

Title: Angie Maxwell, The New Southern Strategy
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Transcript

[From Heterodox Academy, this is *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*, conversations with scholars and authors, ideas from diverse viewpoints and perspectives. Here's your host Chris Martin.]

Chris Martin: A fierce academic debate about Southern history has raged on Twitter over the last 12 months. If you follow the historian Kevin Kruse on Twitter, you probably know about this debate, which is mostly between him and Dinesh D'Souza. Kruse is the only one who has historical evidence on his side but the debate has pulled in other historians including Kevin Gannon and Heather Cox Richardson.

The focus of this debate is the Southern Strategy which caused Southern white voters to move from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party from the 1960s to the present.

Today I'm talking to Angie Maxwell, a political scientist and American Studies scholar about the Southern Strategy. Her new book *The Long Southern Strategy: How Chasing White Voters in the South Changed American Politics* comes out on June 28th, 2019. The book is co-authored by Todd Shields.

Angie is at the University of Arkansas where she heads the Diane D. Blair Center of Southern Politics.

So to begin, let's talk about the term "Southern Strategy". Some of our listeners might be familiar with that term. But when historians and political scientists use that term, what do they mean?

Angie Maxwell: OK. Well, the traditional what I would call the short Southern Strategy is the idea that Goldwater and Nixon decided to pursue Southern white voters by tapping into the white angst that accompanied – you know, changed the Civil Rights, you know, laws and that people were so angry and so upset that they would play to that and get them to flip from Democrat to Republican.

That's the traditional kind of Southern Strategy story.

Chris Martin: In your new book *The Long Southern Strategy*, you argue that the strategy extends beyond the 1960s and that's why the word "long" is in the title. So what evidence do we have for this longer strategy?

Angie Maxwell: Well, the best evidence is just to look at the electoral map post-Nixon and you see that if that had been the moment that the South flips completely Republican, then you wouldn't have the South supporting Democrat Jimmy Carter in '76 or Bill Clinton in the 1990s. Both of those were Southern white candidates. So it pulls at Southern white voters. But it also

meant that white racial angst was not enough alone to flip the region, maybe because attitude has changed or maybe because the backlash to Civil Rights kind of subsided in its intensity.

But we see the GOP once again decide to take a fork in the road on issues related to feminism and the Equal Rights Amendment and then on the pursuit of evangelical Christian voters and those two choices along with playing into white racial angst is really what flips the South from blue to red all the way from the national to the state, to the local level.

Chris Martin: Tell me about some of the key investments from the 1960s to the 1990s that established this strategy.

Angie Maxwell: So when you look at support from white Southern states for GOP presidential nominees, you see that in '64, Goldwater pulls five Deep South states but loses clearly the election. In fact he only wins one other state, which is Arizona, his home state.

Then you see that Nixon, who really tries to thread the needle between George Wallace who runs as a third party candidate in the South and picks up the Deep Southern states since of course he's the segregationist governor of Alabama, that Nixon wins the rest of the South and some of the peripheral South and that is the story we kind of tell that Nixon finds a way to use more coded racial language and therefore the South turns red.

But if you look at 1976, you will see that the South goes back to Democrats under Jimmy Carter. Of course governor of Georgia and one of their own kind of Southern white candidate and the GOP discusses and is kind of stressed about how to kind of turn the tide back. They feel like they've lost the inroads they made in the South because of Watergate and they tried to find some issue that they can – in addition to the coded racial language, to play up to win those white Southern voters back to the party.

So in the '80s, Reagan's team pulls 40,000 American women in a project that's headed up by Elizabeth Dole and a few others and they divide these women into 64 categories, which they gave titles like Betties, Annes, Helens, Nancies. But the larger trend they noticed is that Southern white women in particular are not feminist. In fact they're anti-feminist.

Of course 1977 is when you have the National Women's Convention in Houston and you have Phyllis Schlafly host an anti-feminist family values rally to counter that convention, which had been completely bipartisan, the National Women's Convention.

