

Political narratives on race, Southern identity influence national elections

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New research from North Carolina State University shows how attempts to define the South by Republicans and Democrats may have set the stage for President Obama's victories in Southern states – and shaped the way Americans view themselves.

"Every presidential election is a chance to discuss what it means to be American," says Dr. Christina Moss, teaching assistant professor of communication at NC State and author of a paper on the research. "The South garnered a great deal of attention in the 2004 election season, and the narratives from that election may provide clues to Obama's success in 2008."

In 2004, then-Senator Zell Miller, a Democrat, gave a speech at the Republican National Convention that garnered widespread attention for its angry tone and its refutation of the Democratic Party as representing Southern interests. Following Miller's speech, Republicans and [Democrats](#) spun competing political narratives about the American South.

"The [Republicans](#) portrayed Southerners as rural, loyal to their party, God-fearing, pragmatic and family-oriented people who had learned their lesson about racial prejudice," Moss says. "Democrats highlighted the South's history of racial strife, intolerance and resistance to change. However, both narratives painted a picture of a predominantly white Southern electorate, giving little voice to the African-American population."

"One factor in Obama's later success in the South may have been his ability, as an African-American, to cut through those competing narratives and allow African-American Southerners to regain a political identity."

The two narratives in 2004 effectively reinforced the idea that political power rested primarily in the hands of white voters. "The narratives effectively marginalized African-Americans," Moss says, "by defining the South's regional identity in terms of how whites have handled political power."

This is important nationally, Moss explains, because Southern regional identity informs our national identity. "How we think about the South affects the way that we think about what it means to be American," Moss says. "In Obama's next presidential campaign, it will be interesting to see how these political narratives have changed, in terms of how the parties address race and regionalism."

More information: The paper, "A Nation Divided: Regional Identity, National Narratives and Senator Zell Miller in the 2004 Presidential Election," is forthcoming from the *Southern Communication Journal*.

Provided by North Carolina State University

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