

# FLORIDA & VIRGINIA

## ON THE EDGE OF A NEW SOUTH



With the Black General strike during the U.S. Civil War and the subsequent defeat of the Confederacy, there were a few glorious years in a brief progressive era in which the needs of everyday poor people – especially African Americans - were increasingly met by state government. This was during Black Reconstruction, when mandatory requirements for Black political representation produced African American-led governments across the South which ushered in a tremendous change. In the 10 years following the civil war, Southern states ended Black Codes, created state funded public education systems, passed more progressive taxation, accelerated the building of public infrastructure, and passed laws against discrimination in public transportation and accommodations.

It was the conservative reaction to Black Reconstruction that in many ways shaped modern American politics. The subsequent repression, disenfranchisement of Black voters, and enactment of Jim Crow legislation established the racial and political landscape that still dominates the South. Today's racial profiling, mass incarceration and heightened immigration enforcement are legacies of Jim Crow that dominate the South and much of the rest of the country today. Directly challenging the culture and policies that sustains these systems, by shedding light in particular on their high social and economic costs compared to their limited social and economic benefits, is a critical battleground in the South and elsewhere today.

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The systematic disenfranchisement of African Americans has helped to create a solid conservative South in which, for over 150 years, a politically managed bloc of white controlled states have served as an anchor for both local and national conservative, racist, anti-democratic, corporatist politics. These have translated into low taxes on corporations, limited government for social welfare and public needs, high levels of police and military bases, high levels of incarceration, restrictions on labor organizing, and limited or non-enforcement of civil rights laws. At the federal level, these racial, gender, and class politics serve to water down most progressive national legislation. In fact, they serve as incubators for regressive policies that are then exported to the rest of the country and in some cases to the rest of the world. A similar but different dynamic regarding the oppression of Chicanos in the Southwest further locks-in conservative neo-liberal policies and practices – which is now being transplanted in fertile ground in the South.

The possibilities of a 'new South' can be seen in Barack Obama's electoral victories in the Southeast coastal states of Virginia, North Carolina, and Florida. Prior to 2008, Virginia hadn't elected a Democratic presidential candidate since 1964. Historic African American population centers, linked with new foreign-born immigrants (and their children) who moved to the South over the last thirty years, have set in motion a new political calculus. Together, the immigrant and African American voting bloc is at around 35% of the electorate in both Virginia and Florida, and a similar shift is in place in North Carolina and increasingly in the rest of the Southeast. Additionally, in each of these three southern states elements of a new economy – high tech and biotech industries, regional and global finance and banking, and university-centered research – are breaking apart monolithic white voting blocs that were previously tied to small town and agricultural interests. Within the new economy, there are subsets of white voters who are ready to join the new multi-racial majority. It is now very possible to effectuate a majoritarian progressive voting power, but it requires the forging of new identities, and this only happens through struggle and bold ideas.

Thus, as 2008 showed, there are possibilities for a new southern majority – initially on the region's northern and eastern edges – but overtime an increasingly solid regional electoral majority. Work throughout the Southeast, however, is hampered by the lack of strong progressive infrastructure (including organized labor, voter engagement, and large anchor groups) and developed financial support.

Strong anchor organizations, with the capacity to organize to scale and commitment to develop majoritarian political consciousness, are the glue that will hold together these emerging electoral blocs and in fact will move them to a deeper political unity and a more historically lasting coherence. Florida New Majority and Virginia New Majority, have in a few short years, developed an innovative approach to organizing which: builds broad fronts or alliances in a non-sectarian manner, utilizes strategic communications to magnify impact and to reach into regions, homes, and smart phones to win the battle for hearts and minds, mass scale field operations which utilize modern data bases and micro targeting for maximum impact, and linked local, state and national issue campaigns that help to win real victories while moving our member base from historical objects to rising historical actors.

From 2008-2010, FNM's and VNM's field operations touched well over 1,250,000 predominantly low-income people of color and progressive whites during local, state, and national elections, the 2010 Census, and in issue-based activities between elections. FNM's strategic communications reached audiences in the millions.

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The new-majoritarian model seeks to build connective infrastructure that converges social justice forces on critical issues, but simultaneously looks to connect them with a much larger scale of constituencies to contend for governance at the level of ideas and power. FNM and VNM seek to create a new 'common sense' that is rooted in our mass constituency of African-Americans, new immigrant communities, and progressive and disaffected whites (including young people and students, union members, liberal and social justice faith based communities, the new urban artisan class, white LGBTQ, and others). As the roller coaster electoral cycles of 2008-2010 show; much remains to be done to create a common set of values, interests and activities (not to mention sustained voter engagement operations). But this is the political majority that FNM and VNM are talking to daily, in mass, and through action-oriented work (on-line and in the field).

It is important to note that while VNM and FNM are the leading edge of this integrated approach to power building, we do not see view ours as a monolithic or branded organizational building approach. We both seek to actively work with statewide partners, and in particular support the development and growth of emergent African American, immigrant, and progressive white organizations. In Virginia, for example, VNM is establishing deep ties at three of the state's Historically Black Colleges with the goal of serving as a pipeline for a new generation of leaders and organizations. In Florida, FNM sponsors statewide leadership development processes facilitated by Social Justice Leadership to connect and elevate leaders in various movements across the state. Partners in the state utilize FNM for statewide issue organizing as well as for shared electoral organizing.

In 2011, only four states have elections – Louisiana, Mississippi, New Jersey and Virginia. In Virginia, the Tea Party is seeking to finish off the nearly clean sweep they achieved in the 2009 state elections, when the current Governor, Lt. Governor, and Attorney General, all conservative Republicans, were elected. AG Cuccinelli in particular is vying for national attention through sequential attacks and lawsuits: against a professor who studied global warming; Universities who protected gays and lesbians under human rights statutes; immigrants who tried to secure licenses without permanent residency; and the federal government for 'forcing' individuals to have health insurance. In Florida, the legislature is following through on conservative victories through copycat Arizona legislation and a host of other corporatist measures led by Rick Scott, the new Governor, and former health care industry executive.

This year FNM and VNM seek to turn the Tea Party threat into an organizing opportunity by breaking out of the 'each state for itself' tunnel vision that hampers most civic engagement work. Through our innovative partnership we intend to share and where possible co-mingle each other's skills and capacities to better develop our combined strategic capacity and magnify our collective impact. For example, FNM's communications infrastructure and strategies will be leveraged to jump start VNM's nascent communications operation. FNM and other activists from across the East will join VNM in making the 2011 elections a real battle in key legislative districts. Working in the same region, with strong personal and organizational relationships, a similar political orientation, and in a similar political environment we have ample opportunities to support each other's work and learn from each others advanced practices.

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We have identified the following areas for innovative collaboration:

- Joint Political Education and Leadership Development
- Shared polling and modeling – learning how to most effectively talk to our target voters.
- Data management and access to new data sets
- Collaborative development and assessment of legislative campaigns and experimental organizational structures
- GIS mapping as an iterative and analytical tool

The next two years represent a unique opportunity and a very narrow window for the transformative change we seek to create. Forces of reaction seek to stop and reverse the (limited) advances of the Obama Presidency. Resurgent right-wing organizations, led by powerful national and regional 501c4, 527, and independent expenditure organizations, are fighting tooth and nail to recreate the solid South in its “traditional” – i.e. anti-federal, corporatist, anti-poor, and yes, white supremacist – robes. Breaking up the old solid South is a key step in transforming the politics of the entire United States. We look forward to a bold and ambitious partnership with Atlantic Philanthropies.