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NEWS

# Stekler: Wallace set the woods on fire

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Forty four years ago, a third-party candidate running on what many believed to be a radical platform opposed to racial integration was running second in the national polls, threatening to deadlock the electoral college and to throw the selection of a president to the House of Representatives. The candidate was Gov. George Wallace of Alabama. He's largely forgotten, but Wallace was both an early practitioner of the polarized politics that dominate our nation today and was the creator of the one-party, racially divided politics that define much of the American South.

Before the 1960s, the "solid South" meant dominance of a Democratic party committed to the disenfranchisement of black citizens. A whites-only party primary, along with draconian local registration barriers, ensured that there was virtually no black political participation. Allegiance to Democrats began to crack as the national Democratic Party became more dependent on the growing northern, urban black vote and liberals and began to press for civil rights.

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In the 1960s, George Wallace was the face of Southern resistance. A powerful speaker, ambitious and unapologetic, he became a national figure in fall 1963 when he literally stood in the schoolhouse door at the University of Alabama to bar two black students from registering. Wallace was pilloried by the national press. But he also received thousands of telegrams of support and a growing chorus of calls to run for national office.

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Wallace's presidential run in 1968 — fueled by a backlash to civil rights legislation and wave of urban riots — attracted Southern whites who felt betrayed by a liberal national Democratic party and its nominee, Hubert Humphrey. They were still culturally estranged from a Republican Party that had defeated the region 100 years earlier.

Wallace's campaign eventually came back to earth, but he still took 10 million votes, won a number of Southern states, and came within a few thousand votes in Ohio of throwing the election into the House. His legacy was to accelerate the process of Southern whites moving from the Democratic to the Republican party. The movement of the Southern white vote from Richard Nixon to Ronald Reagan began with Wallace.

This process of turning the white South from blue to red was also driven by a second Wallace legacy, the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

While the civil rights movement had won a great victory with the passage of the Civil Rights Bill of 1964, the bill did nothing to allow millions of Southern blacks the right to vote. Martin Luther King and his allies searched for a place where they could dramatize this resistance to a national audience. George Wallace's Alabama was a prime location.

On March 7, 1965, a horrified nation watched televised images of Alabama state troopers on horseback charging into peaceful marchers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala. President Lyndon Johnson went on national television to announce new voting rights legislation, ending his appearance memorably by declaring "we shall overcome." Many observers blamed the actions of the state troopers on Wallace, and they nicknamed the bill that eventually passed the Wallace Act of 1965.

Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act mandates that electoral districts in Southern states not dilute minority voting strength. Starting in the 1980s, Republicans and Southern black officials formed an unlikely alliance to gerrymander congressional districts so that minorities were concentrated in districts, insuring the election of black candidates, and leaving all the surrounding districts mostly white and increasingly Republican.

Today, there is a solid South and it's Republican. After this November, it is possible that there will not be a single white Democrat in the United States House of Representatives from South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas or Louisiana, with only a handful elected in North Carolina, Tennessee and Texas. President Barack Obama barely got 10 percent of the white vote in much of Deep South in 2008, including East Texas, and his prospects, even as his poll numbers rise in swing states, look worse this time around. In much of the South, if you're white, you're a Republican.

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The growing diversity of the country's electorate was the source of the Obama victory in 2008. If 2008 had had the same racial proportions of the vote, white and black, as 1976, John McCain would have won easily. As the Hispanic vote, largely Democratic, grows in Texas, we'll likely see the re-emergence of statewide two party competition in the future. But until that time comes, the legacy and politics of George Wallace lives.

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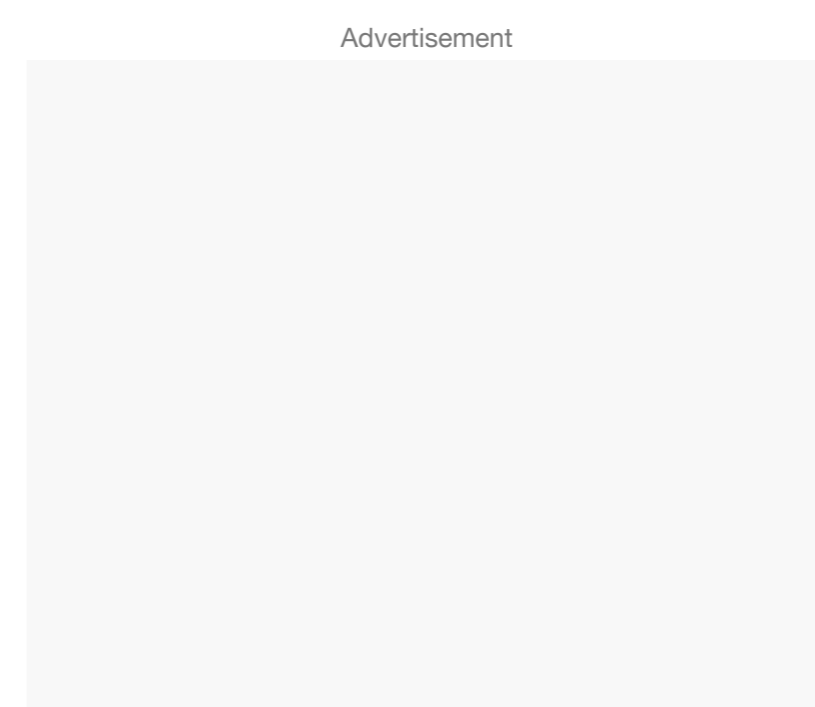
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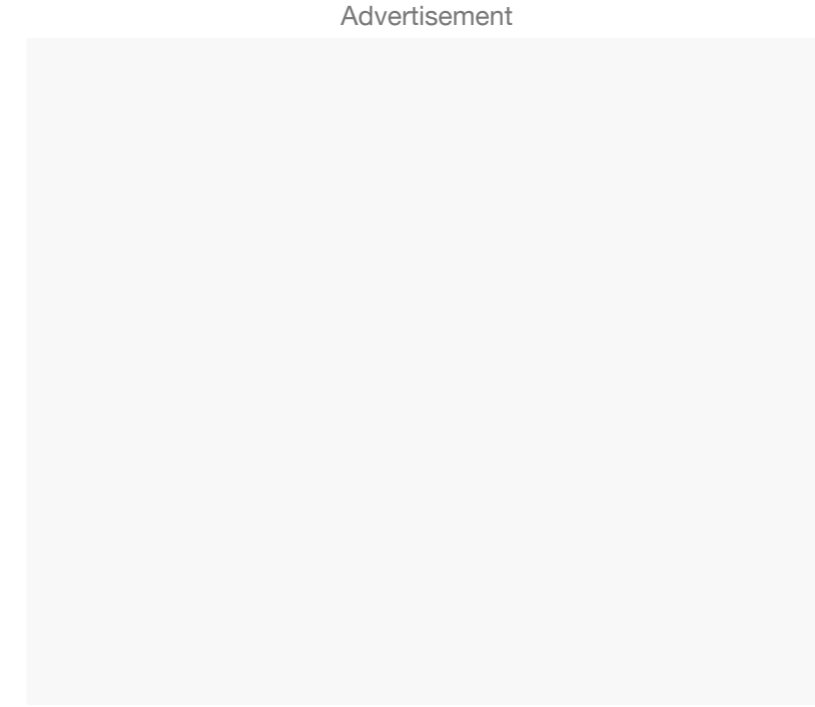
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