The "SEC"
SOUTHERN PRIMARY
Kicking Off in 2016

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# Southern Political Report

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Our founding publisher Matt Towery once wrote an essay on friendship that has stuck with me over the years. In essence, he said, you can never make enough friends. You need them to help celebrate the good times and, hopefully, to stand with you when the rough patches come along. It is the same thing with this magazine, although it’s still a baby and we are only celebrating just the second issue.

We made a splash with the birth of our first Southern Political Report last fall. It circulates to the top movers-and-shakers in 13 states and in Washington, DC, and the response continues to be heart-warming. We have longtime friends (many of them prominent elected officials) as well as a lot of new ones (ranging from readers to advertisers) who are supporting our publication. We believe that the information, analysis and commentary that SPR provides, along with our Georgia-based parent company’s online Internet news service on www.insideradvantage.com, keeps us a relevant and worthwhile part of the news fabric of the South as well as in our nation’s capital.

I’m privileged to be assuming the publisher’s role from Matt for this second issue, although he remains our chairman of the board. He also promises to be actively involved in future issues by chairing our editorial content committee and to be a columnist. As for the feedback from friends who read the inaugural issue, we heard that, along with the political articles, our “Winners and Losers” and “Southern Whispers” forums were especially appreciated.

I also don’t have to remind politically-attuned readers that the Southland will continue to play a growing role in presidential politics, especially when it comes to the 2016 Republican presidential primary. That’s why in this issue I’m writing about Georgia Secretary of State Brian Kemp’s increasingly-popular idea of developing an “SEC primary” on March 1, 2016 to increase Southern voter clout. Our publisher emeritus, Hastings Wyman, adds incisive reporting on two regional gubernatorial contests as well as a key congressional race. Then there’s our feature about an under-reported bipartisan idea—the National Popular Vote—and how it would affect the Electoral College and make every state an equal player. Furthermore, check out our exclusive interview with one of the South’s up-and-coming new U.S. senators, Bill Cassidy of Louisiana. And there’s more, including a focus on three cities that are Southern bright spots.

We appreciate your interest in the latest SPR and hope you recommend our magazine to friends. But most of all, we thank you for being our friend.

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Many Floridians, especially Republican officials and party activists, are furious that Gov. Rick Scott has inexplicably opened the door to illegal aliens voting in Florida. He decided not to appeal a ruling that limited the state’s ability to remove illegal aliens and non-citizens from voter rolls—even though state Attorney General Pam Bondi vigorously opposes Scott’s abandonment of the appeal. Do non-citizens and illegal aliens actually vote in Florida elections? Yes. In 2012 the NBC affiliate in Fort Myers found at least 100 individuals in just one county who had been excused from jury duty because they were not citizens but who were registered to vote. Many had also voted in at least one election. If Scott doesn’t change his mind, illegal aliens and non-citizens will continue to vote. (Remember, the presidency was decided in Florida by a few hundred votes and the state has effectively chosen the last two Republican nominees.)

Democrats in Virginia want government to be more transparent, but state Republicans disagree on what exactly that means. The GOP controls both chambers of the Virginia General Assembly, despite the state having Democrats in its top statewide offices (governor, lieutenant governor, and both U.S. Senate seats). After Republican Bob McDonnell became the first Virginia governor to be indicted on corruption charges, many state leaders began the difficult task of ethics reform. So far, they have very little to show for their efforts but the work continues... in play

While many political watchdogs are familiar with Bobby Jindal, few Republican voters outside of Louisiana actually know who he is, or more importantly, what he stands for. Despite underwa-

ter approval ratings in his home state, the Louisiana governor continues to move closer and closer to a 2016 Presidential run. Over a year before the primary season begins, though, most Iowa Republicans know nothing about him policy-wise and GOP support for now seems to be trending to better-known candidates like Jeb Bush (FL) or Scott Walker (WI). All signs indicate that a Jindal bid for the White House will long, difficult and murky. losing

How often does a Republican-dominated state legislature oppose a plan proposed by their Republican governor? Regardless of the frequency, Insure Tennessee, backed by Gov. Bill Haslam, died in a state Senate committee by a 7-4 vote. Haslam’s plan would use federal money to extend health insurance within the state. According to Senate Speaker Ron Ramsey (R-Blountville), the plan would likely not have enough yes votes to make it out the chamber even if the bill made survived committee. While Tennessee Democrats try to push the Republican governor’s plan forward, as this is written progress is unlikely. losing

Remember how quickly the 2014 Kentucky U.S. Senate race was called? Kentucky polls stay open until 6 p.m. in both its Eastern and Central time zones. The Associated Press called the Kentucky race for Republican Mitch McConnell at 7:01 PM EST over Democrat Secretary of State Alison Lundergan Grimes. Yet despite the double-digit loss to the now-Senate majority leader, Grimes has moved on and announced she’s running for re-election this year. It is a safe move for the 36-year old attorney and it leaves Attorney General Jack Conway virtually un-opposed in the 2015 Democratic gubernatorial primary. winning
Drops in prison populations are normally due to either a decline in crime rates or increases in escape rates. Luckily for Mississippi neither cause is the case. A 3,000-prisoner drop in one year, however, does make a few people stop and inquire. What has been happening is that the state’s parole board has been slowly releasing non-violent criminals either completely or reducing their sentence to house arrest. The Magnolia State, infamous for its high prison population, is definitely on an upswing and may be a model for prison reform in other states.

If you’ve ever traveled on Interstate 85 through Gaffney, South Carolina, you couldn’t miss seeing a water tower called “The Peachoid”—a Peach replica perched on a pedestal. It was erected in 1981 as a tribute to the once-booming peach industry. Rough weather, though, hasn’t been kind and its orange paint is cracking and peeling. Many have feared that the Peachoid would be replaced; however, Southern Political Report has learned that wiser heads decided that it should be repaired, repainted and restored.

Marc Caputo, longtime top political reporter with the Miami Herald, has launched Politico’s Florida version of their popular “Playbook.” This magazine’s parent company InsiderAdvantage polled the 2008 presidential race for Politico and our staff know and respect Caputo. Both are winning.

