

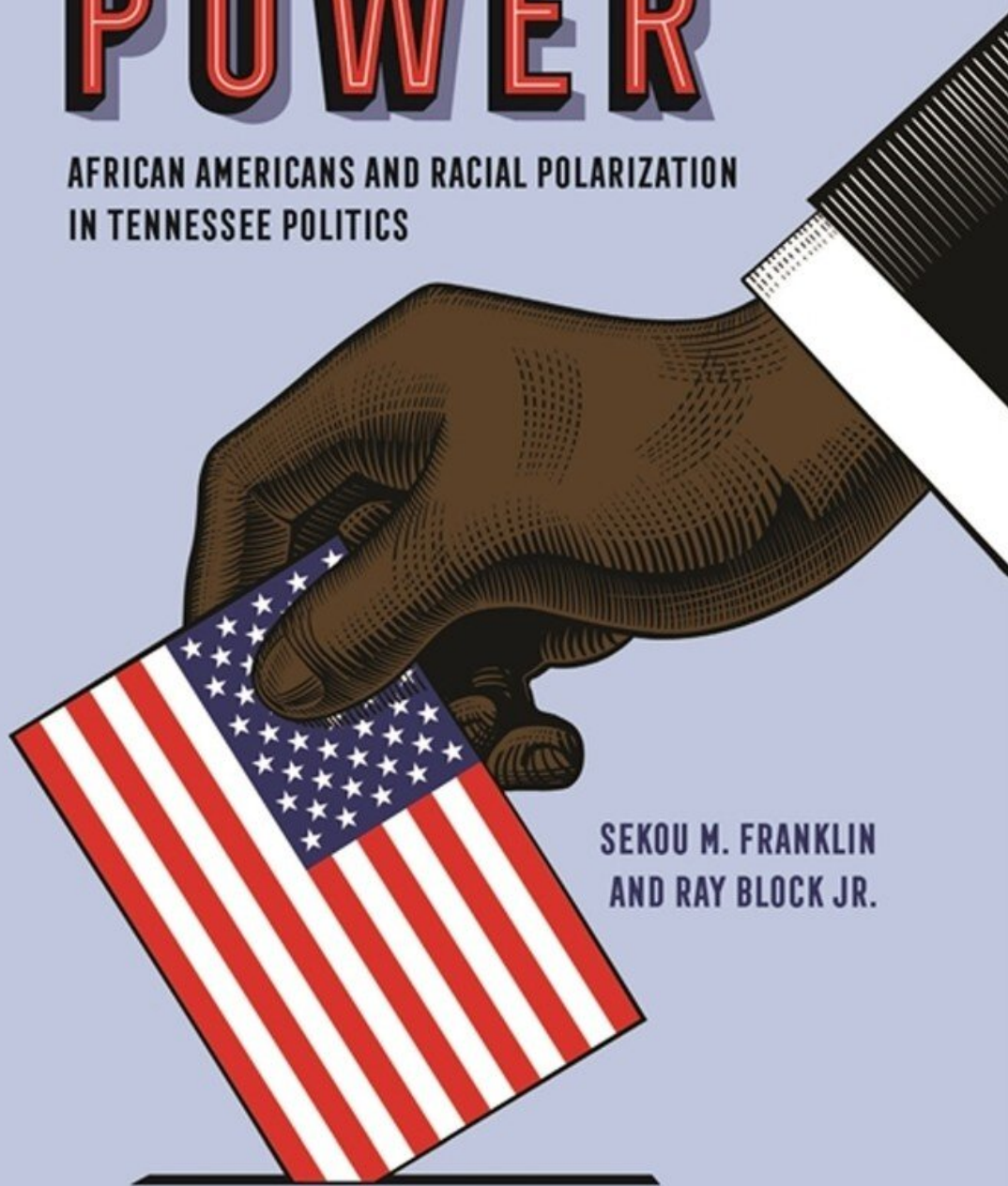
# **Power struggles: How Tennessee became more racially and politically divided**

January 16 2020, by Katie Bohn

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# LOSING POWER

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND RACIAL POLARIZATION  
IN TENNESSEE POLITICS



SEKOU M. FRANKLIN  
AND RAY BLOCK JR.

