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Recession Could Hurt Dixie GOP

The gyrations on Wall Street, combined with similar economic nervousness in overseas markets, a severely declining US housing market, and fears of rising unemployment have pushed the US economy to the top of the news. The prospect of a severe recession is discussed daily in the media. **President Bush** and the Democratic congress, in a moment of rare bipartisan cooperation, appear set to pass an economic stimulus package that can make a short term impact in hopes of heading off hard times. While a snapshot of economic conditions as they now stand shows a prosperous nation, with a fairly low 5% unemployment rate that does not appear to be growing, the negative trends have shifted the attention of voters -- in the South as elsewhere -- to bread-and-butter issues.

If these conditions continue through the fall campaign, it's bad news for the Republicans, who have had little but bad news -- chiefly the war in Iraq -- since the 2006 elections. The political realignment of the past decades moved the South's lower- and middle-income whites from the Democratic home of their ancestors into the pro-business GOP. But when the economy gets bad on the Republicans' watch, many of these same voters return to the Democratic Party, believing that its populist economic policies are more likely to help them than the laissez faire philosophy of the Republicans. That's been the pattern in the South for the past quarter-century, despite Dixie's overall trend to the GOP.

In 1982, only two years after **Ronald Reagan** swept the Old Confederacy -- except for **Jimmy Carter**'s Georgia -- Republicans lost ten US House seats and two governorships in the South. A month before the GOP losses, the nation's unemployment rate rose above 10% for the first time since the Great Depression. The Democrats' gains were the largest in the South since 1974, when the Watergate scandal and Nixon's resignation decimated the GOP across the region and the nation.

In 1986, again two years after a massive Reagan landslide that saw the popular conservative president carry every Southern state, Dixie's Republicans lost four US Senate seats and four US House seats. Again, the issue was the economy. Unemployment was rising in the Deep South. And, as we noted in SPR 207 (November 11, 1986), "While the average economy is up, it's down in many places and in many sectors -- agriculture, textiles , energy" -- all important in the South.

Then in 1992, President **George H. W. Bush** was presiding over an economy that had begun to come out of recession, but not fast enough to prevent challenger **Bill Clinton** from his famous instruction to his campaign staff, "It's the economy, stupid." The South, which had given the Republicans a near-solid string of victories in 1980, 1984 and 1988, split and provided the Democratic ticket with wins in five Southern states (AR, GA, KY, LA & TN). The economic issues helped the double-Southern Clinton-Gore ticket win back the votes of low-income whites. A CNN-*USA Today* poll, taken shortly before the election, showed Bush leading Clinton among Southern whites by 49% to 46%, a weak lead that was not nearly enough to offset the Democrats' 90%+ lead among African Americans.

In 2008, bad times could mean several Southern states could move into the Democratic column in the presidential election. Polls already show **Barack Obama** or **Hillary Clinton** could carry Virginia and possibly one or more other Southern states against most of the Republican contenders. In addition, three of Dixie's Republican US Senators up for re-election this year have tepid approval numbers -- **John Cornyn** (TX), **Elizabeth Dole** (NC) and **Mitch McConnell** (KY). None of the three have strong opponents, but a recession on top of their persistent weakness in the polls could spell trouble for any of the three. In sum, if the current economic tribulations end up in full-blown recession look for a bad year for the Grand Old Party, even in Dixie.

Louisiana: Battle for Baker's Seat

The announcement by ten-term US Rep. **Richard Baker** (R-LA), the second-ranking Republican on the influential Financial Services Committee, that he will resign from the House, perhaps as soon as February 6, is prompting a flurry of activity by potential candidates for Baker's 6th District (Baton Rouge, etc.) congressional seat. Baker will assume the presidency of Managed Funds Association in Washington, DC.

On the Republican side, three candidates have announced. State Rep. **Hunter Greene**, recently named chairman of the powerful state House Ways and Means Committee, is expected to announce for Baker's congressional seat in the next several days. A popular lawmaker, Greene was just re-elected to a second term. Given his prominent role in the legislature, Greene is a good bet to be a successful fundraiser.

Paul Sawyer, a former chief of staff to Baker, benefits from a wide range of contacts from his service in Baker's office. But whether he could match the money and muscle of Greene is unclear. Moreover, he is not very well known across the district.