Two powerful Southern House speakers have come undone in recent months. Last September House Speaker Bobby Harrell of South Carolina resigned. He used hundreds of thousands of dollars in campaign funds for personal expenses and falsified his private plane’s logbook to seek payment for travel that did not occur, a nine-count indictment charged. And, In January, Republican Mike Hubbard was re-elected as speaker of the Alabama House despite being indicted in October on two-dozen felony corruption charges. Hubbard denies any wrongdoing but faces a possible trial this spring. Losing.
Many Georgians tout Atlanta as not just the capital of their state but also of the South and even of the American airline industry! Atlanta has exploded into a city that is the home of everything from corporate giants and civil rights leaders to world champion sports teams and rap music. It’s quite a long road from the smoldering ruins of a town at the end of the War Between the States.

With a population of 450,000 in the city and another 5.5 million in the metro area, Atlanta has evolved into a powerhouse that ranks 45th in the world and eighth in the United States for gross domestic product with a whopping $270 billion output. Almost all air, rail and vehicle traffic not traveling the coastline will end up passing through Atlanta’s busy airways, rails and highways.

Atlanta rose phoenix-like from the ashes left after Union Army Gen. William Sherman burned it to the ground on his way to Savannah. After pounding the Confederate forces into submission, Sherman accepted the surrender of then-Mayor James Calhoun. Sherman’s next order was to burn everything except the churches and the hospitals. After the war ended in 1865, it took naturally awhile to slowly re-build. However, the rail transportation network that miraculously survived the war became the catalyst for the state government to re-locate its capital from Milledgeville to Atlanta. The city then began to outpace other Georgia cities in growth and, by 1880, was the most populated area in the Peach State.

In the decades to come, higher education became a foundation for selling the city as “New South” with a more modern economy not so reliant on agriculture.

A tragic setback occurred, though, on May 21, 1917. Atlanta was nearly destroyed once again. The Great Atlanta Fire leveled 1,938 buildings and displaced over 10,000 people. Even though this event seemed insurmountable at the time, Atlanta rebounded. In fact, as the years went by, those heady times were exemplified by the city’s hosting of the film premier of “Gone with the Wind,” a 1939 movie based on the best-selling novel by Margaret Mitchell. (As tolerant as Atlanta was becoming, legal segregation was still the law of the state; the Oscar-winning actress Hattie McDaniel was barred from the premier because she was black.)

By the 1950’s Atlantans were enjoying a new highway system that allowed faster migration to the suburbs—and the population within the city limits actually began to make up a smaller portion of the metro population. During the turbulent 1960s, racial segregation was also “gone with the wind” in the home of Dr. Martin Luther King and the modern civil rights movement. It was a slow process but today Atlanta tallies the most racially diverse population in America.

Thankfully, six years after the great recession that began in 2008 eased, construction in both the housing and commercial sectors was again on the rise. This revival, coupled with the international footprint that Atlanta and Georgia garnered after hosting the 1996 Olympics, should ensure that this resilient Southern metropolis will continue to be “The City too Busy to Hate” for years to come.

Louie Hunter of Atlanta is both the chief operating officer and a staff writer for SPR.
BIRMINGHAM IS A ‘MUST SEE’ SOUTHERN DESTINATION

When one thinks of a city that exemplifies the true South it’s harder to find one that fits the description more precisely than Birmingham, Alabama. From culture to industry to education Birmingham has steadily risen in the eyes of her neighboring states and, indeed, the country.

Named after the city of Birmingham, England, due to that city’s focus on the steel and mining industry, the Alabama version was named by settlers with the English city as their roots. It has been said that the city was planned as a place where the labor was non-union and the African-American population could provide a steady stream of able-bodied men to allow the area to compete with other larger cities in the Midwest and Northeast. Whatever the case, the city has thrived and grown into a metropolitan area that has a population that now exceeds 1.1 million.

From the founding days through the 1960s Birmingham ruled the South as its premier industrial city. The intense growth that began just after the War Between the States and went well into the 1920s earned the city the nickname of "The Magic City" and “The Pittsburgh of the South." The Pittsburgh connection was clearly a reference to the city’s domination of the iron and steel industry in the Northeast but Birmingham had the rail car and rail industry that was beginning to separate it from its major competitor in the South: Atlanta.

Since that time Atlanta has exploded in population and importance. However, Birmingham lays claim to being the home of Region’s Financial, a Fortune 500 company and five others in the Fortune 1000. Ask someone from Birmingham if they want the growth that fueled Atlanta’s rise and traffic congestion and the collective “NO” can be heard for miles. This writer has found Birmingham residents like their city just like it is!

In 1871 the Elyton Land Company and its group of investors founded the city of Birmingham with entrepreneurs in the cotton, banking and railroad industries. Clearly the railroad magnates knew that the area was a mineral heaven. Iron ore, coal and limestone deposits were close by and those were the essential ingredients to making steel. Interestingly, nowhere else in the world can you find those three minerals in significant amounts. This insured the city a firm place in the industrial age and one that would weather a Wall Street crash and an outbreak of cholera!

As Birmingham grew in significance so did the civil rights movement. In the 1950s and 60s the city was at the center of the civil rights struggle for the African-Americans in the old Confederacy. Violence was no stranger to the era as a string of racially-motivated bombings earned the city the media nickname of “Bombingham.” Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was asked to come to Birmingham to help end legal segregation and he actually led a protest that resulted in the arrests of over 3,000 people—including King himself. In the end, though, a united community leadership, urging mutual respect between the races, stepped in to save the city’s place in history. The peaceful movement to end segregation ultimately succeeded.

Today Birmingham is thriving, and surrounded by suburbs populated by many successful business men and women and their families. Mountains flank the city running from the north to the east and the south to the west. Red Mountain is just south of downtown. For years the mountains shielded large areas from the pollution generated by the booming steel industry and those areas are now home to the more affluent suburbs. Indeed, the rolling beauty of the landscape and the climate that includes abundant rainfall and lazy hot summers make Birmingham a “must see” historic city for anyone touring the South.