So in 1980, the GOP drops the ERA from its platform and really appeals to traditional gender roles, which is very successful for Reagan and shifts a whole lot of Southern white men, but also anti-feminist Southern white women to the GOP.

Then again in the '90s, you see that Bill Clinton's candidacy – again, a Southern white candidate pulls Southern voters back to the Democratic party and so there is another concerted effort and a decision made amongst GOP leaders to really try to appeal to Southern white evangelical voters and culture and that ends up really solidifying kind of the red South, not just at the national level but at the state and local level by the time you get to the candidacy of George W. Bush.

So it's really a combination of three kind of forks in the road that make Southern white voters so – not just voting one time for a GOP candidate but changing their party affiliation, Republican parties becoming really robust in the South. That whole infrastructure which is what you need in order to realign a region within party, you know, kind of in a thorough – you know, long standing way.

Chris Martin: And some people still dispute that there was a Southern Strategy. I'm thinking of Candace Owens most recently. Can you talk about why they justify that explanation?

Angie Maxwell: Well, it's a curious phenomenon. There was a pretty viral fake news video that tracked the Southern Strategy and tried to debunk it. That went pretty viral, which is what a lot of these folks kind of refer to when they talk about there was not a Southern Strategy.

Usually what they start with is the idea that it was Democrats who were the party of slavery. It was Democrats that were the party of segregation and so therefore the idea that the GOP is the party appealing to white racial angst in the South is false, right?

But as we know, the South realigns from blue to red, starting in the '60s and stretching all the way to the end of the 20th century. So they use that – they deny kind of the idea that the parties flipped on race to suggest this continuous Democratic support of white supremacy and kind of the traditional racial hierarchy that existed in the region.

So they make that argument. But it doesn't hold water because we have enough historical records now, enough archives that are open to see that there was a decision made within the GOP after losing in 1960 to Kennedy to really try to go after that Southern block of states in the Electoral College, by deliberately choosing to play to that white racial angst.

Chris Martin: So you just brought in the topic of gender and I think people generally associate the South with more racism and with evangelical Christianity. But one of the new things about the book is that you bring in gender. What made you decide to investigate that and how do ideas about gender roles play into politics differently in the South?

Angie Maxwell: That's a really good question. It has been a huge hole in the field and people who study Southern politics primarily because it has been a male-dominated field.

Also when we do all of our statistical models, gender is rarely significant in the South. But it's the fact that it's not, which means that women are as conservative as men that, you know, has got to be investigated. That's not the case outside of the region.

So when you start digging and you realize how little material there is, then it can make you stop and think, "Well, there must be nothing." But the more we know about that, the rise of anti-feminism, which there has been some research on really recently. Marjorie Spruill's book comes to mind and then you see how powerful it was and you realize that the family value slogan that becomes so dominant in the GOP in the last 20 years really comes from the anti-feminist movement under Schlafly.

Then if you – the Southern historians have done most of the research on where this kind of cult of Southern white womanhood comes from and they trace it all the way to being – it developed in kind with kind of their justifications for white supremacy.

So way back in the Antebellum South, the reasons for why you needed such control, white control over particularly black men is that Southern white women had to be protected, right? Held up on a pedestal, fragile and the two things kind of co-exist. So that becomes kind of the faux justification for slavery, for lynching, even for segregation and that has to have some long term political consequences. Discouraging white women from being involved in the public sphere, casting them as – like I said, fragile and in need of constant protection is not going to inspire strong political participation or women running for office.

We know that the suffrage amendment, you know, the states it fails in with only two exceptions are the states of the former confederacy and the ERA, same way, fails in the Southern states, almost universally.

Chris Martin: The ERA is the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s.

Angie Maxwell: Yes, the Equal Rights Amendment, right. So it sails through the house and the senate. But when it needs state ratification, it's the Southern states that keep it from having enough states pass it for it to become federal law.

So when you start looking at the map with suffrage and then with the Equal Rights Amendment and then you start looking at Southern white women changing their political affiliation, their party affiliation, you realize that there was this turning point and it happens in 1980.

