Disfranchisement and the Populist Threat: The Historical Political Economy of the American South[1]

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Abstract

By the early 20th century, all ex-Confederate states had adopted disfranchisement laws such as poll taxes and literacy tests that sharply reduced voter participation among blacks and many poor whites. Traditional accounts emphasize racial animosity and white supremacy as the central motivation for these reforms. Yet disfranchisement did not spread widely until the 1890s and early 1900s, almost a generation after the return of white Democratic control. This suggests that racial motives, while central, are not sufficient to explain variation in the timing and distribution of franchise restrictions. This paper develops a political economy model of disfranchisement to show how voting restriction becomes an effective electoral strategy when two conditions coincide: (i) a credible third-party threat emerges (the emergence of the Populist party), and (ii) the ruling party has a large structural electoral advantage (the one-party South).

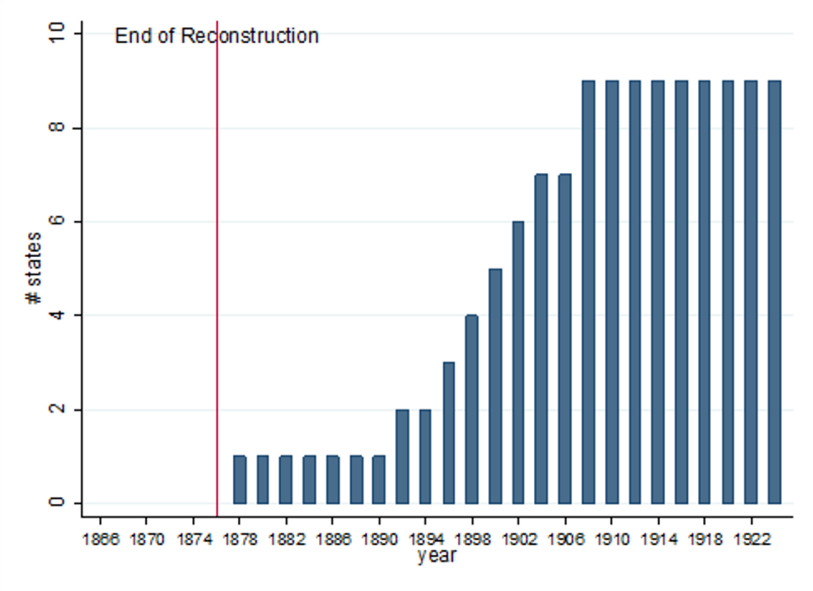
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1 Introduction

After the end of Reconstruction in 1877, the American South experienced perhaps the most remarkable period of democratic backsliding in American history, in which most black Americans and many poor white Americans lost their voting rights. This was accomplished through nominally race-neutral mechanisms, such as literacy tests, poll taxes, and grandfather clauses, although their impact was heavily racialized.

Traditional accounts emphasize racial attitudes and white supremacy as the central motivations behind these reforms (Woodward 1955; Keyssar 2000). Yet, these accounts leave unexplained an important part of the story: disfranchisement did not immediately follow after the return of white Democratic control in the 1870s, but only picked up steam a generation late, in the 1890s and early 1900s (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: States with Literacy Tests



Moreover, some states with racial attitudes strong enough to adopt segregation engaged in systematic disfranchisement, but other states did not (such

as Maryland). Furthermore, some states (such as North Carolina in 1920) even eased their restrictions, even though there is no evidence that their racial attitudes had softened. These patterns suggest that racial motives, while central to understanding disfranchisement, are not enough to explain the variation in the timing, form, and intensity of franchise restriction.

This paper develops a political economy model of voting and exclusion to show how franchise restriction becomes an effective electoral strategy for the dominant party when two conditions coincide: (i) a credible third-party threat emerges, and (ii) one party enjoys enjoys a structural electoral advantage. In the model, the ruling party chooses a screening intensity parameter θ. A formal result is that the derivative of the ruling party's vote share with respect to θ, $d\text{Share}_D/d\theta$, is positive and increasing in its valence advantage. We also show that there is no gain from disfranchisement under two-party competition. Thus, emergence of a credible third party is a necessary condition for the dominant party to disfranchise, and its incentive to do so is amplified as it becomes dominant relative to the other traditional party.

Historically, the first of these conditions were met in the American South by the rise of the Populist Party in the 1880s and 1890s, the second by the dominance of the Democratic party. Contemporary political proceedings and disfranchising conventions repeatedly mention "Populist ballots" and "illiterate voters" as targets of reform, often explicitly linking screening devices to political science concerns around multi-party competition (see Cobb and McMath 1992; Hahn 2003). Segregation and racial exclusion were part of the broader project, but the targeting of white Populist votes suggests the strategic logic of franchise barriers extended beyond pure racial animus.

2 Model

This section develops the model. The foundation is conventional spatial competition in platforms with probabilistic voting and possibly valence. To

this is added the entry of a historically motivated third (Populist) party and a disfranchisement screening mechanism that probabilistically removes some citizens from the voting population.

2.1 Primals

The policy space is one-dimensional. The state consists of a unit mass of citizens with ideal policy positions $x \in \mathbb{R}$. For the historical example at hand, it is convenient to think of x as correlated with education or income.

Citizens also differ according to their populist disposition $Z \in \{0, 1\}$, where $Z = 1$ denotes persons who are potentially receptive to an anti-elite or "populist" campaign, and $Z = 0$ indicates citizens who are not potentially receptive. Citizen ideal points are distributed according to continuous, unimodal densities $g_0(x)$ and $g_1(x)$. The mass of both types is normalized to zero so that the overall density for the population is $g = (1 - \pi)g_0 + \pi g_1$.

If disfranchisement occurs, the densities are screened and rescaled, as discussed below, leaving new densities $\tilde{g}_0$ and $\tilde{g}_1$. We will assume that both of these densities are symmetric, with means c_0 and c_1, respectively. To capture the idea that poorer or less educated citizens are more likely to find the populist party attractive, we assume that $c_0 > c_1$. See Figure 1.