Patrick Hickey is circulation director and staff writer at SPR.
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Saint Petersburg
The South's Top Mid-Size City for 2015
by Gary Reese

For years Saint Petersburg, Florida, was thought of as the sleepy smaller sibling to Tampa in what grew in the 1970s and 80s to become a major metropolitan area known as Tampa Bay. Once known for its retirement environment, its rather depressing green benches where allegedly hopeless seniors sat in the sun as part of what was known as "God’s waiting room" and the world capital for shuffle boards, the old St. Petersburg has been totally transformed.

Now the so-called senior residents stroll parks, feed fish and fowl, and mix in with younger generations as part of one of America’s great new age demographic melting pots. If 50 is the new 40, in Saint Petersburg 70 and over might as well be pretty darn close to the 30 and 40-somethings who now make up a growing part of the city’s population.

Saint Petersburg is an entirely new city.

It started in the 1990s with the emergence of Tropicana Field (most TV viewers would know it for its lopsided dome) and major league baseball in the city. But the major acceleration took place with the restoration and reopening of the Vinoy (now Vinoy Renaissance Resort) around that same time. In the following years gleaming new condominium towers and scores of high-end restaurants would come to line the city’s main promenade, Beach Road—a stretch that looks out over several marinas filled with yachts and sailboats and is lined with museums including the Dali, Chihuly, and Museum of Fine Art.

In keeping with the city’s laid-back style, virtually every weekend brings some type of celebration that fills the “Truman Show”-like parks, which are perfectly landscaped and lighted for all seasons and celebrations. Jazz shows, art shows, you name it, Saint Petersburg has it—and virtually every weekend.

Where those park benches used to symbolize an implied surrender to advancing age and alleged infirmity, miles of biking and running paths bring out skaters, bikers, runners, and walkers who fill the area. It’s not just on weekends but on weekdays as well. With bike-friendly paths that wind along Tampa Bay and the city’s parks, exercise is nearly as popular as Saint Petersburg’s nightlife.

With its outdoor cafes, rooftop bars, and trendy shops the downtown has a slight European flair to it. And St. Pete Beach and its neighboring beaches are just a short drive away.

Just minutes away from the faster-paced city are toney neighborhoods such as Old Northeast and Snell Isle where waterfront homes can easily run from $3 million and beyond.

With Tampa as the more centered part of the area, growth both in the Saint Petersburg area and expansion of suburbs surrounding have increased the metropolitan area’s population, making it the second-largest in Florida and one of the nation’s 13th-largest media markets—ahead of Miami-Ft. Lauderdale.

Politically, the area can go Republican or Democrat. As part of Florida’s famed I-4 corridor, Saint Petersburg is part of the “swing vote” that often decides the state’s races for governor and presidential contests.

The current Mayor Rick Kriseman is a Democrat, elected in 2013. He is a graduate of Stetson University’s College of Law, which is Florida’s oldest major law school and is renowned as the nation’s top school for trial advocacy and elder law. It is located in the St. Petersburg area. Kriseman defeated a Republican incumbent to win office, which illustrates the seesaw nature of politics in the area.

St. Petersburg has been known as a politically progressive town for decades. In the late 1970s it elected a female Republican, Corinne Freeman, as its mayor. She died in 2014.

Freeman fought to help create what became Tropicana Field long before a baseball team was even secured. Many credit her bold move as the foundation upon which the city ultimately was transformed from a town in the 1980s that was desolate by sundown and whose grand and then-abandoned resort, the Vinoy, was vacant and filled with vagrants.

Now the Vinoy, rated one of the top resorts in the United States by Travel and Leisure, is the center of the rebirth that has high rise condominiums, restaurants and stores combining to make Saint Petersburg the comeback mid-size city of the South.

Gary Reese is a staff writer for SPR.
Decades ago a brash entrepreneur known primarily for his ownership of the Atlanta Braves and an America’s Cup Championship declared to the world that he would launch the nation’s first 24-hour-a-day news station and would make Atlanta, not New York, the network’s headquarters. True to his word, Ted Turner did just that and launched the Cable News Network.

Detractors dubbed it the “Chicken Noodle News” network, until the 1991 Gulf War provided Turner the opportunity to outsmart his rivals with the use of new portable satellite cameras. It gave CNN a huge edge in providing live coverage of U.S. sorties that knocked out Baghdad’s major communications and military facilities with colorful precision. And it was seen live only on CNN.

Today CNN remains a major force in cable news, but its ratings have declined much as has the influence of its “Atlanta worldwide headquarters.” Today most CNN programming emanates out of New York. As for Turner, whose merger with Time Warner took him out of a leadership position, he is no longer an active force in cable news.

Yet the idea of a cable news network, headquartered outside of New York, has once again come to fruition.

In this instance, though, the founder is not a brash or flashy entrepreneur. Instead, he is an urbane businessman who enters the world of cable news with a longtime background in journalism.

Christopher Ruddy has enjoyed a huge record of success in building his online Newsmax news site into one of the most visited ones on the web, surpassing such staples as the Drudge Report and Huffington Post in web traffic. His Newsmax magazine boasts a huge national circulation.

Newsmax Media—the south Florida-based parent company which Ruddy leads—launched its cable news network in June of 2014. It was first available in an online streaming format but Ruddy quickly moved to secure positions on both DirecTV and Dish Network. More recently, he added Verizon FIOS to the list of satellite and cable providers carrying the new network, now reaching 41 million U.S. homes in just 6 months of operation. That’s a move that would likely even impress Ted Turner.

What might not impress Turner is the network’s right-of-center content aimed at the often-overlooked baby boomer generation. Turner was an avowed conservative Republican early in his career, but moved to a liberal Democrat leaning in later years. By contrast Ruddy is often described as a “Reagan Republican” but is also known for having strong relationships with Democrats such as former President Bill Clinton.

Many experts in the world of cable and online news view Ruddy’s ability to balance both his own politics and the company’s relationships as a huge part of Newsmax Media’s success. They also credit his business style, which is understated and more akin to a Foreign Service leader than some brash news executive, as the primary reason for his organization’s huge level of profitability.