Chris Martin: And there's a historical party here and then there's a political science part. The historical part is the part where you talk about Phyllis Schlafly, a figure who has been quite influential but a lot of Americans have not heard about and she was not actually from the South but she was quite influential in the South. So tell me a bit more about her.

Angie Maxwell: Well, Schlafly is actually – I mean I would argue that she kind of starts the Southern Strategy. She doesn't call it that. But she publishes a book called "A Choice Not an Echo" in the 1960s and she was basically a mom and a homemaker and a political organizer from St. Louis. But her argument in *A Choice Not an Echo* is that the Republican Party was not offering a distinct choice from the Democratic nominees. So she even kind of called it "Democrat lite" is what the GOP is being and in some ways, particularly when Civil Rights was the dominant issue, the Republican and Democratic party's platforms are almost identical in the 1950s.

We don't really know or we didn't know that maybe one party was going to go pro Civil Rights and one party was going to try to halt or dampen kind of progress in that direction and probably most people would have guessed that it would have been Democrats who would have taken that conservative position. But because of who – because of the Kennedys and because of who Democrats start to nominate, they really kind of brush off the Southern wing of the party.

You've got LBJ who signs the Civil Rights Act and gets identified. The Democrats get identified, kind of with pro Civil Rights and Schlafly is saying if we want to be successful as a party, we're going to have to distinguish ourselves from the Democrats.

So I mean Goldwater literally uses that slogan, "A Choice Not an Echo" in '64 on some of his campaign materials and then Schlafly, it's kind of quiet and then she really surges back into popular organizing when she founds the STOP ERA, which STOP stood for "Stop Taking Our Privileges" and she cast feminism as an ideology for which anti-feminism is a legitimate counter-ideology and she insists – and this is where she's really influential at a kind of deep place is she insists that anti-feminists get the same amount of time, the same amount of federal funding, the same number of seats on any commission and it really is a –it's a false equivalency because feminism was choice, right?

So to me the opposite of feminism is sexism, not anti-feminism because if you're supporting traditional gender roles or that's what you as a woman want for your life, then that's a choice that feminism allows for. But because some of the feminist leaders weren't making that choice, she really distinguishes anti-feminism as this counter ideology and she rallies the troops and organizes and gets them on these commissions and these – the UN has its International Year of the Woman that has all kinds of meetings and like I said commissions and she insists that the anti-feminists have roles in all of that and because so many show up for her anti-feminist rally, also in Houston, I think the GOP took notice and said this isn't a universal phenomenon among women. It's something very different and we can take this other side and win just as many women.

Chris Martin: And on the political science side, one of the measures you use is modern sexism. Tell me a bit more about why you picked that measure.

Angie Maxwell: So in 2008, when Hillary Clinton was challenging Obama for the nomination on the Democratic side and of course when Obama gets the nomination, we spent most of our time as political scientists trying to figure out like what the – what we call the "Bradley Effect" would be on Obama, which is how much would his racial ethnicity kind of cost him among voters.

So people who probably should vote Democrat based on their policy positions but who just won't pull the lever in the privacy of the voting booth for an African-American candidate. But what we didn't talk about and mostly because Clinton didn't get the nomination that time around is if there would be a similar kind of Bradley effect on gender.

So I started digging into what scales are out there for social scientists and it's the psychologists who really use modern sexism and it's a huge battery of questions. So in 2012, I picked five questions that I thought really spoke to political kind of ambition or a female candidate and asked them in a 2012 national poll I run and again in 2016.

The difference between modern sexism and maybe what we're used to thinking about, which is "Can women do the job?" Can a woman be commander-in-chief? Do we trust that?

These aren't those questions. This is the stage past that, which is we feel like a woman can do it. We're not really asking that. But we resent women who want to or we resent that ambition. It makes us uncomfortable and those numbers are really high, particularly among Southerners, men and women, white Southerners, men and women.