2.2 Parties and Platforms

There are two "traditional" parties, D (Democrats) and R (Republicans). In some scenarios there is also be a third party P (Populists), which appeals only to $Z = 1$ voters. The parties are assumed to maximize their expected votes (or their share of votes, which is the same). They do not have policy preferences. They compete by choosing platforms p_D, p_R, and p_P. In order to focus on the incentives of the traditional parties, we assume that party P has an exogenous platform that is at the center or left of the center of its

potential supporters, $p_D \leq c_1$.[2]

Party R suffers a valence disadvantage of $v \geq 0$. For the post-Reconstruction South, we have in mind that Republicans were disadvantaged by their association with the Union Army and Reconstruction.

2.3 Citizens and Voting

The type Z indicates whether a citizen is potentially willing to vote for the Populist party. If $Z = 0$, a citizen is "traditional" and will only vote for D or R; if $Z = 1$ (potential populists), a citizen chooses between D, R, and P.

Citizens are assumed to choose among the available parties according to a random utility model, following Hinich (1977) and Enelow and Hinich (1982). Random utility models create smooth objective objection functions, which ensures existence of equilibria and provides relatively clean comparative statics. Voter i with ideal point x evaluates party $j \in \{D, R, P\}$ according to

$$V_{ij}(x) = U_j(x) + \epsilon_{ij},$$

where U_j is the deterministic payoff from supporting party j and $\epsilon_i j$ is a random idiosyncratic term.

Voters receive deterministic utility from the three parties quadratically:

$$U_D(x) = -(x - p_D)^2,$$

$$U_R(x) = -(x - p_R)^2 - v,$$

$$U_P(x) = -(x - p_P)^2 + w \cdot \mathbb{1}\{Z = 1\},$$

where $v \geq 0$ is the valence penalty associated with R, and $w \geq 0$ is a bonus

[2]Many of the forces we highlight would continue to appear if we allowed to choose its platform freely, but there are also special cases where they do not appear. Since our goal is to highlight potential forces, we adopt a specification that allows the main tradeoffs to be shown most transparently.

received by $Z = 1$ citizens from supporting P.[3] We have in mind that P adopts an anti-establishment platform – that is, it take a position in opposition to the rule of both traditional parties – that appeals to a slice of the electorate.

The error terms are drawn independently across voters from a Type I extreme-value distribution.[4] Under this assumption, the individual choice probabilities follow the multinomial logit form: given a voting choice $A = \{D, R\}$ or $A = \{D, R, P\}$, the probability that a citizen of type Z with ideal point x votes for party j is

$$\phi_j^Z(x) = \frac{e^{U_j(x)}}{\sum_{k \in A} e^{U_k(x)}}.$$

2.4 Disfranchisement and Screening

Before the election, the dominant party chooses a screening policy θ – for example, a literacy test or poll tax – that determines which citizens are eligible to vote. The policy imperfectly screens citizens based on x. A higher value of θ corresponds to more stringent voting requirements.

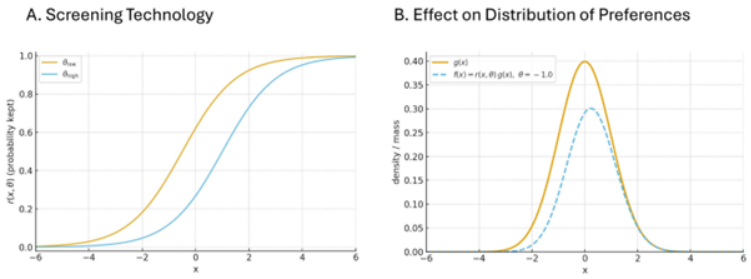
The probability that a citizen survives the screen and retains voting rights is $r(x, \theta)$. The screening function has the following properties: First, $r_x > 0$: citizens with larger x are more likely to survive, that is, the educated and wealthy are less likely to disfranchised. Second, $r_\theta < 0$, reflecting that θ is the index of screening stringency. Third, $\partial^2_{x\theta} \ln r(x, \theta) \geq 0$. This last condition – log-increasing differences – captures the intuition that high-x citizens are relatively favored as the screen tightens.[5] Functions that satisfy this condition include $r = H(x - \theta)$ where H is log concave (such as a normal distribution) and a hard cutoff rule $r = \mathbb{1}\{x \geq \theta\}$.

[3] Alternatively, we could model this as a second dimension of the policy space, where P operates at $Z = 1$, the traditional parties are restricted to locate at $Z = 0$, $Z = 1$ citizens derive positive utility from Z, and $Z = 0$ voters receive no utility from Z. The assumption that $Z = 0$ citizens do not vote for P is for expositional convenience.

[4] We assume a precision parameter $\alpha = 1$ to reduce notation.

[5] This condition ensures clean comparative statics but is stronger than necessary for our results to hold.

Figure 2: Illustration of Screening Technology $r(x, \theta)$



Given this screening function, the post-screening density of enfranchised voters of type Z is

$$\tilde{g}_Z(x, \theta) = \frac{r(x, \theta)\, g(x)}{\int r(x, \theta)\, g_Z(x) dx.}$$

Figure 2 illustrates the screening function: Panel A shows how the screening function shifts with a change in θ; Panel B show how screening changes the distribution of voter ideal points. We assume that the dominant party, D in this case, chooses disfranchisement to maximize its post-screening vote share. Aggregating over the eligible population after disfranchisement yields party j's expected vote share

$$\text{Share}_j = \int (1 - \pi)\phi_j^0(x, \theta)\, \tilde{g}_0(x)\, dx + \int \pi\phi_j^1(x, \theta)\, \tilde{g}_1(x)\, dx.$$

2.5 Sequence of Actions and Equilibrium

The sequence captures the idea that disfranchisement precedes the election.

1. Screening stage. The dominant party D chooses θ.

2. Platform stage. Parties D and R simultaneously choose their platforms p_D and p_R in order to maximize vote share.

3. Voting stage. Each enfranchised citizen votes stochastically.

An equilibrium, indicated by asterisks, is $(p_D^*, p_R^*, p_P^*, \theta^*)$ such that p_D^* are best responses at the platform stage; p_P^* is the best response to (p_D^*, p_R^*); all

expectations are taken with respect to $\tilde{g}$.

3 Equilibrium Party Competition

A central conclusion of this paper is that the impetus for disfranchisement depends on the confluence of two forces, existence of the Populist party and one-sided competition between the two traditional parties. In the model, existence of the populist party is a necessary condition for disfranchisement to be valuable for the dominant party, and the value is increasing in the leading party's valence advantage.