When Turner launched CNN in 1980 there were bands and speeches and a promise from its gutsy and brilliant founder that the network would not sign off until the world came to an end.

Chris Ruddy’s style is more muted. His programming is still evolving with studios and offices in both New York and Washington along with south Florida. But make no mistake. Newsmax is firmly planted in the Sunshine State—giving the Southeast an additional opportunity to shine as a major media center.

Gary Reese is a staff writer for Southern Political Report
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Bill Cassidy completed the GOP’s Southern sweep of U.S. Senate elections last fall, beating Louisiana’s longtime incumbent Democratic Sen. Mary Landrieu in the state’s December runoff.

A physician and former Louisiana State University medical school professor, Cassidy is among a new Republican class whose victories in the midterm elections gave the GOP control of the Senate. Cassidy entered the Senate from the U.S. House of Representatives, to which he was first elected in 2008 from Baton Rouge’s 6th congressional district.

A native of Louisiana’s capital city, Cassidy received his undergraduate degree from LSU and his medical degree from LSU’s Medical School. For nearly three decades, he provided care for uninsured and underinsured patients in the state’s charity hospital system and co-founded the Greater Baton Rouge Community Clinic, which gives free dental and health care to uninsured workers. His wife, Laura, is a retired general surgeon specializing in breast cancer and they have three children. He is also an avid SEC football fan.

Cassidy serves on the energy and natural resources; appropriations; health, education, labor and pensions; and veterans affairs committees, as well as the Senate Joint Economic Committee, according to his office web site.

Southern Political Report talked to Cassidy about his priorities and key issues, including his views as a doctor on the Affordable Care Act commonly known as Obamacare.

**Southern Political Report** After your service in the House, how do you feel about joining the Senate? What goals do you wish to accomplish?

**Bill Cassidy** Of course, I’m excited about it. A lot of the priorities I was working on in the House I’m now working on in the Senate, including passing the Keystone XL pipeline, reining in the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency), its regulatory straitjacket if you will, and health care including alternatives to Obamacare. My exact priorities in the House have been front and center in the Senate. It’s very gratifying.

**SPR** You are among a new wave of Southern GOP senators. Do you and your fellow Southerners have a sense of shared interest?

**Cassidy** Absolutely. They see the challenges facing our country: How do we create jobs for blue collar working families? That is the worker in the South. The president works against those families.

Statistically, if you look at lower wage workers, she’s had her hours decreased from 40 a week to 30 as her employer has sought to evade the penalties of Obamacare.

On immigration, people come across the border and get Social Security and other benefits illegally and are competing with Americans who have a hard time getting a job. That’s another aspect in which the president’s agenda hurts the working people.

I and the other Southern senators represent people who typically pull a wrench. We are more sympathetic to those workers than the president.
What are your views on the Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare? What should the GOP offer as an alternative?

We’ve been working on Obamacare, which puts decisions that a family used to make at the kitchen table in the hands of bureaucrats. Bureaucrats tell them what benefits they must purchase and how much they must spend on health insurance. A friend of mine messaged me that for months he was all tied up in accountant red tape as he attempted to evade the penalty for not being insured. Obamacare is making this guy’s life miserable. We need to change this law so that the bureaucrat doesn’t have power— but the people do.

You support the Keystone XL pipeline. How will the pipeline benefit Louisiana and the rest of the South? (The pipeline, recently approved by the Senate and House, would carry crude oil from tar sands in Alberta, Canada, to the United States. President Obama, who vetoed the House and Senate bills, makes the final decision unless he is overridden by congress.)

There will be 40,000 jobs created, and those workers will come from across the country. Some of our companies in Louisiana, some of our workers, work on pipelines. Additionally, we all will benefit in the United States from a national security standpoint. Instead of buying from enemy countries that are hostile to us, like Venezuela, we’ll be buying from that country that people consider our closest ally. There’s a common grace from the national security aspect of it.

The economy is improving, but the recovery still seems slow. What can the GOP do to stimulate growth?

One way this works is using American natural resources. The war on coal has decimated many families in coal country. From his hostility to oil and gas, the president has made it difficult and limited the growth that’s been there. The growth could have been greater. If we’d approved liquefied natural gas facilities, we’d be creating gas manufacturing and construction jobs. By opening up some of the natural gas fields in north Louisiana and exporting that gas as liquefied natural gas, we’d be creating jobs at railheads all the way downstream.

What are your views on immigration reform?

At the baseline, we have to secure the borders. Americans are not going to be comfortable until they know that we have secured the borders. Once you can control who comes in, they will not qualify for Social Security and other federal benefits. That’s a magnet for other people to come in. That’s a starting point, for once you’ve done that one thing, you can then have a discussion about what to do next.

Finally, turning to foreign policy, what should be done to fight Islamic terrorism and ISIS?

First, the president needs to give us a strategy. We do not have a strategy from the president. It’s difficult to commit to anything until you see what that strategy is. Generals and retired intelligence officials have testified on that and made the same point. A strategy can’t be given until you admit that we are at war. The president will not even admit that we are battling Islamic terrorism.
Southern Super Tuesday 2016 presidential primary—labeled by some the “SEC primary” in a nod to the various football-loving states that comprise the NCAA’s powerful Southeastern Conference—is evolving into what could become a pivotal event for the Republican presidential nomination.

Georgia Secretary of State Brian Kemp came up with the idea of a March 1, 2016 regional primary with as many as seven states including the nation’s second- and third-most populous states—Texas and Florida—participating. Non-Southern states could also hold primaries that day.

Georgia’s Republican National Committeeman Randy Evans underscores its impact, especially if there are a variety of contenders:

“We’re on the national map, and that’s really what we wanted,” says Kemp. “We wanted the candidates to know this was going to happen: The SEC primary is going to be a happening event. And our voters here will be able to participate in that process.”

Most Southern states have already signaled their support for the move, which has reached beyond traditional Southern borders. Election officials in Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi, Tennessee and Texas have all either confirmed or are working to seal their intent to hold March 1 primaries. So have Oklahoma and Virginia, even though they don’t host SEC schools. Florida has as well, although it could move its primary to an earlier date.

