

## Trouble down south for US Republicans

By Ryan Bowman and Andrew K. Woods

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McLeod's tyre shop, Lucedale, Mississippi

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### Voices from the American South

At first glance, McLeod's Tyre Shop in Lucedale, Mississippi, seems an unlikely venue for a political salon. It is a large, spare room, its contents pushed to the corners as if by an invisible centrifugal force, or maybe the weak wind of the ceiling fan. To the right of the entrance, four tyres stand on tiny podiums like sculptures in an art gallery. In the far right-hand corner of the room, a large 1920s stove slumbers beneath a Mississippi State football flag, which Doug McLeod hung to taunt his rivals from Ole Miss – the University of Mississippi. And in the far left-hand corner, a long counter is crowded with well-thumbed copies of every newspaper (local, state and national) from the past two weeks – kindling for starting and settling scores.

We walk in at the tail end of an argument between four men, just in time for McLeod to jam his finger into one of the newspapers and say, with an air of finality, "And that's why they should raise interest rates." McLeod has owned this tyre shop for more than 30 years, and in that time he has established himself as a local character and the shop as a destination: a place where he and others can hold forth. The scene is both chaotic and relaxed, with high-energy McLeod spinning like a top while visitors sit or lean, idling on about all subjects but their tyres.

The men assembled here, in one of the most Republican counties in the American deep south, are conservative. In fact, the latest demographics say they – southern, white males aged over 35 – are the Republican party. Despite differences on many subjects – football, Ford trucks, fiscal policy – they all agree that their interests are not represented in Washington, not by Barack Obama and the Democrats and not even by their own party.

The south is the spiritual and – along with the mountain states of the west – electoral base of the Republican party. And yet, as the party struggles back into national relevance with recent gubernatorial triumphs in both New Jersey and Virginia and a genuinely shocking upset last month with the victory by Scott Brown in the race for Ted Kennedy's former seat in Massachusetts, the south has become as much a curse as a blessing. If the "Grand Ol' Party" wants to win nationally in

#### Lucedale, Mississippi Doug McLeod



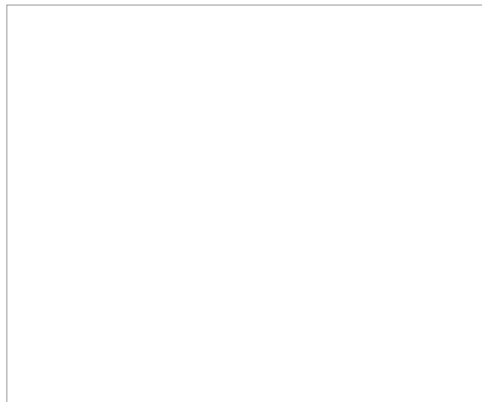
"I want them to close the borders. If we need to, by God send 20,000 marines down there and another 20,000 National Guard"

#### Albany, Louisiana Billy McCarthy



"A Mississippi lady once asked me where I went to church. I told her Sacred Heart and she said, 'Well, we all have to worship somewhere, don't we?'"

#### Oneonta, Alabama Frankie Powell



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2010, it must attract voters who do not identify with southern values. And if it wants to harness, as it did in Massachusetts, the power of the anti-Washington "tea party" protests – the grassroots movement that emerged in 2009 in opposition to Obama's tax and spending plans – it may have to distance itself from the southern establishment. The great paradox of recovery, then, is that it now seems that the fastest way for the Republican party to return to its broader base of the late 1990s and early 2000s is at the expense of its most loyal and ardent followers.



"I think the United States is on the verge of the government being for the government"

**Lexington, South Carolina  
Don West**



"The purpose of government is police, military, courts. It's not to redistribute the wealth"

This is what pundits have come to call the "southern problem". We came here to investigate this paradox from the inside, driving more than 1,300 miles over the better part of two weeks and interviewing more than 40 representatives of the Republican base in five southern states – South Carolina (where we both grew up), Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana. We talked about the party, of course, and the future of Republican politics, but we mostly talked about life in the south, and about being a southern conservative in the age of Obama.