We establish these points by first characterizing the case of two-party competition (without party P), showing that disfranchisement has no value to either party, valence or no valence difference. After that, we show have disfranchisement becomes valuable to the dominant traditional party when party P is present.

3.1 Two-Party Competition

Consider first the case of two-party competition between D and R. The first proposition describes the equilibrium of this competition. Formal proofs of all propositions appear in the appendix.

Proposition 1. Two-Party Equilibrium. *There is a unique pure strategy equilibrium with platforms*

$$p_D^* = p_R^* = c^*(\theta)$$

where $c^*(\theta) = \int x\, \tilde{g}(x, \theta)\, dx = \mathbb{E}_\theta[x]$. *Equilibrium vote shares are* $Share_D^* = \sigma(v)$ *and* $Share_R^* = 1 - \sigma(v)$ *where* $\sigma(v) = 1/(1 + \exp(-v))$.

Convergence is a standard feature of two-party competition. Unlike in the classical model with deterministic voting (Downs 1957), with random shocks

the parties converge to the average ideal point of the population (Hinich 1977). The main force at work is that it is better to choose a platform that appeals to a large mass of voters, which are concentrated in the middle, rather than a small mass. Because in this specification, the incremental vote-share return from increasing a voter's utility is the same for all x, the equilibrium platform takes the particularly simple form it does.

In the simple case of no valence, $\sigma(0) = .5$. In this case, the parties choose identical platforms and divide the votes equally. This is the conventional case.

In the case of positive valence, $\sigma(v > 0) > .5$. The parties still converge, but the party with the valence advance captures a larger share of the vote. The finding of convergence depends on the parties being pure vote maximizers. Other research has shown that when parties have policy preferences, they do not generally converge (Groseclose 2001). Our results on the effect of screening would be qualitatively similar if we assumed the parties had policy preferences, but the analysis would be more complex.

Given Proposition 1, it follows immediately that neither party benefits from disfranchisement. We record this as a corollary.

Corollary 1. Value of Disfranchisement with Two Parties. *Disfranchisement does not benefit either party:* $\frac{\partial Share_D}{\partial \theta} = \frac{\partial Share_R}{\partial \theta} = 0$

The intuition here is straightforward. With two-party competition, if the distribution of voters is screened, the parties simply converge to the average of the new distribution, and votes are apportioned as before. With no valence, they divide the votes equally regardless of disfranchisement, and if there is a valence advantage, they divide them according to the same proportion. Screening changes the equilibrium platform, but does not change the vote shares.

Corollary 1 captures an important intuition for why disfranchisement is rare under two-party competition. Both parties seek the votes of all citizens and try to incorporate them into their based. Removing some citizens does

not provide an advantage to either party. In fact, as discussed below, the Democrats in the South attempted to attract the votes of Black citizens prior to disfranchisement, and had some success.

These results can also be extended to symmetric three-party competition. In particular, if we introduce a third party, with or without a valence advantage or disadvantage, and assume simultaneous platform choices, the equilibrium is similar. The parties co-locate at the average ideal point, and there is no gain from disfranchisement for any of the three parties. Disfranchisement has a value only when a third party with certain features appears, as shown in the next section.

3.2 Three-Party Competition with Populist Party

Here we consider what happens when the Populist party enters. We begin by characterizing the equilibrium in the case $v = 0$.

Proposition 2. Three-Party Equilibrium. *Suppose $v = 0$. In equilibrium, parties D and R choose*

$$p_D^* = p_R^* = c^{**}(\theta) > p_P.$$

The intuition for this result is similar to that of Proposition 1. The parties have an incentive to locate at the center of the mass, where most voters are located, and their units increase when other parties are located there. Because P's platform is attractive to $Z = 1$ voters, and D and R choose platforms to the right of p_P in order to appeal to both $Z = 0$ and $Z = 1$ voters.

Given this description of the equilibrium, we can turn to the characterization of how disfranchisement affects the vote share of party D. We continue to assume that $v = 0$ so that the platform equilibrium is as characterized in

Proposition 2, and characterize how party D's vote share changes if screening is tightened (θ increases. The next proposition states a key result.

Proposition 3. Value of Disfranchisement. *Suppose $v = 0$. There is a $\bar{\pi} < 1$ such that for all $\pi \geq \bar{\pi}$,*

$$\frac{dShare_D}{d\theta} > 0.$$

Proposition 3 implies that if party P is sufficiently strong, party D gains from tightening the screening. That is, a populist party with sufficient appeal in the populist creates a gain for party D from disfranchisement.

There are two channels through which tighter screening increases D's vote share. The first is what might be called a composition channel. Because the screening function disproportionately removes low x voters, the share of $Z = 1$ voters in the electorate falls relative to the share of $Z = 0$ voters. Because party P attracts some fraction of the $Z = 1$ voters, while D and R split the $Z = 0$ entirely among themselves, this change in the pool of voters works to D's advantage.

The second channel, which we call the attractiveness channel, arises from the propensity of the pool of $Z = 1$ voters to support D. Tighter screening shifts the mass of the $Z = 1$ population to the right. When there is a large enough mass of potential populist voters, this makes the surviving $Z = 1$ voters more likely to support D and R because their platforms are to the right of P's platform. However, if the mass of potential populists is sufficiently small, it is possible for a countervailing effect to arise if D and R shift their platforms so far to the right post-screening that they lose support from the remaining $Z = 1voters$.

Even if a countervailing attractiveness channel effect is present, it may not be large enough to offset to the composition channel. So the positive effect of disfranchisement for D, which emerges certainly if the populists are very strong, can also emerge if the populists are weak.

Next we explore the affect of valence on the incentive to disfranchise. Specifically, we are interested in how valence affects the magnitude of $\text{Share}_D/d\theta$, which formally is shown by the sign of the cross-partial of Share_D with respect to θ and v. The next proposition assumes that $v = 0$ and then characterizes how $d\text{Share}_D/d\theta$ changes with respect to an increase in v.