“I want the next president of the United States to come to Mississippi,” Mississippi Secretary of State Delbert Hosemann says of the plan. “By having an earlier voice in the decision-making process through an SEC primary, I believe he or she will.”

The states that first decide 2016 GOP presidential candidates through primaries and caucuses—Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada and South Carolina—will naturally garner media publicity and provide a fund-raising boost for the winners. But the big SEC primary will arrive soon after—and ahead of a number of others.

Alabama Secretary of State John Merrill cites a conversation he had with an Iowa politician who noted that a presidential contender visiting there has to meet with voters at least eight times to win their support. “So we need to get in the game. We know we’re not going to be the quarterback. But we could be the holder or the placekicker.”

**We’re on the national map, and that’s really what we wanted…**

– Secretary of State Brian Kemp

**THE ‘EARLIER THE BETTER’**

Kemp, Evans and other supporters note that “the earlier the better” is the main idea. Many political observers believe that the protracted nominating process in 2012 undermined eventual GOP nominee Mitt Romney going into the general election.
Who would an ‘SEC Primary’ help?

Who are the potential candidates that an expanded “SEC primary” could help? One example could be former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, a social Southern conservative who performed well in 2008 caucus contests and who might lack the necessary funding. It could also boost a Gov. Scott Walker, who also might lack adequate funding for a full-blown national campaign but who already is polling well in Georgia and other Southern states.

While the order of GOP primaries and caucuses will be important because of a crowded primary field, the calendar will be less important on the Democratic Party side of the 2016 presidential nominating process. So far, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is an overwhelming favorite in the polls. As anyone who has followed politics knows, however, a candidate’s presidential prospects can change quickly.

Phil Kent is publisher and editor of Southern Political Report and a former editor of The Augusta, Georgia, Chronicle.
Will U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL) end up on the presidential ticket next year? Or will he seek re-election? That’s a big question in Florida politics right now. On the Democratic side, there’s growing talk that U.S. Rep. Patrick Murphy will run for Rubio’s Senate seat, whether it is an open seat or a race against Rubio himself. Described in Washington’s The Hill as “a rising political star,” Murphy is a good fundraiser and a young and energetic 31 years old. But no one expects Rubio to be an easy target. A recent Quinnipiac Poll in the Sunshine State showed Rubio with a 47 percent approval rating, with 35 percent who disapprove.

U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX), a likely hard-right entry into the 2016 presidential sweepstakes, is walking a careful line in Washington. He has been opposing publicly what he sees as the GOP establishment’s “strategy designed to lose” on illegal immigration policy, but avoiding pushing the issue on the Senate floor or with his fellow lawmakers. Cruz wants to stay in the conservative limelight, but not at the risk of shutting down the government—which he forced in the Obamacare battle in 2013. During the first two weeks in February, for example, when immigration was a major topic in the Senate, Cruz did not make a single speech on the issue, reports Politico, while during the same period U.S. Sen. Jeff Sessions (R-AL), a leading proponent of tough immigration curbs, spoke on immigration policy for 147 minutes.

Dixie’s economic confidence lagged last year. According to the Gallup poll’s annual “State of the State” series, Southerners were substantially more pessimistic about the economy over the 12 months of 2014 than people in the rest of the country. Texas was the only Southern state to make the cut for the top ten economically confident states. The data, based on averages of Gallup’s economy-related polls taken in 2014, found eight of the ten least optimistic states were in the South. West Virginians were the most downcast, followed by Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma and Tennessee. Gallup cautions, however, that the ratings don’t necessarily reflect current economic confidence, which has increased since last fall.

Hey guys—check out this best-kept secret. CityLab reports that Atlanta, Georgia has one of the highest percentages of single women compared to single men in the country. Georgia’s capital has a little over 80,000 more unmarried females than males. (The District of Columbia has nearly 65,000.) Other Southern metro areas with the largest ratios of single women to men are: Greenville, North Carolina, with 1,227 single women per 1,000 single men; Florence, South Carolina, with 1,212; Burlington, North Carolina, with 1,185; and Brownsville-Harlingen, Texas, with 1,172.
Mercedes-Benz’s move to Georgia is the latest in an epic and under-reported migration South, says National Review Online author Lee Habeeb. Moreover, the past 30 years have seen growing numbers of black people seek a future below the Mason-Dixon Line and desert declining cities of the Midwest and Northeast. The South, by far, is also the best region in the United States for blacks to own businesses, according to NerdWallet. It ranks Georgia as the best state in the country, with its city of Columbus ranking No. 1 on the list, Atlanta No. 3 and Savannah No. 9.

Rejection of Common Core educational standards, which are tied to federal grants, is a trend continuing in the South and spreading to other states. Mississippi, as we go to press, is considering leaving Common Core behind. State senators Michael Watson and Angela Burks introduced repeal legislation, with Watson predicting the state “will end up with our own standards that are better, higher and cleaner than Common Core.” This measure follows Gov. Phil Bryant’s 2013 executive order affirming Mississippi’s right to define its own standards. Louisiana, South Carolina and Oklahoma have thrown out Common Core over the past year.

In many states, districts are redrawn only once a decade following the decennial census. Not so in Virginia, where objections have been raised following one state senator’s move to swap precincts with a Democratic neighbor and increase his odds of surviving re-election. GOP State Sen. Bryce E. Reeves, worried by his 226-vote margin of victory in 2011, pushed a bill swapping a Democratic precinct in his district for a Republican district in a neighboring one through the majority-GOP Virginia Senate. Gov. Terry McAuliffe (D) is likely to veto the “technical amendment” that is in reality shameless gerrymandering.

If you thought Georgia’s water war was over, think again. Georgia Gov. Nathan Deal (R) allocated $4 million to cover the legal expenses of the “hydro-litigation,” and many expect that number to rise. While meetings between legal teams from Georgia, Alabama, and Florida sound like “bipartisan” congressional meetings, they act like them too: accomplishments are few and problems are increasing. Remember when many thought the legal battle to supply over five million metro-Atlantans with water would not last very long? They were wrong.