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The south is still defined by the spaces in between its cities, the rural expanses separating Charlotte, Atlanta and Birmingham. While this world is changing – a drive through the south today offers few glimpses of the grime-faced, dungareed cotton pickers of old – some elements of life here remain intractably linked to the impoverished Reconstruction years following the civil war. Southerners are still poorer, more conservative, more religious and less educated than their northern peers.

That doesn't mean the politics haven't changed. Sixty-five years ago, this was strictly the domain of the Democratic party, home to the "Yellow Dog" Democrats, whose loyalty extended to any candidate, canine and human alike. In the past half-century, the south has turned progressively more Republican, a result of party changes more than social trends. Southerners remain attached to a set of beliefs that are more timeless than partisan. Everyone to whom we spoke placed great stock in the unique intersection of religion, tradition and grassroots politics that plays out in their communities every day.

**Lexington, South Carolina  
Charlie Hendrix**



"The swing of the country is for government to do more for people. That's good, but it also makes you lazy"

Such fierce local engagement has a corollary: fear of change and interference. These fears manifest themselves in an underlying anxiety about life and livelihood in the south. And this unease is both a threat and opportunity for the Republican party. In *Grand New Party*, Ross Douthat and Reihan Salam argue that the future of the Republicans lies in addressing what they describe as growing trepidation among rural, working-class voters. This is the constituency who lack "the resources and social capital to rebound from illegitimacy, broken homes, and failed marriages" – and many of them are southern. For these voters, issues such as abortion and gay marriage are not simply political questions but moral ones – indicators of their insecurity about changing social and economic structures.

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Derrick Scott first visited McLeod's Tyre Shop 20 years ago. Reclining behind one of several messy desks, his sneakers propped on a pile of papers, he explains why he keeps returning: "I was living near Mobile [Alabama] back then and I came by here just to say 'Hi' and Doug was running around, like he is now, on his way to this meeting or that, the school board or whatever. He made me realise that I just wasn't involved in life. I moved back here and I started engaging."

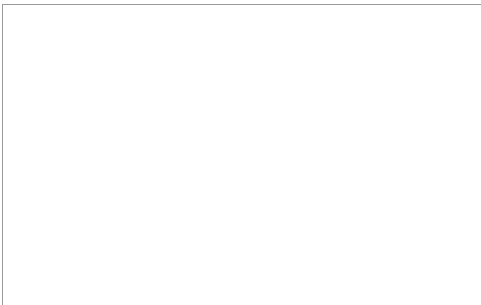
Scott became an active member of the nearby church, bought a farm (that "didn't make a cent") and began working at the local hospital as a nurse anaesthetist. He even served a term himself on the school board. On the day we visited McLeod's, he had brought along his son Will, who is on the high school football team. Scott himself, who is bald with a closely trimmed goatee, is one of eight children, all of whom entered the medical profession. His grandparents were sharecroppers and his parents liberal Eisenhower Democrats. But today, like almost all of Lucedale, George County and Mississippi, Scott is a Republican.

**Lexington, South Carolina  
Ron Medlock**



"They're trying to stimulate the economy with all this money, but only certain groups see it"

Still, his political choices are based largely on moral or personal convictions rather than party loyalty or political allegiance, he says. Universal healthcare he dismisses as a "sweet dream", not for medical reasons but because he believes that people need to "get out and work for a living [and so be covered by employee health insurance]". He is categorical that abortion and gay marriage are not things he "can support politically because of my Christian faith" but he also insists that these are just "election-day issues", part of a tactic by national politicians to "pull my strings".



Indeed, from South Carolina to Louisiana, we encountered a general distaste for such politicking. Asked about gay marriage, abortion or gun control – all strategy-shaping issues key to Republican victories in the past 20 years – southerners sighed and explained that their views on these didn't define them and never would. We met many southerners who cared deeply about these topics and whose vote depended upon them; what they resented was the suggestion that their worldview could be boiled down to a singular cause, their political power caricatured away.