Proposition 4. Effect of Valence on Value of Disfranchisement. *Suppose $v = 0$. There is a $\hat{\pi} < 1$ such that for $\pi \geq \hat{\pi}$,*

$$\frac{d^2 Share_D}{d\theta\, dv} > 0.$$

Proposition 4 says that the effect of tightening the screen, $\partial\text{Share}_D/\partial\theta$ becomes larger when a valence disadvantage for R is introduced (when P is sufficiently attractive). Recall that a tighter screen helps D by removing $Z = 1$ voters and making those $Z = 1$ voters that remain more amenable to support D or R. Intuitively, if D have a valence advantage relative to R, it stands to gain a larger share of the voters that are lost to P. Substantively, this implies that entry of party P is necessary for disfranchisement to have electoral value for D, and that the valence disadvantage of R amplies the value of disfranchisement to D.

Taken together, Propositions 1-4 produce predictions of when disfranchisement is likely to occur. Under two party competition, with or without a valence advantage, there is no gain do disfranchisement, so it would not occur in that context. Entry of the third is a necessary condition for the majority party to gain from disfranchisement, and the gain is increasing in the valence advantage of the majority majority. Thus, the conditions in the American South after the emergence of the Populist Party were theoretically ideal for disfranchisement to benefit the majority party.

Of course, there are purely racial reasons that a party may with to adopt disfranchising processes – our model identifies only pure electoral reasons to disfranchise. This is not to say that race was not a factor in disfranchisement,

but that the core dynamics do not require race to explain much of what happened.

3.3 Robustness

3.3.1 Voter Turnout

The model assumes that all eligible voters do in fact vote. The model can be easily extended to allow for the fact that some citizens abstain. Let $q(x)$ be the probability that an eligible citizen of type x votes. Then the ultimate distribution of voters can be expressed as

$$\tilde{g}(x) = q(x)\, r(x, \theta)\, g(x),$$

and similarly for $\tilde{g}_0$ and $\tilde{g}_1$. As long as the function q is such that it preserves the key properties of $\tilde{g}$, namely that it is continuous and unimodal, then the analysis goes through exactly as before. For example, the natural case of $q(x)$ continuous and increasing would work.

3.3.2 Party Preferences for Control

The model assumes that parties maximize the expected share of the vote they receive. One could instead assume that parties maximize the probability that they control the government.

In a two-party election, the party with the largest share of the vote would control the office (say, governor) or legislature (if a majority votes delivers a majority of seats). Maximizing expected vote share is then equivalent to maximizing the probability of holding power.

The case of three-party competition is trickier because it is not always obvious how vote share translates into control. If the key election is the governor, and the winner is chosen by plurality, then the party that receives the largest share wins the office. In this case again, maximizing vote share

is equivalent to maximizng the probability of winning.

However, if the key election is for the legislature – as may have been the case in the late 19th and early 20th century when executive power was much more limited than it is today – capturing a plurality of seats would not necessarily grant control of the legislature. If no party has an outright majority, then a coalition government would be needed. Modeling coalition formation in a legislature would be an interesting direction to pursue in the history of this period, but is beyond the scope of this paper.

3.3.3 More

Parties with policy preferences.

3.4 Referendum Votes

The model offers some empirical implications. A central implication is that Populist-leaning voters were more likely to oppose disfranchisement.

4 Historical Discussion and Evidence

4.1 Notes

Discuss how both parties tried, with some success, to attract black voters prior to disfranchisement.

Regressions showing that populists voted against disfranchisement.

Cross-sectional evidence showing that disfranchisement more likely when (i) populist party stronger and (ii) one-party dominance was greater.

Seems like we should offer evidence that significant number of poor whites were also disfranchised.

4.1.1 Note from Wechsler, Burton D., "Black and White Disenfranchisement: Populism, Race, and Class," American University Law Review, 2002

(1) Argues that disfranchisement in Alabama was to a considerable degree a response to a Populist threat, and the disfranchising convention spent most of its effort in trying to make the new constitution palatable to poor whites. This was done through appeals to race and inclusion of a temporary grandfather clause.

(2) P24 notes that Alabama had one of the most powerful Populist movements in the South.

(3) P26: "Moreover, here was a growing breed, restive whites – Alliancemen, Populists – no longer so politically paralyzed by Bourbon myths about Reconstruction, black domination, and Redemption, to catch the nearest way. Here was a politically emboldened species, many of its leaders now daring to offend southern mores and Bourbon power by appealing to black for support..."

(4) P28: "What made the Bourbons particularly apprehensive was that in this struggle over power, blacks regained a modest measure of the political significance they lost with the collapse of Reconstruction. In this new ere of the Populist challenge, blacks no held an all-important balance of power." (About 45

(5) P29: "The Bourbons felt a solution lay in further manipulation of the electoral system. The electorate had to be pruned of those constituting a major part of the threat: the poor, the uneducated, those without property, and the indebted. It is important to understand what else the southern disfranchisers contemplated. They also hoped to snatch the ballot away from those economically desperate whites, backs to the wall, to whom the Populist message was alluring, and from whose ranks had sprung an imposing collective resistance to Bourb on rule. Thus, in the ensuring assault on the ballot, the class and race of the quarry were intertwined."

(6) P31-32: "Faced with the perils of Populism, the Bourbons had to find some way to induce whites in Alabama, as in the rest of the South, to approve a plan limiting suffrage to the affluent and educated, thus disenfranchising most blacks, and, in the process, an untold number of white voters. The idea of white supremacy supplied a good part of the methodology."

(7) P29 60

(8) P43: "Disenfranchisement, grandfather clause and all, was the disfigured offspring of the Bourbons, lords of the New South and Democratic Party, accosted of late by a bunch of discontented, disrespectful Populists, an ambitious lot that spoke to power, not as supplicants, buas a contenders for the throne."

4.1.2 Taylor, Joseph A., "Populism and Disfranchisement in Alabama," Journal of Negro History, 1949.

(1) Analysis of the politics of the Alabama Constitutional Convention of 1901.

(2) P410: "The thesis here presented is that the [Alabama] Constitution of 1901 was the direct result of the threats of populism in the 1892 and 1894 gubernatorial elections; and that the cry of 'Negro domination' both prior to and during the Convention was but a 'red herring' designed deliberately to obscure the real motive of the professional Democratic leadership."

(3) The intense period of Populism was 1890-1896.

(4) Footnote 16 suggests that the Democrats were attracting considerable black support, not necessarily going to GOP, prior to Populism.

4.1.3 Note from Histories of Populism

It may be relevant for our paper that although the role of Populism in disfranchisement is not always mentioned in histories of disfranchisement, it is routinely mentioned in histories of Populism. Some examples:

Posted, Charles, The Populist Vision, 2007.