Businesswoman **Laurinda Calongne** is a former member of the Council on Graduate Medical Education, a position she was appointed to by **President Bush**. According to Roll Call newspaper, Calongne plans to raise $600,000 for the race.

Potential GOP contenders who have been mentioned in the media include **Woody Jenkins**, long a mainstay of Louisiana conservatives; Livingston Parish President **Mike Grimmer**; and Secretary of State **Jay Dardenne** (R), who has also been considering a race for the US Senate.

For the Democrats, the first candidate to announce, even before Baker resigned, was state Rep. **Don Cazayoux** (D), 41, a popular Pointe Coupee Parish lawmaker who recently lost a hard-fought bid to become speaker of the Louisiana House of Representatives.

Cazayoux, a former assistant district attorney, "has been a leader of Democrats in the House for quite a few years," says Baton Rouge consultant **Trey Ourso** (D); "He's a good guy." Cazayoux is a trial lawyer, though some observers consider him a conservative Democrat. He is the early favorite to win the Democratic nomination.

Other possible Democratic candidates include State Rep. **Michael Jackson** (D), an African American, who told the Baton Rouge *Advocate* that he is "seriously" looking at the race, and attorney **Jason DeCuir**, who lost a state senate bid in 2007.

The district has been reliably Republican in the recent past. President Bush carried it with 59% in 2004 and Republican **Bobby Jindal** carried it with 56% in the 2007 governor's race. Baker has not had serious opposition since 1998. Since then, several developments have affected the district, some to the GOP's advantage and some to the Democrats'. In 2002's post-census redistricting, a substantial number of Democratic areas were drawn into other districts, leaving the 6th significantly more Republican. But since Hurricane Katrina in 2005, a large number -- perhaps as many as 70,000 -- residents of the New Orleans area, most of them Democrats, have moved into the district, although the exact political impact of this shift is uncertain. In a press release, National Republican Congressional Committee Chairman **Tom Cole** (R-OK) said his committee will begin interviewing potential GOP contenders shortly.

Gov. Jindal will set the date for the special election to fill the balance of Baker's term. Because of recent changes in Louisiana's election laws, there will be party primaries for the special election. There is conjecture in Baton Rouge that the primaries will be held in March, runoffs if needed in April, and the General Election in May.

Baker's resignation is the latest in the state's big power drain. In the past year, two members of Congress from the state, **Jim McCrery** (R) and Baker, have announced they are stepping down, and a third, Bobby Jindal, left when he was elected governor. These losses to the state's congressional seniority follow on previous retirements, including that of former US Sen. **John Breaux** (D) in 2005.

Texas: Congressional Primaries

The filing deadline in Texas has passed and a number of hotly contested congressional primaries are shaping up across the state, mostly on the Republican side. In the US Senate race, incumbent **John Cornyn** (R) has only token primary opposition and on the Democratic side, state Rep. **Rick Noriega**, the party establishment favorite, has three opponents, none with significant political heft. But in the US House primaries on March 4, there will be at least five Republican contests and three Democratic ones.

Texas 3 (Plano, etc.)

Now in his 16th year in Congress, US Rep. **Sam Johnson** (R), 77, has drawn several primary foes, retired airline pilot **Harry Pierce** and controller, author **Wayne Avellanet**, neither of whom has previously sought elective office. Two Democrats are also running for their party's nomination, attorney **Tom Daley** and **Ron Minkow**, who is retired. Daley, so far, has the more visible Democratic campaign. Despite his opposition, Johnson, a decorated Viet Nam veteran, "is kind of an institution in Plano," says one observer of Lone Star politics. Johnson won by 63% to 35% in 2006 and is a strong favorite again this year.

Primary (R): Safe Johnson. General Election: Safe Republican.

Texas 4 (Rockwall, etc.)

Although 13-term US Rep. **Ralph Hall** (R), 84, was re-elected in 2006 with 65% of the vote, he has drawn four primary opponents: Former mayor of Frisco **Kathy Seei**; NASCAR team owner **Gene Christensen**; businessman **Kevin George**, a self-described "born-again Bible believer;" and graduate student and former congressional staffer **Joshua Kowert**. Two Democrats also filed: Former prosecutor **Valinda Hathcox**, who lost (41%) a statewide bid for land commissioner in 2006; and history professor **Glenn Melancon**, who got 33% in his 2006 race against Hall. Hall's office tells SPR that all the opposition reminds the congressman of the folks that used to file against elderly House Speaker **Sam Rayburn** (D), who once held this seat: They were gambling on his not being around much longer. Primary (R): Likely Hall; General Election: Safe Republican.