What will North Carolina Republicans do if their state receives a new Congressional district in the 2020 census? All population estimates say that North Carolina will gain an electoral vote after the 2020 census. But where will they put a new seat? In a state that has been gerrymandered to have a 10 to 3 Republican-to-Democrat House delegation ratio, would the Republican General Assembly create another conservative district, letting North Carolina send 13 Republicans to Washington, D.C. and just three Democrats? Probably not. Such a tactic would leave the Republican bench spread out, and could make a Republican seat vulnerable. They should give Democrats another seat, solidifying their power in the state and forcing Democrats to spread themselves thin. Of course, they have to gain the new seat first.
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With the 2015 legislative session underway in many Southern states, our elected leaders, lobbyists and citizen interest groups are gearing up to do battle on a wide range of issues. Many of those issues are specific to the states, and some will have a ripple effect throughout the nation. One piece of legislation in particular could hardly be more important to the U.S. as a whole, as it goes to the very core of our representative democracy. It’s called the National Popular Vote bill, and if enough states sign the bill into law, it will fundamentally change the way we elect our president.

For presidential campaigns today, there are essentially two types of states: swing states and flyover states. Voters in swing states are closely divided between the two major political parties, meaning candidates spend a great deal of time and resources campaigning in those states. Flyover states are predictably Republican or Democrat. Flyover states typically do not see presidential candidates in person, nor do they receive advertising dollars, nor are their voters polled by presidential campaigns seeking to understand the issues they care most about. It is almost a forgone conclusion that flyover state votes will go to one presidential candidate or the other—whether the candidates spend time and resources there or not—so the candidates stay away.

Most Southern states are flyover states. They tend to vote Republican. Therefore, under the current system, it would actually be foolish for presidential candidates to work hard persuading Southern voters, as finite campaign resources would be better spent on votes that are more easily won (or lost). Candidates understand this, and they act accordingly: In 2012, the two presidential campaigns spent zero advertising dollars and made zero public, post-convention appearances in Georgia, South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Oklahoma or Texas. Swing state Ohio, by comparison, received 73 campaign visits and $193 million in campaign advertising.

This past presidential election cycle, the Romney and Obama campaigns spent 100 percent of their resources in 2012 in just 12 states. The other 38 states were ignored. “The fact that four out of five American voters are forced to watch the election of the American president from the sidelines is a problem that strikes at the core of our representative government, and that means it’s a problem worth fixing,” says National Popular Vote spokesman Pat Rosenstiel.

Under the current state-by-state, winner-take-all system, all of a state’s electoral votes go to the candidate who receives the most popular votes in that particular state. Because of the winner-take-all approach, a candidate can win the presidency without winning the most popular votes nationwide. This has occurred in four of the nation’s 56 presidential elections. Also, a shift of fewer than 60,000 votes in Ohio in 2004 would have meant the defeat of President George W. Bush, despite his nationwide lead of 3,500,000 votes.

Article II, Section 1 of the U.S. Constitution gives the states exclusive power in awarding their Electoral College votes. Under the National Popular Vote plan, participating states agree to award their electors to the presidential candidate who receives the most popular votes in all 50 states. The National Popular Vote compact takes effect when the number of participating states represents a majority (270) of the Electoral College votes, that which is constitutionally required to elect the president. The National Popular Vote plan would leave the Electoral College in place, and the states would maintain their authority in awarding electors.

To date, 11 jurisdictions (10 states plus Washington, D.C.) with a total of 165 electoral votes have joined the National Popular Vote compact. That means the electoral reform movement needs states representing 105 additional electoral votes to enact National Popular Vote legislation for the U.S. to begin electing its president by a nationwide popular vote.

“National Popular Vote makes every voter in every state matter equally in every presidential election,” says Rosenstiel. “It is the only plan that guarantees the presidency to the candidate who wins the most popular votes in all 50 states.”

Proponents suggest that the current system for electing the president is broken. Their proposed fix is the National Popular Vote bill, since it assures that every voter is equally important in choosing our nation’s leader.

Saul Anuzis is a former chairman of the Michigan Republican party.

The Growing National Popular Vote Campaign

By Saul Anuzis
Four Republicans and one Democrat are officially in the race to succeed term-limited Kentucky Gov. Steve Beshear (D) now that the filing deadline has passed. The GOP primary is likely to be a rough-and-tumble affair, with three evenly matched candidates representing distinct constituencies, and a fourth with some heft. The early GOP frontrunner, according to a late January survey by Remington Research, is Agriculture Commissioner James Comer leading with 22 percent, followed by wealthy Tea Partier Matt Bevin at 19 percent, former Louisville city councilman Hal Heiner 18 percent and former state Supreme Court Justice Will T. Scott 5 percent. There is no runoff after the May 19 primary; the candidate with a plurality wins.

On the GOP side, Comer is the early leader, but not a lead pipe cinch. Comer is a farmer, “a rural Kentucky kind of guy,” says Lowell Reese, publisher of Kentucky Roll Call, an asset in this state where rivalry between Louisville and the rest of the state can be intense. Before his election as Agriculture Commissioner, Comer served in the state House of Representatives for ten years. He has been campaigning for months and has garnered significant backing from some Tea Partiers. He is also a good fundraiser, having raised some $1.1 million, more than any other candidate.

Heiner ran a strong but losing race (48 percent) for Metro-Louisville mayor in 2010 and should run well in the Louisville area, which accounts for some 35 percent of the Republicans in the state. He has substantial support among prominent GOPers and a good grassroots following. Heiner loaned his campaign $4 million and is the only candidate who has already run TV ads.

Bevin, a successful industrialist who mounted a primary challenge to U.S. Sen. Mitch McConnell (R) last year, is the wild card in the race. “You don’t know how much money he has and will be willing to spend, or what message he will use,” says longtime Kentucky political journalist Al Cross. On the plus side, his supporters are highly motivated. On the downside, he angered many Republicans—including the politically powerful McConnell—by declining to endorse McConnell in the general election.