(1) P202: "The Populist challenge to Democratic rule in the South held much significance for race relations. . . . Although the Populists occasionally showed a practical caution compared to the fanatical racial campaigns of the Democrats, the significance of Populism did not lie in possible shadings in a common master race ideology and practice. Rather it lay in the Populist role in reviving political competition. The Populists, no less than the Democrats, represented white supremacy, as did the 'lily-white' Republicans. But when the Populists engaged in political combat with the Democrats – especially when this combat made alliances with a Republican party that continued to have a significant African American constituency – cracks opened in the walls of racial oppression."

(2) P200: "On the other side of the argument, that same year in Mississippi, Alliance leader Frank Burkitt protested the adoption of literacy tests and poll taxes, fearing that they would take voting rights from poor whites."

(3) P201: In Texas, "the Populists saw the poll tax as a menace to the poor white voter. . . " ... "Those with the most wealth tended to align themselves with the Democratic party and its partisan efforts to strip the franchise from the potential voters of the Republican and Populist opposition."

Chambers, John Whiteclay II, The Tyranny of Change: America in the Progressive Era, 1890-1920, 2000.

(1) P143 attributes segregation in part to "racial tensions exacerbated by the economic depression and the nascent cooperation of black and white populists in the 1890s. . . " It notes that "blacks and not a few poor whites" were disfranchised.

Edwards, Rebecca, New Spirits: Americans in the Gilded Age 1865-1902

(1) P 241: "Why did the confluence of race hatreds tale place in the 1890s? Or, to put it another way, why did Americans respond to economic crisis and social upheaval in such deeply racialized ways? . . . Most of all, it was politics that helped shape a broad climate of racial violence and

hostility."

(2) P252: "In the wake of this and related developments, southern Democrats became increasingly bold. Along with engaging in open fraud and terror in the 1890s, they chose 'white supremacy' as the banner under which to unite white voters and defeat Populism."

4.2 Cut and Paste from Chat

The model developed above treats literacy tests and poll taxes as a screening technology, $r(x, \theta)$, that a dominant party can tighten ($\theta \uparrow$) to alter the composition of the electorate and the relative appeal of a third party. Two comparative statics are central. First, in the presence of a viable Populist (or fusion) alternative, tightening the screen raises the mainstream Democratic share through two channels: a composition effect that reduces the post-screen share of voters inclined toward the Populist, and an attractiveness channel that lowers the kept voters' propensity to choose the Populist party. Second, when Democratic valence is high – resulting in one-party dominance – the marginal electoral return to screening is larger and the electoral payoff from disfranchisement is greater. These predictions help account for the two most striking historical facts: the timing of disfranchisement – clustered in the 1890s and early 1900s rather than immediately after Redemption – and its heterogeneity across states, including prominent failures and partial reversals.

The temporal pattern is difficult to reconcile with a purely ideological account in which white-supremacist preferences alone drive policy. In most Southern states white elites regained control by the mid-to-late 1870s, yet the decisive constitutionalization of barriers arrives roughly two decades later, beginning around 1890. The model explains this lag: the Democrats' incentive to raise θ is not a monotone function of racial animus but of the marginal electoral benefit $d\text{Share}_D/d\theta$. That benefit is small in a simple two-party setting with a demobilized or fragmented opposition. It rises sharply once a third force appears that can fuse Black voters with disaffected white farm-

ers and industrial workers. The Arkansas experience is emblematic. After a decade of agrarian organizing, the Union Labor–Republican fusion nearly matched Democrats statewide in 1888–1890. The response was immediate and tightly targeted: a shift to a state-run secret ballot that functioned as a de facto literacy screen, followed by a poll-tax amendment. Anti-Democratic vote shares fell in the ensuing low-turnout contests. The sequence—threat, then screening—is exactly what the model predicts when the composition term becomes strongly negative for the dominant party at baseline and turns positive for D when θ rises, and when the P-channel further pushes kept voters away from the left-positioned Populist.

North Carolina, Alabama, Texas, and Georgia display the same logic in locally specific forms. In North Carolina the Republican–Populist fusion captured the governorship and the legislature in 1896; Democrats reclaimed the assembly in 1898 with violence and immediately advanced a constitutional amendment mixing literacy tests and poll taxes with a grandfather clause. The grandfather clause is revealing: our framework predicts that parties seek instruments that maximize their vote share while limiting collateral damage to their own base. Since many of the disfranchising laws required constitutional amendments, it was also important for Democrats to persuade the full electorate to adopt the mechanism. Exemptions such as grandfather or "Old Soldier" 'clauses did precisely that, shielding poorer, low-literacy whites while shifting the screening margin toward voters most susceptible to Populist and fusion appeals. Alabama's trajectory is similar. Populists polled near majorities in the mid-1890s; even after the movement waned, Democrats constitutionalized a permanent mix of literacy, cumulative poll tax, and property requirements in 1901, locking in the gains suggested by the model's comparative static. In Texas, where Democratic dominance had appeared secure through the 1880s, the close gubernatorial outcomes of the Populist decade were enough to induce a poll-tax amendment in 1902, followed by ballot-format changes that raised the literacy hurdle further.

And in Georgia, an older poll tax (1868) had not eliminated competition; only after the Populists repeatedly drew between a third and nearly half of the vote in the 1890s did Democrats add a literacy-and-property screen in 1908. Taken together, these cases exhibit a common structure: the Populist decade is when θ rises. That is when the model's two channels both work in Democrats' favor—the composition of the kept electorate shifts away from likely Populist supporters and, because the Populist platform remains to the left of the mainstream midpoint, the Populist's conditional support among those kept declines as the midpoint moves right faster than the Populist can follow.

The model also clarifies why disfranchisement was sometimes pursued most aggressively where Democrats were strongest. When valence is high, two things change simultaneously. First, the expected vote-share gain from a small change in the electorate is larger: in a near-one-party environment, even modest compositional shifts can cement machine control for a generation. Second, strong parties can bear the political cost of constitutional change and can structure procedures to minimize popular veto. South Carolina and Virginia illustrate the point. In South Carolina the Tillmanite coalition used legislative supermajorities to write poll-tax and literacy provisions into a new constitution with an "understanding clause," avoiding the uncertainty of a popular ratification vote. In Virginia the constitutional convention of 1901–02 ultimately proclaimed disfranchisement without referendum, on the explicit logic that the electorate would not choose to disenfranchise itself. It is difficult to read these maneuvers as the product of a time-invariant racial ideology alone; they reflect the exercise of institutional capacity motivated by a large electoral return to $\theta \uparrow$, precisely as the model's valence channel suggests.