So we think that though it's an accomplishment to get past the traditional kind of attitudes towards women scale, which asks things like, "Can a woman do the job?" that getting past that ushered in a new kind of sexism which again is this resentment or distrust of women who decide to tackle that and those numbers are really high and they cost Clinton a significant percentage of voters we project and they – I think we see that more and more when we ask questions about electability and these other women candidates.

It's important to remember it's not men solely that hold modern sexist attitudes. It's a large percentage of white women as well.

Chris Martin: And when you're talking about Southern white men and white women here, you're particularly talking about not just those who reside in the South but those who identify as Southern, so who have a Southern identity.

Angie Maxwell: Right. So most of the time political scientists measure – well, all the time political scientists measure the South by geography and that makes sense. We vote where we live and so when you're predicting elections, it doesn't matter I guess if people identify with the region. It matters if they live there.

But Southern identity is a different beast and the Republican party choosing to really try to win Southern white voters meant that they had to tap into that Southern identity and so when you look at the South both as a place and as an identity structure, you see that there's a lot of people outside of the region who identify that way too.

Now maybe they used to live in the South. Maybe there's some aspect to the confederacy that they hold some value in or place some value in. We know we've got confederate flags flying in Iowa and Ohio and we've got confederate statues all over the country.

So it's important I think to measure both. If you're talking about identity politics, Southern identity and the Southern strategy, the long Southern strategy and the GOP's decision to play into that and kind of nationalize Southern white identity, it's crucial to try to figure out what it is.

Chris Martin: Right. One of the things I liked about the book was the way you break down the graphs and you show figures for people who live in the South, who leads the figures for white voters, white voters who live in the South and then white voters who identify as Southern and those numbers are never quite the same and I don't think any previous author has broken down figures in that way. I think it's useful to – I found it useful personally because I've lived in the South for over 20 years now and I think there are definitely Southerners who feels ambivalent about the South because of the confederacy and then Southern whites who don't and who are still quite proud of the South. For them, it's a core part of their identity.

Angie Maxwell: Uh-huh.

Chris Martin: One counterargument someone could raise about your book is that you're arguing that the Republican Party pursued a Southern Strategy. But a counterargument is they became more ideologically conservative and so of course they just won more votes in the most conservative region, which is the South. Maybe there was no Southern Strategy per se. So how would you respond to that?

Angie Maxwell: Well, we have – I mean a lot of it has to do with electoral strategy, right? So we know that there was a debate in the '60s between a pro Civil Rights wing of the party, the Rockefeller wing, who really did not want to play into white racial angst and the kind of Goldwater-Nixon wing of the party who thought that that strategy would benefit the party over the long run.

It's a real battle and there was a whole lot of Republicans who were very disappointed. You can see that in Goldwater. He loses everywhere except the Arizona and the Deep South.

The people were really turned off by that. But Nixon, when he kind of codes the language packages it better. It becomes more palatable to a lot of Republicans. We see the same debates in the '80s over the ERA. I mean as I mentioned, the National Women's Convention was wholly bipartisan and when I say that, I mean every former first lady was at that convention, Republican and Democrats. You had a huge feminist wing within the Republican Party and those women and men were very disappointed when the GOP drops the ERA from its platform.

I mean really disappointed and you have the same thing when the Republican Party decides to really chase evangelical voters. There were a lot of Republicans that warned and were worried that that was a marriage they would regret. That if they gave those groups that much power, that it will become a litmus test for their nominees, that it would be really hard to maintain, particularly after the Southern Baptist Convention becomes so hardcore fundamentalist, which is about a ten-year process that starts in 1979 because then, it moves away from an organization protecting the free exercise of religion and moves towards – for example their lobbying firm they fire and replace with a group that's pushing for the establishment of Christian religion within our public life.

There were many Republicans that thought that was a bridge they didn't want to cross. So we see these decisions getting made and we see whole chunks of the GOP – obviously not a majority but being very disillusioned by this and that strategy in there is really also run by a small group of people.

You know, I tell folks that when I heard that the Trump campaign had hired Paul Manafort way back, I just cringed as Paul Manafort is who ran Reagan's Southern campaign and when you look at who made the very racist Willie Horton kind of famous campaign ad that really hurt Democratic nominee Dukakis, you look at who made that ad and it was Roger Stone and Roger Ailes, a young Roger Stone and Roger Ailes.

