt Lassiter offers a major reinterpretation of the transformation of liberalism and the rise of conservatism in the post-1960s South and in America writ large. He shows how white Southerners, like their Northern counterparts, embraced a rhetoric of color-blindness that gave them cover to build a sprawling, suburban world that reinforced racial inequalities. This provocative, pathbreaking book offers a whole new conceptual map for the reappraisal of Southern history and national political history."--Thomas J. Sugrue, University of Pennsylvania and author of *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*"Impressively researched, *The Silent Majority* brings together valuable and wholly new collections of archival material. Many historians pay lip service to the need to draw connections between the grassroots and the leadership, the local scene and national affairs. Lassiter actually does it. With verve and grace, he presents compelling accounts of grassroots mobilizations in Virginia, South Carolina, and Tennessee, and sensitive, detailed case studies of Atlanta and

Charlotte. At the same time, he demonstrates how these local, suburban movements both reshaped national politics."--Bruce Schulman, Boston University

The Silent Majority stands as a landmark in a new generation of scholarship on the American South. Matthew Lassiter is spot on in his dissection of the myths of de facto segregation, national innocence, and southern distinctiveness. Rejecting a narrative that revolves around individual racism, he shows us how we arrived at our current dilemmas. This book is indispensable reading for anyone seeking to understand how the North and the South have converged around an 'intractable landscape of racial apartheid' in which class ideologies and divisions play a central role."--Jacquelyn Hall, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill and Director, Southern Oral History Program.

"The Silent Majority is a compelling recounting of modern liberalism's demise and the ascendance of center-right politics. It is based not on Nixonian Southern strategies and stubborn remnants of malign racist thought and deeds, but on the adoption of socially acceptable race-neutral resistance to racial equality, financed by federal initiatives which created white suburbs and encouraged majority black urban cores. This is a breakthrough rethinking of established thought, discarding conventional wisdom."--Julian Bond, Chairman of NAACP

"Matthew Lassiter has mastered an impressive body of primary and secondary sources ranging widely over national, regional and local materials over the past fifty years. He uses this mountain of evidence to make a telling point about the emergence of suburban southerners as a primary political force in the region, and about their impact on school desegregation."--David R. Goldfield, University of North Carolina, Charlotte

I did not find this book to be "dry" or filled with "jargon." On the contrary I found it to be one of the most stimulating works of history I have ever read. Lassiter has new and interesting interpretations of the "Southern Strategy" and the idea of Southern exceptionalism. He explores a post civil-rights suburban culture of "middle class entitlement." Every scholar writing about race and class in the second half of twentieth century America has to grapple with the collapse of New Deal liberalism and the rise of conservatism. Scholars like Lassiter, Kevin Kruse, Robert Self, and Thomas Sugrue, who work in the fields of urban and suburban studies, have given us some of the most interesting explanations. They write that this political shift is located within the privatized, exclusionary, color-blind world of the white suburb. Lassiter's narrative of the busing battle in Charlotte is riveting. He gives us exactly the micro historical perspective here that another reviewer claimed was lacking in this book. He examines all the key players in this drama, and most interestingly he discusses the attitudes of the working class white residents who could not afford to live in the suburbs. The book overflows with interesting observations on Southern and national politics, and how they were

shaped by a new suburban consensus that was national in scope, and could not be simply attributed the peculiarities of Southern racial politics. Lassiter also lays out a metropolitan perspective that if adopted could finally begin to more equally distribute the power and wealth that the suburbs have seized at the expense of urban America. This is one of those rare books that has a lot of interesting things to say, and is also a joy to read. An essential book to understand American politics and the limits of what the civil rights movement was able to accomplish.

Having read some of the other reviews for this book I think that what disappointed many people was the way the book chose to concentrate on school desegregation in several southern metro areas to demonstrate how common perceptions of the political realignment based on racial politics transformed the South. While the author does make a very strong argument with these facts, I think that the book has not been marketed that way and that has disappointed some. While the writing for this book is a little dryer than others in the series I still found the argument strong and I liked the way the final chapter tied it into the efforts of the Nixon led Republican Party to gain the southern states. While the Southern Strategy as we have come to know it may not have been a reality the author shows that race was still very much a central issue in the emerging suburban politics of the South. While this book is not a casual read and is defiantly not popular history, I think that it would be interesting in poetics in the south or efforts to desegregate southern school systems and the challenges to our political institutions that that presented.

Lassiter's book addresses the creation of contemporary Republican Party dominance in the South. Lassiter distinguishes the "Sunbelt" from the "South" on the basis of class and urbanization, but also history: the South is a complete society with a history going back to the 1600's, whereas the Sunbelt refers to recently developed, high-growth urban population centers. While the South comprises all classes, stata, subcultures, and races, the Sunbelt is specifically the new South of urban sprawl, suburbs, affluent regional immigrants, and (often) technology, finance, or mass retailing. Specifically, the book addresses the urban legend that GOP operative Kevin Phillips won the South for the Republicans through a strategy of ostentatious appeals to racism. However, this question only dominates the preface and Chapter 10 (of a 12-chapter book); otherwise, the book is an outstanding study of the sociological divisions within a specific region of the Southeastern USA. In particular, the book examines a period from around 1960 to 1975 when several policies of the New Deal came to fruition. During this period, Georgia and North Carolina (for example) experienced extremely rapid economic growth and something of a political thaw from the Talmadge & Shelby Dynasties. Federal

programs, chiefly in defense and energy, stimulated manufacturing and research in the areas around Atlanta and Charlotte. In 1960, finally, Atlanta and Charlotte were associated with the "New South," in which White Power and paternalism were shunned by a cosmopolitan and business-oriented populace. The wedge issue for these regions was the desegregation of the school districts. In 1959, the Open Schools Movement emerged to resist the scheme of closing all public schools (a scorched policy to resist desegregation, and the precursor to the "Voucher" schemes). The Open Schools Movement seldom or never endorsed the \*Brown vs. [Topeka] Board of Education\* decision (1954), but merely stuck to the position that compliance within the system of public schools was a practical necessity. An important point that emerges from the complex struggles over desegregation, integration, and busing was that the affluent, managerial class of homeowners and voters (whose voting power and electoral influence far surpassed its actual numbers in the Southern cities) was opposed to the egregious racism of people like Wallace or Maddox, and insisted on colorblindness, attractive neighborhoods, safety, and "fairness" to [White] households living in the present day. Lassiter explains how the idealism and hope of the 1960's and '70's both enabled White acceptance of desegregation, and fueled the suburban sprawl that effectively restored segregation. Definitely a first-rate, measured, and well-documented account of the era, with a strong focus on two specific cases studies (Atlanta and Charlotte).

Having had the opportunity to have learned from Lassiter at the University of Michigan, reading his book was quite a joy. Lassiter's insight and perspective on the growth of suburbia in the South and the move towards "color-blindness" as opposed to the racially conscious liberal movement offers a great theory that counters the somewhat accepted notion of individual racism as the driving force in the 1960s south. Really a great read for anyone interested in the subject, and even those who may not be as interested. Lassiter has a great way of writing that really makes this book readable.

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