Equally important for identification are the cases where disfranchisement failed or later receded. Maryland attempted three disfranchising amendments between 1905 and 1911, each defeated by referendum despite Democratic

control and explicit racial rhetoric. In our framework, this is a state where the expected marginal return $d\text{Share}_D/d\theta$ was not large enough to overcome organized opposition: there was no durable Populist–fusion threat to magnify the composition and P-channels, and Democratic valence was insufficient to bypass popular consent. Oklahoma provides a complementary pattern: initial success in 1910 under the banner of white supremacy was undone by Guinn v. United States (1915), after which a redesigned amendment failed at referendum in 1916 when Republicans and Socialists coordinated. The lesson is not that racial motives evaporated; rather, once the expected electoral gain declined and the costs rose, tightening θ was no longer an optimal strategy. That some states later relaxed elements of their regimes—especially after the Populist threat had dissipated by the 1920s—likewise fits a calculus in which the P-channel weakens and the net marginal return to screening falls.

The design of the barriers themselves reinforces the interpretation of disfranchisement as targeted electoral optimization rather than a blunt instrument. Where Democrats faced a sizable pool of poor white supporters, grandfather and Old Soldier clauses limited within-coalition fallout from literacy screens; where Populist pressure was acute, literacy tests appear alongside or after poll taxes, raising the effective θ on the margin most correlated with Populist voting. The move from party-printed tickets to the state-run, secret Australian ballot likewise functioned as a subtle literacy test that disproportionately burdened voters mobilized through collective slate-voting tactics common in fusion strongholds. These are the kinds of selective curvature in $r(x, \theta)$ that our baseline analysis predicts when parties choose instruments to maximize their vote-share derivative with respect to screening.

This strategic account also helps reinterpret the ubiquitous white-supremacy rhetoric of the period. The model does not deny racial motives; rather, it explains why policy moved when and where it did. If ideological demand were sufficient, disfranchising constitutions would have followed Redemption rapidly and uniformly across the South. They did not. Instead, we ob-

serve adoption concentrated in the years when Populists and fusion coalitions threatened Democratic hegemony, implemented through instruments that minimized losses among white Democratic constituencies, and undertaken with greatest institutional confidence where Democrats held the strongest grip on office. The rhetoric supplied a mobilizing frame and a legal cover; the calculus that determined when to spend legislative capital and constitutionalize barriers was electoral.

The broader implication is that disfranchisement in this era was not simply a policy artifact of racial hierarchy but an equilibrium response to a specific competitive shock: the rise of a mass, cross-racial alternative to the Democratic machine. Once that threat receded, the marginal returns to additional screening diminished, and—in some places subject to federal constraints and counter-mobilization—barriers were pared back. This interpretation aligns timing, targeting, and cross-state heterogeneity with the two core mechanisms identified in the baseline analysis. It also yields testable predictions beyond the cases discussed: where third-party pressure was weaker or shorter lived, or where Democratic valence was modest, we should observe delayed, failed, or softer screening; where both forces were strong, we should expect earlier, constitutionalized, and more durable regimes, often with exemptions that protect within-coalition voters. The state histories summarized above conform closely to these predictions, suggesting that the late-nineteenth-century wave of disfranchisement is best understood as strategic screening by dominant parties confronting Populist competition, not as the mechanical enactment of a long-standing racial preference.

5 Conclusion

x

A Appendix. Proofs

Proof of Proposition 1

Proof. Define $\Delta = (x - p_R)^2 + v - (x - p_D)^2$. The probability that voter with ideal point x votes for D is

$$\phi_D^1(x) = \frac{e^{U_{iD}(x)}}{e^{U_{iD}(x)} + e^{U_{iR}(x)}} = \frac{e^{\Delta_i}}{e^{\Delta_i} + 1} = \frac{1}{1 + e^{-\Delta_i}} = \sigma(\Delta).$$

Then

$$\text{Share}_D = \int \sigma(\Delta)\, \tilde{g}(x, \theta)\, dx,$$

and

$$\frac{\partial \text{Share}_D}{\partial p_D} = 2 \int (x - p_D)\, \frac{\partial \Delta}{\partial p_D}\, \tilde{g}(x)\, dx = 2 \int (x - p_D)\, W(x, p_D, p_D)\, \tilde{g}(x)\, dx,$$

where $W(x, p_D, p_D) = \sigma(\Delta)\,(1 - \sigma(\Delta))$. The first-order condition for D is

$$2 \int (x - p_D)\, W(x, p_D, p_R)\, \tilde{g}(x)\, dx = 0.$$

By symmetry, R's first order condition is identical.

Consider symmetric platforms $p_D = p_R = c$. In this case $\Delta = v$ (independent of x) and W is a positive constant, which factors out of the first order condition, leaving:

$$\int (x - c)\, \tilde{g}(x)\, dx = 0.$$

Then $c^* = \int x\, \tilde{g}(x)\, dx = \mathbb{E}_\theta[x]$. The strict concavity of each party's payoff in its own platform gives uniqueness.

Since $\Delta(x) = v$ for all x, each voter chooses D with probability $\sigma(v)$, independent of x. Integrating over $\tilde{g}$ gives $\text{Share}_D = \sigma(v)$ and $\text{Share}_R = 1 - \sigma(v)$. ■

Proof of Proposition 2

Proof. Step 1. Co-location of D and R platforms

Fix θ and observe that that

$$\text{Share}_D = \int (1-\pi)\,\phi_D^0\,\tilde{g}_0\,dx + \int \pi\,\phi_D^1\,\tilde{g}_1\,dx,$$

and

$$\text{Share}_R = \int (1-\pi)\phi_R^0\,\tilde{g}_0\,dx + \int \pi\phi_R^1\,\tilde{g}_1\,dx.$$

The first-order condition for D is

$$\frac{\partial \text{Share}_D}{\partial p_D} = \int (1-\pi)\frac{\partial \phi_D^0}{\partial p_D}\,\tilde{g}_0\,dx + \int \pi\frac{\partial \phi_D^1}{\partial p_D}\,\tilde{g}_1\,dx = A + B,$$

where $\frac{\partial \phi_J^Z}{\partial p_J} = 2(x-p_J)\phi_J^Z(1-\phi_J^Z)$ for $Z \in \{0,1\}$ and $J \in \{D,R\}$. A is the vote share from $Z=0$ and B is the vote share from $Z=1$. R's first order condition is similar.

