A politician once remarked, "it is good to be home in the state of great people, warm hospitality, and conservative voters—if only the rest of America was as perfect." That politician was Strom Thurmond, but the other senior Carolina senator, Jesse Helms, could have said it. Their combined 78 years in politics, longer than most individual’s life spans, mirror a transformation of Carolina and national politics, and continue a legacy of divisiveness, oftentimes based on issues of race.

One political observer noted that Tar Heel voters continually re-elect Helms “as long as he can throw the Eastern media into apoplexy.” During his five terms, the longest in N.C. history, Helms was an unabashed conservative in what many view as a progressive Southern state. This conflict between progressivism and conservatism was often a proxy fight over the issue of race. Often derided as “Senator No” by liberals, Helms never minced words when it came to advancing conservative social, economic, and foreign policy issues. By appealing to rural white conservative Democrats who became “Jessecrats,” Helms gained the needed margins of victory in his closely fought elections. Helms epitomize Southern conservatism, and thus appealed to North Carolina’s growing Republican base and, more importantly, the “Jessecrats.”

Helms’ campaign style will be remembered as much as his principled stands in the U.S. Senate. His campaigns signaled a divisive battle over his staunchly conservative stances. Yet Helms centered the battle not over his ideas, but on his opponents’ ideas, and often these ideas related to race. His votes against the 1982 Voting Rights Act and a Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday became weapons against his most serious challenger, then Gov. Jim Hunt, in the 1984 election. Modern-day North Carolina senate campaigns, and their negative attacks, are still compared against this epic battle. In the 1990 and 1996 elections, former Charlotte mayor Harvey Gantt challenged Helms in a contest between progressivism versus conservatism. Again, using race as an issue, Helms used indirect, but understandable, appeals to his loyal Jessecrats. His conservative supporters answered the call, and returned their champion to the U.S. Senate.

Within the past few years, “Senator No” has softened his confrontational approach. Helms worked to modify the United Nations, a body that he had previously derided. In addition, Helms developed a system of constituent services that any North Carolinian could call upon, much like his colleague to the south.

Thurmond’s 100th birthday on Dec. 7 culminates a historic life, beyond being the longest-serving and oldest senator. A political career that began in the 1930s, Thurmond supported federal assistance to combat the Great Depression, but reacted against the growing influence of blacks in the New Deal coalition. Thurmond’s 1948 presidential bid on the States Rights, or “Dixiecrat,” ticket heralded the passing of the Democratic-dominated South. Yet it would be another thirty-six years before a statewide-elected Southern politician would publicly disavow the party of Jefferson and Jackson and declare himself a Republican. Thurmond, in his famous party switch in 1964, made being a Republican respectable to white Southern conservatives.

Prior to his switch, Thurmond sought to delay nationalizing civil rights for an oppressed segment of the American population. For many, his 24 hour, 18 minute filibuster against the 1957 Civil Rights Act (a record that still stands today) was the last
gasp for “states rights;” others contend it was the dying breath of segregationism. Yet with the landmark 1965 Voting Rights Act, which brought not only blacks to the voting booth but also into the Democratic Party, Thurmond recognized that Republicans needed a counterstrategy. Working on Nixon’s 1968 presidential campaign, Thurmond made a lasting political pact: build a Republican Party on a base of white Southern conservatives. He, and those he mentored, developed the recent Republican presidential strategy of capturing the South in order to win the White House.

Beyond creating the “Southern Strategy,” Thurmond was the first (and still, the only) candidate to be elected to the U.S. Senate on a write-in campaign (1954), and in 1971, he was the first Southern senator—Republican or Democrat—to hire an African-American on his staff. His work on behalf of his constituents knew no color line—one call to Thurmond’s office would guarantee a quick response. Many will remember this aspect as Thurmond’s lasting legacy.

While their legacies will be multi-faceted and controversial, both Thurmond’s and Helms’ enduring contribution is a rebalancing of the South’s political allegiances, distributed along racial lines. A majority of white Southerners identify themselves as Republicans, while over eighty percent of Southern blacks identify themselves as Democrats. Both Carolina senators are the orchestrators of this divided electorate, which has had a profound impact on politics.

On the evening of the 2002 election, Helms’ successor, Senator-elect Elizabeth Dole, issued a call of reconciliation: “I wish to work for all North Carolinians.” While this may have been a subtle acknowledgement of her predecessor’s divisiveness, the void left by Helms and Thurmond, in political power, is a daunting task for both their successors. Ultimately, neither successor may have the lasting impact that Thurmond and Helms have made. Their reshaping of politics will be debated for years to come—and that debate may last another 78 years, or longer.