"Losing Power," co-written by a Penn State researcher Ray Block Jr., associate professor of political science and African American studies at Penn State, investigates how modern Tennessee emerged as a more racially and politically divided state between 2000 and 2012. Credit: University of Georgia Press

Tennessee has long been considered politically moderate and relatively racially progressive, compared to other southern states. But researchers say the Volunteer State has become considerably more conservative—and racially polarized—since the turn of the 21st century.

In a new book co-authored by a Penn State researcher, the authors explored how racial dynamics, policy changes and political party shifts—combined with the history and legacy of the state—contributed to Tennessee transitioning from a swing state to one that is now strongly Republican from 2000 to 2012.

The book—"Losing Power: African Americans and Racial Polarization in Tennessee Politics"—was published Jan. 15 by the University of Georgia Press.

Ray Block Jr., associate professor of political science and African American studies at Penn State, said because Tennessee represents U.S. politics on a smaller scale, the research findings offer insight into race and politics across the country.

"As Tennessee has become more politically polarized, it has also become more racially polarized, which is both one of the causes and one of the consequences of black Tennesseans' recent loss of political power," Block said. "This has contributed to anti-minority rhetoric, racially

regressive policy making, and an increasing number of barriers facing African Americans who are able to win political office."

According to Block, Tennessee has traditionally had a reputation for being more racially progressive than other Confederate States. While Tennessee was the birthplace of the Ku Klux Klan, it was also the first state to join the Union and the only southern state to ratify the 14th Amendment, which granted citizenship and equal civil and legal rights to African Americans.

Prior to the turn of the 21st century, Block said, Tennessee was a swing state that did not guarantee victory for either Republican or Democratic candidates. But, since 2010, the state has become increasingly more conservative, much like the greater United States.

"We've started to see a reddening of the country, and often in places where there isn't a legacy or tradition of Republican candidates winning consistently," Block said. "So we were wondering, how does a purple place go red? How does a blue place, like Pennsylvania or Wisconsin, go red? We wanted to explore what's going on that makes it so that some of these places that were up for grabs politically are no longer up for grabs."

Block said the transition was partly due to party shifts within the state legislature. While Democrats kicked off 2000 with majorities in both Tennessee's state Senate and House of Representatives, they lost dozens of seats throughout the remainder of the decade. By 2012, Republicans had supermajority in both chambers for the first time in more than a century.

According to the researchers, as Democrats lost power in Tennessee, so did African Americans. By 2016, no committees or subcommittees were chaired by black lawmakers.

Additionally, the book details how certain hot-button issues helped politically and racially polarize the state, including debates over taxes, immigration, [health care](#), and criminal justice policy.

According to the researchers, a 2004 decision to cut more than 300,000 people from the state's managed health care program—TennCare, which many considered to be a precursor to the Obama administration's Affordable Care Act—and reduce the benefits of 400,000 more drew swift criticism from health care advocates and civil rights groups. The state legislature eventually approved a plan to disenroll 226,000 beneficiaries and reduce the benefits for hundreds of thousands of others.

Block said that while the state government rationalized these choices with political rhetoric, the researchers found there was a divide between those who bought into the rhetoric and those who did not. Tennesseans with high incomes were more likely to believe the political rhetoric than the economically disadvantaged. The researchers also found that white Tennesseans were more likely to support TennCare reforms than African American Tennesseans.

"In addition to deepening racial polarization in residents' viewpoints about the implementation and administration of health care and related services," Block said, "the TennCare decisions also contributed to increased racial disparities in health outcomes in the state."

Block said that while these subjects are complex, they are essential for understanding the political landscape in the U.S.—in the past, present, and moving forward.

"It's not just party, or race, or regional idiosyncrasies," Block said. "These things exist in a very rich tapestry. And I do believe that, as the country continues down the path that it's currently on, it will become

more difficult to have these conversations, because you're thinking about state politics, and race, and partisanship. These conversations are difficult, but they're important to have."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

Citation: Power struggles: How Tennessee became more racially and politically divided (2020, January 16) retrieved 16 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-01-power-struggles-tennessee-rationally-politically.html>

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