Texas 10 (Austin, Houston suburbs, etc.)

US Rep. **Mike McCaul** (R) finished with an unimpressive 55% in 2006, but he was still 14 points ahead of the Democratic nominee, who garnered 41%, while a Libertarian took the remaining 4%. Nevertheless, the Democrats think they smell blood in the water and are making a significant effort here. First, however, they have to get past a contested primary between **Dan Grant**, a consultant with an impressive foreign affairs resume, and Texas Justice television judge **Larry Joe Doherty**. Grant benefits from residing in Austin, where most of the Democratic voters live, and from his recent endorsement by **Ted Ankrum**, the Democrats' 2006 nominee. Doherty gets major points from his TV exposure. In the end, however, the district is a Republican one (Bush 62% in 2004) and McCaul should be re-elected. Primary (D): Toss-up. General Election: Likely Republican.

Texas 14 (Galveston, etc.)

US Rep. **Ron Paul** (R-TX) has attracted a loyal following of libertarian activists and donors across the nation for his presidential campaign. Less noticed, however, is that under Texas law -- thanks to **Lyndon Johnson** -- Paul can run for both president and congress simultaneously and could face a contest getting re-nominated in his district. **Chris Peden**, mayor pro tem of Friendswood has filed to oppose Paul. Peden said bluntly, "I think Islamo-Fascists terrorists were responsible for the 9/11 attacks," a slam at Paul's criticism of the Bush foreign policy. Peden is best known as a leader in an effort to get English declared the official U.S. language, a popular cause here. Paul, however, has a loyal following, especially in the rural areas in his district: "His people would walk on a bed of nails for him," says one observer. Primary: Likely Paul; General Election: Safe Republican.

Texas 22 (Sugar Land, etc.)

Freshman **Nick Lampson** (D) won his seat in 2006 by a tepid 52% against a write-in candidate in Texas' GOP-leaning 22nd District (Sugar Land) once held by ex-House Majority Leader **Tom DeLay** (R). During Lampson's first year, he underwent heart surgery; then considered but declined -- a race against the GOP's US Sen. **John Cornyn**. Lampson has since jumped full-throttle into his campaign for re-election to the House. Like moderate Texas Democrats of yore, Lampson is emphasizing constituent service and forging a centrist political image. He joined the Blue Dog Coalition of conservative and moderate Democrats. He's also raising lots of money.

Given the district's GOP-leaning past, ten Republicans are vying for the nomination to oppose him. They will face off in the March 4 primary. According to one Texas journalist, the Republican race in the 22nd "is so wide open that most anything could happen." The first five to enter the race, and probably the group from which the eventual GOP nominee will emerge, are:

Physician and former Houston Councilwoman **Shelley Sekula-Gibbes**, who served two months of DeLay's (R) last term, has significant name ID, but got some bad ink when some of DeLay's former staff left in a huff over her management style. Given the large field and her substantial war chest, she could easily make the runoff.

Pete Olson, a former top aide to Cornyn and ex-US Sen. **Phil Gramm** (R), will have to make himself known, but he's got a pot full of money and is a skilled politico. He will benefit from the high-level backing of his former bosses.

Dean Hrbacek, former Sugar Land mayor, is well-regarded and some 45% of the district's voters are in his stomping ground.

State Rep. **Robert Talton**, popular with social conservatives, is from Pasadena in the Harris County (Houston, etc.) part of the district, which contains nearly half the voters. Talton, fairly well-known district wide, made friends and enemies by his strong opposition to state House Speaker **Tom Craddick** (R).

Pasadena Mayor **John Manlove** (R) resigned as his city's CEO to enter the race. His base of support is likely to come in Pasadena, a suburb of Houston and one of the two centers of population in the district.