Now if $p_D = p_R = c$, then $\phi_D^0 = \phi_R^0 = 1/2$ and $\phi_D^1 = \phi_R^1 = \hat{\phi}^1(x)$. Then

$$\frac{\partial \text{Share}_D}{\partial p_D} = \frac{1}{2}(1-\pi)\int (x-p)\tilde{g}_0\,dx + 2\pi\int (x-p)\hat{\phi}^1(1-\hat{\phi}^1)\,\tilde{g}_1\,dx = \frac{\partial Share_R}{\partial p_R}.$$

This implies that any solution of D's first-order condition is a solution to R's first-order condition, and conversely, and therefore that D and R co-location is a solution.

The equilibrium co-location can be found from the first-order condition:

$$c^{**} = \frac{(1-\pi)\,c_0 + 4\pi\int x\hat{\phi}^1(1-\hat{\phi}^1)\,\tilde{g}_1\,dx}{1-\pi+4\pi\int \hat{\phi}^1(1-\hat{\phi}^1)\,\tilde{g}_1\,dx}.$$

Step 2. Location of D/R platform relative to P's platform

Next we show that $c_1 \leq c^{**}$. Because D's objective function is strictly concave, if the derivative at c_1 is positive, the maximizer must lie strictly to the right. The location of the platforms is established by showing that

$\partial Share_D/\partial p_D > 0$ at $p_D = p_R = c_1$.

Consider the term A. If $p_D = p_R = c_1$, then $\phi_D^0(x) = 1/2$ and

$$A = \frac{1}{2}(1-\pi)\int (x - c_1)\,\tilde{g}_0\,dx.$$

Because c_0 is the center of $\tilde{g}_0$ and $c_1 < c_0$, then $\int (x - c_1)\,\tilde{g}_0\,dx > 0$. This establishes that $A > 0$.

Now consider the term B. Note that

$$B = 2\pi \int (x - c_1) W(x)\,\tilde{g}_1\,dx,$$

where $W)x) = \phi_D^1(1 - \phi_D^1)$. The co-location of D and R platforms and the fact that $\phi_P^1 > 0$ implies that $\phi_D^1 < 1/2$. Then because $\phi_D^1(x)$ is increasing amd $\phi_D^1 < 1/2$, $W(x)$ is increasing. This implies that $W(c_1 + \delta) \geq W(c_1 - \delta)$ for $\delta > 0$.

Because $\tilde{g}_1$ is symmetric around c_1, the integral in B can be decomposed as

$$\int (x - c_1) W(x)\,\tilde{g}_1\,dx = \int_0^\infty \delta\big[W(c_1 + \delta) - W(c_1 - \delta)\big]\,\tilde{g}_1(c_1 + \delta)\,d\delta \geq 0.$$

This establishes that $B > 0$. Therefore, the derivative of D's objective function is positive at $p_D = c_1$, establishing that $c_1 < c^{**}$. ■

Proof of Proposition 3

Proof. Consider the special case $\pi = 1$, so that all citizens are type $Z = 1$. In this case, there is no composition effect, and

$$\text{Share}_D = \int \phi_D^1\,\tilde{g}_1\,dx = \mathbb{E}_\theta[\phi(x)],$$

where E_θ is expectation with respect to the normalized density $\tilde{g}_1$. The proof proceeds by showing first that ϕ_D^1 is increasing in x. Second, it show that

if $\theta_2 > \theta_1$, then the distribution $\tilde{g}_1(.,\theta_2)$ first-order stochastically dominates $\tilde{g}_1(.,\theta_1)$. This implies that Share_D is increasing in θ

Step 1. ϕ_D^1 is increasing in x:

By the standard multinomial logit algebra,

$$\phi_D^1 = \frac{1}{2 + e^{-\Delta}},$$

where $\Delta = U_D - U_P = (x - pP)^2 - (x - c^{**})^2 - w$. Note that $\partial\phi_D^1/\partial\Delta > 0$, and also that

$$\frac{\partial\Delta}{\partial x} = 2(x - p_P) - 2(x - c^{**}) = 2(c^{**} - p_P) > 0,$$

where the inequality follows from the equilibrium relation $c^{**} > p_P$. Then

$$\frac{\partial\phi_D^1}{\partial x} = \frac{\partial\phi_D^1}{\partial\Delta} \cdot \frac{\partial\Delta}{\partial x} > 0.$$

Step 2. Stochastic dominance

Fix $\theta_1 < \theta_2$. Consider the ratio

$$\frac{\tilde{g}_1(x,\theta_2)}{\tilde{g}_1(x,\theta_1)} = \frac{r(x,\theta_2)g(x)/M(\theta_1)}{r(x,\theta_1)g(x)/M(\theta_1)} = \frac{M(\theta_1)}{M(\theta_2)} \cdot \frac{r(x,\theta_2)}{r(x,\theta_1)},$$

where $M(\theta) = \int r(x,\theta)g(x)dx$. Because $M(\theta_1)/M(\theta_2)$ is a positive constant, we can focus on $r(x,\theta_2)/r(x,\theta_1)$. Writing this ratio in logs:

$$\ln\frac{r(x,\theta_2)}{r(x,\theta_1)} = \int_{\theta_1}^{\theta_2} \frac{\partial \ln r(x,\theta)}{\partial\theta} d\theta.$$

Using the assumption that $\partial^2_{x\theta} \ln r(x\theta) > 0$, the partial derivative in the integral is increasing in x. An integral over θ of function that increase in x is increasing in x, implying that the log ratio is increasing in x and therefore $r(x,\theta_2)/r(x,\theta_1)$ is increasing in x. Therefore, the ratio $\tilde{g}_1(x,\theta_2)/\tilde{g}_1(x,\theta_1)$ is

increasing in x. This monotone likelihood condition implies that $\tilde{g}(x, \theta_2)$ first-order stochastically dominates $\tilde{g}_1(x, \theta_1)$.