Scott is not expected to spend heavily. However, he has the potential to win votes in eastern Kentucky which might otherwise go to Comer. He favors expanding legal gambling in the state.

“Comer has the shortest odds, Democrat or Republican, to be the next governor,” opines Cross. But Reese notes that Comer “has been out there since September; I would have thought his numbers would be a little higher.”

On the Democratic side, Attorney General Jack Conway has only token opposition from perennial candidate Geoffrey Young, who is expected to run in the single digits. Thus, for the first time in decades, there will not be a seriously contested Democratic gubernatorial primary in a year where there’s no incumbent—one sign of the party’s decline in the state.

However, Dale Emmons, a long-time Democratic consultant, notes that having a “shoo-in” primary was a major break for Conway. “The party establishment is falling in line and resources are falling in line. He needs that, because the state is sometimes red and sometimes purple, but never blue.” Emmons also notes that the Democrats “don’t have to beat down McConnell to elect a governor, so they have an easier path this year.”

On the downside, Conway “is not a natural campaigner,” says Cross. “He’s an urbane kind of guy,” though he adds, “He’s been a good attorney general.” He also has some political baggage. When a court overturned the Kentucky legislature’s ban on same-sex marriage, Conway declined to appeal the ruling, but Gov. Beshear, also a Democrat, over-ruled him. Kentucky’s appeal is before the US Supreme Court. Conway lost a U.S. Senate race to Rand Paul in 2010.

In early January, a Gravis Marketing survey showed Conway leading all of the major Republican contenders, by about 43 percent to 36 percent. At this early stage, that reflects mostly name ID. In any case, it will be a hotly contested election.

Hastings Wyman is founding editor of the Southern Political Report
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this last year Florida moved ahead of New York as the nation’s third most populous state. That’s about 14 years later than the night it became ground zero in American presidential politics.

It was in the wee hours of the evening when the late Tim Russert wrote on an erasable board the word “Florida” and explained to the nation that a presidential race that seemed impossible to declare, that of George W. Bush and Al Gore, was all about one state.

Since 2000 Florida has decided, or inadvertently decided, many moments on the road to electing a president. In many instances those results have been filled with ironic moments. This next contest likely will be no exception.

In late 2007 Hillary Clinton seemed a prohibitive favorite to win her party’s nomination for president. But a move by the Republican-controlled Florida legislature taken earlier in the year made Clinton’s path a far more precarious one. It voted to move the state’s primary ahead of several “sacred cow” contests. The penalty, handed out by the Democratic National Committee, was to strip Florida’s massive number of delegates from the winner of the “rogue contest.”

That meant Ms. Clinton, who was virtually guaranteed a large number of Florida delegates, would not survive the bumps along the road of much smaller contests such as Iowa and South Carolina. She lost momentum against the then-upstart Barack Obama. And the rest was history.

In that same cycle, Republicans witnessed Florida as the site of several “game changes” in their effort to choose a nominee. A pithy answer to a question concerning Jesus and politics in a CNN/YouTube debate in held in Tampa Bay late in 2007 made little known former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee an overnight hit. He carried the momentum from that Florida debate into Iowa where he staged an upset early win in the race for the 2008 Republican nomination.

But it was Florida that delivered an ironic final blow to Huckabee and other Republican candidates when John McCain won the Florida primary and basically sealed the deal for his 2008 nomination. Adding to the irony was the fact that an endorsement from then-Republican Gov. Charlie Crist was credited by most pundits as major reason for McCain’s win that year. Crist has since changed to being an independent and a Democrat—and in both cases lost his statewide bids for elective office.

And that leads to the name Marco Rubio. He was a youthful sensation in Florida’s legislature rising to the position of speaker of the House—again, ironically, under the tutelage of then-Republican Gov. Jeb Bush. Against all odds Rubio managed to defeat Crist in a race for the U.S. Senate and continued his meteoric rise to power in 2010.

Fast forward to the approaching 2016 race for the presidency and some very familiar names are again in the mix. Hillary Clinton, now a former Secretary of State, is again likely seeking the Democratic nomination and again seems the odds-on favorite to win the right to face the ultimate GOP nominee.

And with his early move to capture major Republican donors, activists, and the top consultants, Jeb Bush could be the most likely potential candidate to win his party’s nomination and take on… a Clinton. Bush versus Clinton, not exactly a unique pairing of last names.

But there remains that name Rubio. In taking on Crist, Rubio seemed to be bucking the establishment and looking for trouble. But circumstances and political acumen tuned Rubio’s dark horse bid into a major victory. Could Rubio possibly pull off the same sort of upset against his old mentor, Bush?

Ultimately, though, none of the aforementioned candidates will likely win a party nomination if they fail to win Florida. And as for the General Election of 2016, the winner will undoubtedly be the candidate who carries our largest swing state. The late Tim Russert had it right years ago—it all boils down to Florida.
When second-term U.S. Rep. Alan Nunnelee (R) died in February at 56, of a stroke and cancer, he was mourned by political figures in both parties. House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi said he served his constituents “with integrity and energy.” More than a thousand folks attended his funeral, including House Speaker John Boehner, who also praised Nunnelee.

But politics pauses for only a short time, even to mourn the untimely passing of one of its own. So by several days after the funeral, a long list of potential candidates from both parties was being discussed in Mississippi and in Washington.

Gov. Phil Bryant (R) has 60 days following Nunnelee’s death on February 6 to call a special election, and then another 60 days to hold the election. Bryant may set the election for August 4, the date primaries will be held for other offices to be filled in 2015. If no candidate receives a majority, a runoff would be held August 25.

The 1st District is in North Mississippi and includes Tupelo, Oxford and Southaven, a suburb of Memphis, Tennessee. The district is heavily Republican, giving Mitt Romney a 25-point margin in 2012. But prior to Nunnelee, the district was represented by Travis Childers, a Democrat, who won a special election in 2008, then was elected for the full term, before he lost to Nunnelee in 2010.