So there has been this kind of cohort of people willing to do that work, frame the debate that way or hired by the campaigns and how far a candidate and their team will let that group push these issues. You know, traditional gender roles and kind of demonization of feminism. You know, racial angst and this kind of evangelical outreach. The more they will let them push that, oftentimes the more kind of extreme the party became.

Chris Martin: So one question I think that's an interest to a lot of our listeners is given this history, how do you differentiate between principled conservatism and Southern identity and how do you measure each of those things?

Angie Maxwell: Oh, it's a really good question. Well, a mistake that we often make – that's kind of what this whole book is about. It's like getting a realistic lay of the land so that the coalitions that need to be built depending on which side of the ideological spectrum you're on. But if you're a progressive, the coalition you need to build is maybe not what we thought, right?

So one of the mistakes we've made is lumping all people who express racial resentment or modern sexism or evangelical religion together. We're like, "Oh, that's these people," right? But it turns out that – and we show this in the book.

Most people are not all three. They don't fall on that category. They maybe hold one of those attitudes strongly. Maybe they're neutral on the other two. The place where you have the most voters who hold all three is of course in the white South and chasing all three of those things, taking those far right positions wins you a bigger chunk of the white South.

But it picks up hardcore evangelicals in the Midwest or people who are really uncomfortable with the female president that are in the Rust Belt, right? So it captures all of that and then in addition to that, you have kind of traditional conservatism, which had a lot to do with the views on the economy and the deficit and economic regulation.

We saw in the Tea Party that – and I still think this. A lot of the folks who started that kind of wing of the party were really concerned about the economy and the deficit and our federal spending.

The problem is, is that a whole bunch of other folks jumped on board the Tea Party because they saw it as a criticism of Obama and so it becomes kind of this placeholder for that extreme kind of racial resentment.

So there are ideological conservatives in there. They will not express high levels of racial resentment. They will not express high levels of modern sexism and they will not be kind of Christian nationalists and most of that has to do with the economy.

The problem is, is over the last 40 years, because the GOP has taken those positions, the American people have sorted themselves kind of accordingly.

So where you used to have maybe people who would express high levels of sexism, pretty evenly distributed in both parties, now you've seen a shift to the GOP.

It doesn't mean that all Republicans express that. In fact it's about – there's about 40 percent who don't among white Republicans. That's a lot of people but they can't contain. They don't have enough of a block to control that within their own party.

So there are still principled conservatives out there who don't express any of those things. But they're in the minority in their own party.

Chris Martin: So before we wrap up, tell me a bit about the Blair Center for Southern Studies where you work and what's unique about it.

Angie Maxwell: The Blair Center is named after Diane Blair who was a political scientist who focused on the South, passed away after a short battle with brain cancer and there was an endowed center named after her. Its mission is research and my team, one of the things we realized, that people who work on Southern politics struggle with is good data.

So even your excellent national polls like the American National Election Survey, their Southern samples most years are extremely small. One of the reasons the South is hard to poll in is because of the rural population.

So we decided that we would spend our resources getting really good data that would benefit scholars for generations. So this poll uses a firm that has an outreach into the rural South and so it has an oversample of the South, so that we can really tease out the differences in the people who live in the South and the people who identify as Southern and that really changes how the national picture looks when you get a true sample of the South and you don't just have most of it from the urban areas within the region.

[Music]

Chris Martin: The New Southern Strategy is by Angie Maxwell and Todd Shields, both at the University of Arkansas. It comes out June 28th in e-book and July 24th in hard cover. Angie and Todd will be appearing at the Politics and Prose Bookstore in Washington DC. So you can catch them there on July 24th. You can also follow Angie on Twitter, @AngieMaxwell1.

Our upcoming guests include Nick Christakis, author of Blueprint. As always, please leave us a review on iTunes if you enjoyed the show. It helps other people find out about the show. Thanks for listening.

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