

Lily-White Politics ^[1]

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by Benjamin R. Justesen, 2006

See also: [Black and Tan Constitution](#) ^[2].

"Lily-white politics" was a term popularly used from the 1890s until the 1930s to describe the views of advocates of an all-white [Republican Party](#) ^[3] in the South. Formed in the 1850s as an antislavery organization, the Republican Party had come to power in North Carolina and other southern states after the [Civil War](#) ^[4] with the help of the votes of newly enfranchised [African Americans](#) ^[5] that were formerly enslaved. By the 1890s, however, the party was losing ground to [Democrats](#) ^[6] under the relentless attack of white supremacists. Only North Carolina, which elected a Republican governor and a [Fusion](#) ^[7] legislature dominated by Republicans and [Populists](#) ^[8] in 1896, remained truly competitive, although its presidential vote was consistently Democratic. North Carolinian [Jeter C. Pritchard](#) ^[9], the region's only Republican U.S. senator, indirectly owed his two elections to Black support, since more than half of the state's Republican Party membership was African American. The South's last Black legislators served in the North Carolina [General Assembly](#) ^[10] until 1901; the nation's last Black congressman of the nineteenth century, [George Henry White](#) ^[11], served the state's Second District from 1897 to 1901.

As the number of eligible Black voters dwindled across the South, lily-white factions in southern states began to battle the traditional "black and tan," or biracial, wing of the Republican Party. After his first election in 1896, Republican president [William McKinley](#) ^[12] unsuccessfully attempted to increase his party's standing in the region by reaching out to white voters during two southern tours. As lily whites became more powerful, national pressure mounted to end the party's dependence on Black votes; this was particularly true in North Carolina, which in 1900 was preparing to follow the example of Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina by [disfranchising](#) ^[13] illiterate Black voters.

In 1900 Pritchard reversed his previous stand and publicly opposed Black officeholders. North Carolina's delegation to the national convention in June contained just two Black delegates (George White and Henry Hagens). Voters soon overwhelmingly approved the suffrage amendment to the state constitution, which would take effect in 1902, and Republicans lost every major statewide race in the 1900 elections.

Pritchard now led the lily-white wing of North Carolina Republicans and became an important adviser to President [Theodore Roosevelt](#) ^[14]. Roosevelt dealt pragmatically with both factions, allowing local conditions to dictate the racial makeup of a state's party. After lily whites gained control of the North Carolina Republican Party in 1902, for instance, Pritchard successfully recommended that Roosevelt appoint a white replacement for the town of Wilson's Black postmaster, Samuel H. Vick. After Pritchard left the Senate in March 1903, Roosevelt appointed him to the District of Columbia Supreme Court, and later to the Fourth Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals.

In other states, the struggle between lily whites and traditional black and tans continued until the 1930s, by which time almost all Black voters had shifted their support to the Democratic Party.

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Additional Resources:

"NEGROES LOSE FIGHT IN NORTH CAROLINA; Pritchard's 'Lilly Whites' Recognized by the President. Politicians in Washington Are Puzzled by Contradictory Aspects of Mr. Roosevelt's Policy in the South." ^[15] *The New York Times*. February 17, 1903.

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Subjects:

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