One longtime observer of Magnolia State politics lists at least ten Republicans and three Democrats who are being talked about for the race. He speculates that there will be three strong candidates in the race: One establishment Republican, one Tea Party GOPer, and one Democrat.

Potential Republican contenders, in alphabetical order, include Boyce Adams, who lost a race for the Public Service Commission in 2011; state Rep. Nancy Collins; Hernando Mayor Chip Johnson; District Attorney Trent Kelly; state Rep. Brad Mayo; Wayne McCollough, former head of the TVA and former mayor of Tupelo; state Sen. David Parker, an ideological conservative; Transportation Commissioner Mike Tagert; state Sen. Gray Tollison, a former Democrat who switched to the GOP; and Quentin Whitwell, a former member of the Jackson city council who relocated in Oxford and “has been positioning himself for this race,” says the insider. The list could get longer or shorter as the filing deadline, to be set by the governor, approaches.

In addition, Court of Appeals Judge Jimmy Maxwell, who was elected in a non-partisan race, might run; however, his wife does work in the district office of U.S. Sen. Thad Cochran (R), which may be a clue to his politics.

Of particular interest will be the role of state Sen. Chris McDaniel (R) in the race. McDaniel led Cochran in a bitter Republican Primary last year, but lost to Cochran in the runoff, amid charges that Cochran depended on Democrats crossing over to achieve his victory. In January, McDaniel established the United Conservatives Fund super PAC and told Washington’s Roll Call, “Our UCF team is currently discussing scenarios and who we might support in the election, if anyone.” SPR’s source speculates that state Sen. Parker might receive McDaniel’s backing.

There are fewer Democratic names, but all three have a following. The best known is Childers, who was the Democratic nominee for the US Senate last year, garnering 38 percent to Sen. Cochran’s 60 percent. Also well-known is Brandon Presley. Democrats wanted him to run for governor this year, but he filed for reelection to the PSC instead. In addition, Jason Shelton, the mayor of Tupelo, gets mentioned. The local betting is that Democrats hope to recruit one of these three for the race, hoping he will win the special election, as Childers did in 2008, and keep the seat as an incumbent in 2016.

At this point, however, the GOP has to be favored to hold the seat.
S. Sen. David Vitter (R-LA) is the odds-on favorite to win this year’s gubernatorial race in the Bayou State, but it’s not a done deal. Vitter has “the strongest voter ID, the most money and the deepest donor pool,” says political scientist Joshua Stockley of the University of Louisiana at Monroe.

Vitter is “the 800 lb. gorilla,” says a lobbyist. He has raised $4.5 million and has another $3.5 million in his federal account, which he can’t use in a state race. And he led in the last two polls, in both the primary and the runoff.

But with no incumbent in the race—Gov. Bobby Jindal (R) is term-limited—several other candidates have announced, and with the August 11 filing deadline months away, more could run.

Lt. Gov. Jay Dardenne (R) and Public Service Commissioner Scott Angelle (R), a former lieutenant governor, have also entered in the race. Dardenne has won statewide before and in early 2014, reported $1.2 million on hand. Angelle impressed folks when he reported raising $1.5 million in his first financial report.

Waiting in the GOP’s wings are state Treasurer John Neely Kennedy; Burl Cain, who runs the state’s maximum security prison; and Lt. Gen. Russel Honore (ret). None has ruled out a gubernatorial bid, but it is getting late to raise the money and hire the staff a serious campaign requires.

Kennedy is the most serious; a year ago, he had some $3 million in his campaign fund. But “I’m highly skeptical that Kennedy will enter this race,” says Stockley. “[T]here’s no room for him. Vitter is the conservative in the race. Angelle and Dardenne are more moderate. And John Bel Edwards is the lone Democrat.”

State House Minority Leader John Bel Edwards, a populist Southern Democrat, announced for governor in February 2013. But since then, he “has gained no traction in terms of money or name ID,” says Stockley.

Enter—maybe—Mitch Landrieu. Mayor of New Orleans, scion of a super-prominent political dynasty, and a former lieutenant governor, Landrieu is giving the race serious thought. His decision is “the biggest question on the Democratic side,” says Trey Oursou, a political consultant and former executive director of the state’s Democratic Party.

But two Democrats in the jungle primary “would be fratricide,” says Stockley, with the two splitting the Democratic vote. If only one of them runs, a Democrat might make it to the runoff. So for Landrieu to run, Edwards would have to step aside. While Landrieu might be the stronger Democrat, Republican Bill Cassidy defeated Landrieu’s sister, then-US Sen. Mary Landrieu (D), 56 percent to 44 percent last November.

The state government’s financial condition is the big issue. Vitter said a new governor’s “first big challenge will be to stabilize the budget,” reported Gannett Louisiana. “The state is in a mess,” said state Treasurer Kennedy. Democrat Edwards agreed: “Louisiana is in tough shape.” Other issues, including immigration, the Common Core education program, and restoration of the state’s coastal region will also play a role.

A poll taken in mid-January by NSO Research showed Vitter in the lead with 24 percent, Edwards second at 22 percent, Kennedy 13 percent, Dardenne 10 percent and Angelle 2 percent. And a Southern Media & Opinion survey taken in December showed Vitter with 36 percent, Edwards 26 percent, Dardenne 19 percent and Angelle 3 percent. Polls of hypothetical runoffs taken last fall showed Vitter leading both Edwards and his fellow Republicans.

Assuming Vitter leads in the October 24 primary, but does not get a majority, his victory in the November 21 runoff “depends on who he gets in the runoff with...” says Oursou. “There’s a big ‘anybody-but-Vitter’ crowd,” some ideological, but some based on Vitter’s 2007 prostitute-related scandal. While Vitter has been neglected since, “People evaluate a candidate for governor differently,” opines Oursou. “He would be here in your face everyday as governor, not up in Washington.” So if Dardenne or Angelle, both more moderate than Vitter, make it to the November 21 runoff with Vitter, either could possibly win, says Oursou, mainly by keeping their Republican supporters and gaining the votes of moderates and Democrats.

But all things considered, it’s still Vitter’s to lose.

Hastings Wyman is founding editor of the Southern Political Report.
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