

*Why Did V. O. Key Draw Back
from His “Have-Nots” Claim?*

In *Southern Politics* in 1949, V. O. Key Jr. made one of his most interesting and influential claims: “Over the long run the have-nots lose in a disorganized politics.”¹ That is, they do worse in a one-party factional politics like much of the South’s than in a setting where organized political parties compete closely in elections. Yet seven years later, in writing *American State Politics*, a work also about states, parties, factions, organized vs. disorganized politics, and the favorable effects of party competition, Key entirely abandoned the “have-nots” claim.² Or at least he carefully refrained from restating it. What accounts for his switch? In this essay I speculate about why he may have stepped back from the “have-nots” claim, though I do so without having sought out private documents or information that may bear on the matter. I draw on Key’s published work in the 1949 and 1956 books and the 1952 edition of his *Politics, Parties and Pressure Groups* text, as well as on the changing political and intellectual background of the 1950s.³ Before undertaking the speculation, I try to set out with some care the structures of the main arguments about parties that Key made in the two books about state politics.

The status of the *Southern Politics* “have-nots” claim is not entirely clear. It can be read as a theoretical statement of universalistic form, in which case its universe, within which organized and disorganized politics might be