West Columbia, South Carolina

On the wall behind Scott is a faded red bumper sticker reading "Bulldogs for Barbour", a reference to Haley Barbour, the rotund Republican governor of Mississippi. Barbour, former chairman of the Republican National Committee and Washington insider, had just assumed leadership of the powerful Republican Governors Association after Mark Sanford, the governor of South Carolina, suffered a political meltdown over an illicit affair. When asked about leadership generally, and Barbour in particular, Scott shakes his head and, like most of the people we talked to, says no one inspires him any more. "I am looking for a war hero, someone who is going to come back from this horrible engagement we've been in a strong leader, a battle-scarred leader who has a proven record of taking things from point A to point B. Someone who has gone through things that I haven't."

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Obama's election and the Democrats' commanding victories in 2008 have had pollsters and pundits declaring the Republican party rudderless. Does the party need a war hero (John McCain) or a rabble-rouser (Sarah Palin)? A CEO (Mitt Romney) or a more spiritual guide (former pastor Mike Huckabee)? In Obama's first year as president, a coterie of southern figures tried their hand at leading a revival: Barbour, Huckabee, Louisiana governor Bobby Jindal. But the very fact that they were from the south didn't always help in Washington. Ohio senator George Voinovich, when asked to identify the biggest problem in his floundering party, sniped: "It's the southerners. They get on TV and go 'errrr, errrrr'. People hear them and say 'The party's being taken over by southerners'."

Meanwhile, as the populist tea party protests increase in number and sophistication, there is even talk of a second rightwing party motivated by fiscal conservatism. Immediately following Obama's election, polls found that only 21 per cent of Americans identified themselves as members of the Republican party, the lowest figure since 1983. A late-2009 telephone poll showed greater national support for the still-informal tea party movement than for the Republicans.

**Pendergrass, Georgia**  
**John Woodson**



"God says thou shalt not kill. It's just that plain. And abortion is killing, it's murder"

Even more troubling than these polling numbers were the demographics of the group that identified as Republican. A base that was once geographically and economically diverse had largely been whittled down to a single constituency. The question for the Republican party, then, is how to address southern anxiety about a changing world – and an endangered heritage – while also managing to appeal to voters in Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and across the nation.

On the road to Thom and Janice Stoudemire's house, gravel crunches beneath our car tyres, indicating that we have reached the end of the state-maintained road. Up ahead, the Stoudemires' brick, ranch-style home is almost invisible behind the pine trees and azaleas. The house is not one of the planned subdivisions of suburban America, but part of a collection of five or six homes surrounded by fields, hills and ponds. Inside, Thom and Janice greet us with warm cookies and ice-water and call for their children, Ryan and Jessica. The house is immaculate, every surface covered in Americana. In the bathroom are boxes of Victorian soap and "hair powder"; in the living room a metal sign on the wall reads "Spitting on Sidewalks Prohibited".

**Lexington, South Carolina**  
**Thom Stoudemire**



"The civil rights movement turned off a lot of middle-class white people. Southerners felt like it was being crammed down their throat"

Thom is wearing a dark grey polo shirt, which he's tucked into his jeans. When he says the south has been "significantly watered down in my generation", he is talking about immigration. He works in construction, where immigrant labour is in high demand. "It is a bitter pill, one we have to deal with on an everyday basis. You walk around, and just about everyone is Hispanic and, let's face it, most of them are here illegally." The statistics say that South Carolina, like the other states we visited, has a relatively low level of immigration compared with the rest of the country – 3 per cent against the national average of 12.6 per cent. Still, for a small community that is literally black and white, the influx of 10 new faces can feel more like 100. Thom laughs at official immigration statistics and offers up a figure more than double in size.