Step 3. Taken together, 1 and 2 establish that Share_D is increasing in θ.

Now consider the change in Share_D in response to tightened screening when $\pi = 1$. D's vote share depends on θ directly through the change in distributions, and indirectly through c^{**}. Denote the equilibrium dependence of the D and R platforms on θ as $c^{**}(\theta)$, and the share as $\text{Share}_D(\theta, c^{**}(\theta))$. By D's first-order condition,

$$\frac{\partial \text{Share}_D}{\partial c^{**}}(\theta, c^{**}) = 0.$$

The derivative of interest can then be expressed as

$$\frac{d\text{Share}_D}{d\theta} = \frac{\partial \text{Share}_D}{\partial \theta} + \frac{\partial \text{Share}_D}{\partial c^{**}} \frac{\partial c^{**}}{\partial \theta}.$$

By the first-order condition, the second term is negative, so

$$\frac{d\text{Share}_D}{d\theta} = \frac{\partial \text{Share}_D}{\partial \theta} | c^{**} > 0,$$

where the last inequality follows from 1-3 above.

Finally, because the equilibrium is unique and smooth, it can be shown that $\partial \text{Share}_D / \partial \theta$ is continuous in θ. This implies that if $\partial \text{Share}_D / \partial \theta > 0$ for $\pi = 1$, then it is also positive in a neighborhood around 1, which establishes the result. ■

Proof of Proposition 4

Proof. Consider the special case $\pi = 1$. As shown in the proof of Proposition 3, D's share can be writtend as

$$\text{Share}_D = \int \phi_D^1(x; \theta, v)\, \tilde{g}_1(x; \theta)\, dx = \mathbb{E}_\theta[\phi(x)],$$

where $\mathbb{E}_\theta$ is expectation with respect to the normalized post-screen density $\tilde{g}_1$. For clarity of notation, let $\phi = \phi_D^1$ and $\phi_v = \partial\phi_D^1/\partial v$.

The proof proceeds in three steps. First, we show that ϕ_v is increasing in x. Second, we use the stochastic dominance result from Proposition 3 to show that the cross-partial $\partial^2 \text{Share}_D/(\partial\theta\partial v)$ is positive when the co-located platform c^{**} is held fixed. Third, we use the envelope condition and symmetry at $v = 0$ to conclude that the same sign holds taking into account equilibrium responses.

Step 1. ϕ_v is increasing in x.

With utilities $U_D = -(x - c^{**})^2$, $U_R = -(x - c^{**})^2 - v$, and $U_P = -(x-p_P)^2+w$, the probability that a $Z = 1$ voter chooses D can be expressed as

$$\phi_D^1 = \frac{1}{1 + e^{-v} + e^{U_P - U_D}}.$$

Then

$$\phi_v = \frac{e^{-v}}{(1 + e^{-v} + e^{U_P - U_D})^2} > 0.$$

Now, viewing ϕ_v as a function of x, note that

$$\frac{d}{dx}[U_P(x) - U_D(x)] = 2(x - c^{**}) - 2(x - p_P) = 2(p_P - c^{**}) < 0,$$

where the inequality holds because $p_P < c^{**}$ in equilibrium; then ϕ_v is increasing in x.

Step 2. Sign of the cross-partial holding c^{**} fixed.

Now fix θ and define

$$\Delta\text{Share}_D(v) = \text{Share}_D(\theta + \delta, v) - \text{Share}_D(\theta, v).$$

Using the expectation representation, this isn

$$\Delta\text{Share}_D(v) = \mathbb{E}_{\theta+\delta}[\phi(x, c^{**}, v)] - \mathbb{E}_\theta[\phi(x, c^{**}, v)]$$

Differentiating with respect to v at $v = 0$ gives

$$\Delta\text{Share}'_D(0) = \mathbb{E}_{\theta+\delta}[\phi_v(x, c^{**}, 0)] - \mathbb{E}_\theta[\phi_v(x, c^{**}, 0)].$$

From Proposition 3, the post-screen distribution $\tilde{g}_1(\cdot, \theta + \delta)$ first-order stochastically dominates $\tilde{g}_1(\cdot, \theta)$ when $\delta > 0$. Because $phiv$ is increasing in x from Step 1, standard properties of stochastic dominance imply

$$\mathbb{E}_{\theta+\delta}[\phi_v(x, c^{**}, 0)] > \mathbb{E}_\theta[\phi_v(x, c^{**}, 0)]$$

This means that $\Delta\text{Share}'_D(0) > 0$. For a fixed c^{**}, the cross-partial derivative can be written ae

$$\frac{\partial^2 \text{Share}_D}{\partial\theta\,\partial v}(\theta, 0) = \lim_{\delta\to 0} \frac{1}{\delta} \cdot \Delta\text{Share}'_D(0),$$

which is therefore positive.

Step 3. Accounting for equilibrium platform adjustment.

At the platform equilibrium, D's optimization condition is

$$\frac{\partial \text{Share}_D}{\partial c^{**}}(\theta, 0) = 0.$$

By the envelope theorem, the total cross-partial of the equilibrium share satisfies

$$\frac{d^2\,\text{Share}_D}{d\theta\,dv} = \frac{\partial^2\,\text{Share}_D}{\partial\theta\,\partial v} + \frac{\partial^2\,\text{Share}_D}{\partial\theta\,\partial c^{**}} \cdot \frac{\partial c^{**}}{\partial v}.$$

Terms associated with $\partial\text{Share}_D/\partial c^{**}$ are removed by the first-order condition. Because the environment is symmetric at $v = 0$, the co-located function $c^{**}(\theta, v)$ is an even function of v in a neighborhood of $v = 0$, so that $\partial c^{**}/\partial v = 0$ at $v = 0$. Therefore, at $v = 0$

$$\frac{d^2\,\text{Share}_D}{d\theta\,dv} = \frac{\partial^2\,\text{Share}_D}{\partial\theta\,\partial v} > 0.$$

This establishes that the marginal effect of screening on D's vote share is increasing in v at $v = 0$ when $\pi = 1$. By continuity of the cross-partial in π, there is also a neighborhood of π for which the sign is positive. ■

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