Five other Republicans filed later. **Jim Squier** resigned as a judge to make the race. His latest press release notes that he raised $150,000 in the first two weeks of his campaign. **Cynthia Dunbar**, a member of the Texas School Board elected in 2006, is a prominent conservative and "small l" libertarian activist. **Kevyn Bazzy**, an Army intelligence officer, is basing his campaign on his experience in counter-terrorism. **Brian Klock**, a financial analyst and commander in the Navy Reserve, has promised to eat only MREs (military "meals ready to eat") until the primary. And information technology professional **Ryan Rowley** notes that he served in the Persian Gulf War. Toss-up all around.

Texas 23 (San Antonio, etc.)

Freshman and former US Rep. **Ciro Rodriguez** (D) won a Dec. 12 special election runoff in late 2006, ousting incumbent **Henry Bonilla** (R) by 54% to 46%. Although the boundaries was redrawn in a way that favored Democrats, **President Bush** still carried the current district territory with 57% in 2004, so the GOP has a major interest in challenging Rodriguez. **Francisco "Quico" Canseco**, a lawyer, banker and Republican activist who ran for the 28th District seat in 2004 (second in a four-way primary with 21%) announced early and gained the support of most of the party establishment, who believe running an Hispanic candidate makes good political sense here. However, Bexar County Commissioner **Lyle Larson**, who announced later, has held office for a decade in the district's GOP population center, which makes him a powerful contender in the primary. The upshot is that the Republicans may not nominate the candidate who would run the stronger race in November. Thus freshman Rodriquez "is a happy camper," says one Lone Star analyst.

US House Updates

Kentucky: Northup v. Yarmuth? Freshman **John Yarmuth** (D), who edged out five-termer **Anne Northup** (R) in Kentucky's Louisville-based 3rd District with a mere 51% of the vote in 2006, may face a rematch with her this year. With the exit of former Assistant US Attorney **Erwin Roberts**, who was called up for reserve duty, Northup is pondering entering the race; she must decide before the January 29 deadline. However, Northup, if she runs, could face competition in the primary from confrontational real estate developer **Chris Thieneman**, a former University of Louisville football player, who has indicated he plans to announce soon.

Louisiana: Scalise, Morris Lead in 1st District Poll. A survey taken for Slidell Mayor and former law enforcement official **Ben** Morris, one of the candidates to replace former Congressman -- now Gov. -- **Bobby Jindal** (R), shows State Rep. **Steve Scalise** with 27%, Morris with 22%, Jefferson Parish Councilman-at-large **John Young** with 12% and State Rep. **Tim Burns** 6%. Former Governor/ Congressman **Dave Treen**, who has also announced that he is a candidate, was not included in the poll. The poll was taken the second week in January by Market Research Insight. The 1st District is heavily Republican; **President Bush** carried it with 71% in 2004. The filing period begins January 29 and ends January 31. The party primaries, the first partisan primaries in Louisiana since the early 1970s, will be on March 8, with runoffs on April 5 and the General Election on May 3.

North Carolina: Kissell Edges Hayes. Democrat **Larry Kissell**, a former textile employee and school teacher, is leading five-term Congressman **Robin Hayes** (R) by 49% to 45% in a recent poll taken for the Service Employees International Union and the Center for American Progress.

Grits

? Florida: Absentee Ballots, Early Voting Hit New Highs. Although the Florida presidential primaries are on January 29, voting began January 14, with requests for absentee ballots -- easier under new laws -- at record highs, accompanied by an unprecedented rush of early voting. According to the *Orlando Sentinel*, some 370,000 voters had requested absentee ballots by January 14 and the numbers were rising. **Rudy Giuliani** was in the state during this early voting phase, which could help him, although his poll numbers have been falling sharply.

? South Carolina: More Democrats Vote. Some 446,000 people voted in the Palmetto State's Republican Primary, compared to 532,000 in the Democratic Primary -- not a good omen for the GOP in this traditionally Republican State.

? South Carolina: Between the Lines. A couple of days before the Palmetto State Republican Primary, we talked to a long-time GOP activist in the state. Here's some of what he had to say. On **Fred Thompson**, for whom the primary was his swan song: "He flopped…. [his wife] worked the crowd like crazy. She had to take him by the arm and pull him into the crowd." On **Mike Huckabee**: "I don't believe this country is going to elect a Southern Baptist preacher president." On the GOP: "The Republicans in Congress make me sick. They're quitting all over the place, like rats jumping ship."