All across the south we hear similar views. One man in tiny Oneonta, Alabama, told us "there are more Mexicans than white people", even though, across the region, evidence suggests otherwise. While the south is seeing its first dramatic increase in foreign-born Hispanic immigrants – across the board, this demographic has risen between 200 and 500 per cent since 1990 – it has also experienced an influx of white Americans. Both groups were drawn to the region's strong economic growth in the 1990s. The recent recession wiped away many of those gains, but the latest government statistics show that the recession has affected Hispanics and



The tiny town of Oneonta in Alabama

African-Americans more harshly than whites. Statistics, though, are cold comfort to southerners anxious about their communities changing around them.

Outsiders often confuse the peculiarly southern allegiance to tradition with racism and nostalgia for a slave-owning culture. For Thom Stoudemire, the main concern is that these new immigrants "don't see themselves as Americans, they view themselves as Mexicans or Guatemalans and have no desire at all to blend in, so yeah, there is a lot of animosity between us and them."

**Oneonta, Alabama**  
**Hobart Henderson**



"I'm concerned about the poor and the helpless. I love people and I'd like to see them do

well"

That race is important to understanding political trends in the US is self-evident: 95 per cent of African-American voters backed Obama in 2008 compared with only 43 per cent of white Americans. But for Thom and other southern white conservatives, racial politics alone does not capture the complexity of southern politics, not in the 21st century. Instead, it is woven into a tapestry of related issues and themes, including self-reliance, limited government, community, tradition, faith.

Regional aversion towards immigrants – outsiders seen as disrupting a traditionally closed society – mirrors the south's longstanding resistance to federal power. "All over the country, people are fed up with federal intervention, especially in education," Thom tells us. "Someone in Washington, DC, has little idea what Dutch Fork High School [in South Carolina] needs to educate people. It feels like it is being crammed down our throats, that we don't have an equal say at the table."

This is the rebel stance. It is mythologised in narratives of the civil war, which is still re-enacted here in local parks at weekends, and it reveals itself in conversations with southerners. Even as people say that the "right side won" the war, and that slavery and racism are abominable, they embrace an element of the rebel identity: the importance of defending a set of traditions in the face of an outside, usually federal, power.



Stock cars at the Racing Hall of Fame in Dawsonville, Georgia

Nowhere is this more evident than in Dawson County, one of the most conservative counties in Georgia and "moonshine capital" of the nation, where evading federal power was once a cottage industry. Gordon Pirkle is the town patriarch and owner of the Dawsonville Pool Room – home of the "world famous Bully Burger" – a diner with a black-and-white chequered floor and racing paraphernalia for wallpaper. He is also the organiser of the town's biggest attraction: the \$8m Georgia Racing Hall of Fame, which doubles as City Hall.

A seventh-generation local, Pirkle's youth was spent idolising the stars of Nascar stock-car racing, a sport whose origins date back to the Prohibition era, when bootleggers would customise their vehicles to outrun the authorities. "All those boys who used to run liquor, they were my heroes," he says, his eyes narrowing as he lists their names: Frank Monday, Gober Sosebie, Raymond Parks. Pirkle says the Scots who settled in the hills above Atlanta were innately resistant to authority: "Whiskey was illegal, but you couldn't tell a Dawson Countian that. We felt like making whiskey was a God-given right!"

**Dawsonville, Georgia**  
**Gordon Pirkle**



"If people work and [aim to] do better, I don't care what colour their skin is or what language they speak, they're my kind of people"

Contradictions sit easily with Pirkle, a man whose passion is racing but who argues that "we live such a fast life, we're not enjoying it." He says he votes Republican, yet he supports national healthcare, opposes a border fence between Mexico and the US and thinks faith is a personal, not political, matter. Pressed about what matters to him the most, he says that he fears change. "I love this country," he explains, "and I have no desire to leave it – too much roots. I think that's the reason southern people have always loved the land, you know, you got roots, and I think we're losing that." Even Nascar has changed for the worse, swallowed whole by technological advances and corporate forces.



As we wait for our Bully Burgers to arrive, Pirkle strolls over and proffers a coffee mug, nods his head at it and says, "Y'all better decide who is driving now, otherwise you'll be both staying the night here." In the moonshine capital of the world, you don't consume unknown liquids in opaque glasses too quickly. The drink, which smells of apple brandy, burns the throat and stomach, even on a 35°C summer day. Later, the waitress brings over our food, takes a sip from the mug, smacks her lips and says "107 ... 110 [proof], anyway I guarantee it will flame up blue."

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When Massachusetts held an election to fill Ted Kennedy's senate seat last month, it did not – to the surprise of Americans – flame up Democratic blue. The election of Scott Brown, a little-known Republican state senator most famous for a Cosmo centrespread, upended conventional wisdom about the political tenor of the north and the Republican party's attachment to the south. It also served as a convenient model for a national strategy in the 2010 mid-term elections. The Republicans can't win in Massachusetts, or in New Jersey for that matter, with a southern-themed party, but now they have proven that they can win on a pragmatically themed, economically conservative platform. Ultimately, Brown triumphed because he rejected Obama's big spending, on healthcare and beyond. But, tellingly, he ran less as a Republican than as the alternative to Obamanomics; just try to find the word "Republican" on his website.

Throughout our travels, we saw a struggle between the desire to be heard in Washington and the desire to maintain a culture that simply does not sell at the national level. In small, private acts – brewing small batches of moonshine in Dawsonville, for example – southerners are seeking out ways to preserve a heritage that their party increasingly views as a roadblock to success.

Since Brown's victory in Massachusetts – during which the Republican party kept a low profile to allow free rein to tea party personnel and money – the party has witnessed several heated Senate primary races between Republican candidates. Just this week in Illinois, Republican stalwart Mark Kirk defeated tea party-backed upstart Patrick Hughes. In Florida, popular pragmatist governor Charlie Crist is locked in a contentious race with golden boy Marco Rubio, whom Mike Huckabee has called the "face for the future of the Republican party". This sort of inter-party rankling makes it clear that as startling and as symbolic as the Brown victory was, there is still a lot of work to be done before the "Party of No" can be the "Party of 2012".

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Inside McLeod's Tyres, it's closing time. The doors are locked, the visitors gone home. Only now does Doug McLeod settle into a rocking chair to talk to us directly. For a moment he relaxes and slumps under the weight of a long day. But it only lasts a second as his eyes widen with excitement and he scoots to the edge of his seat, one hand on his knee while the other jabs the air to punctuate his points.

"I do miss – 35 years ago, 40 years ago – the simpler part of life, everybody respected everybody, everybody was friendly. Everybody waved at everybody. Now, I'm the only one that waves going down the road." On the one hand, he and the others who've said as much to us are merely demonstrating pride of place. But is the south timeless and indestructible, or are southerners right to be anxious about change? A central challenge for both parties is to delicately address southern angst about preserving a unique culture and maintaining jobs while disentangling cultural and economic anxiety from xenophobia and racism.

The prospect of Republican victories in formerly blue states such as Massachusetts raises another possibility: that of Democratic victories in the land of Dixie. By the end of our journey it was clear to us that the south is up for grabs; the southerners we spoke to are as disenchanted with Republicans as they are with Democrats. If Republicans walk away from the southern voter, the Democrats may have a chance to regain ground in a land they once dominated.

*Ryan Bowman is a writer, designer and partner at consultancy Shakeup Media. Andrew K. Woods is a Gates Scholar at Cambridge University. His last piece for the magazine was about US detention centres in Iraq. Read it at [www.ft.com/stone](http://www.ft.com/stone)*

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#### Birmingham, Alabama Charles Simpson



"I happen to believe that limited government and individual freedom is a good idea"

#### Lucedale, Mississippi Thomas Bristow



"Do I call myself a Democrat or Republican? I call myself Thomas Bristow"

#### Lucedale, Mississippi Brian Murrah



"I'm not being racist, I just don't see [Obama] fit to be president. I don't like his ways, I don't like him"

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