# Deep Roots:
# The Political Legacy of Southern Slavery

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# Introduction

> "98% probably of white people in Mississippi were segregationists. My family was, my father was, I was, everybody was. Everybody that I knew was for segregation."
>
> Greenwood, Mississippi, resident

Greenwood, Mississippi (2010 pop. 15,205), is, by all accounts, a fairly typical town in the Mississippi Delta. It is not a big town, but it feels big enough. The gridded streets line up in a roughly north-south direction, and its two rivers—the Tallahatchie and the Yazoo, parts of the web of smaller rivers forming the Mississippi food plains—roughly encircle the town. North of the Yazoo, historic mansions line Greenwood's "Grand Boulevard," and cotton and corn fields dot the roads leading away from the city. South of the Yazoo, in the historic city center, long-standing restaurants and shops, some of which have been there for decades, continue to serve Delta specialities like broiled shrimp and crabmeat. But perhaps Greenwood's greatest claim to fame, at least today, is serving as the birthplace and former home to a number of great blues artists, including Robert Johnson and Walter "Furry" Lewis.

Looking around the town—and elsewhere in the broader Mississippi Delta region—it is easy to see remnants of older, different times. The Mississippi Delta is an alluvial plain, and its system of rivers have provided rich, fertile soil for agricultural use for two centuries. To cultivate these lands in the early 1800s, white entrepreneurs forced the transportation of enslaved African Americans westward

into this region. Together, the fertile land, the "inexpensive" workforce, and the navigable rivers made cities like Greenwood the engines behind "King Cotton," with Mississippi providing roughly 480 million pounds of ginned cotton in 1859—almost a quarter of all cotton production in the United States that year—and helping to propel the nation through the Industrial Revolution in the late 19th century (Haines, 2010). It is easy to see this in Greenwood's Grand Boulevard mansions and the wide treelined streets in some of its neighborhoods. A sign on the outskirts of town proudly welcomes visitors to the "Greenwood, Cotton Capital of the World." And it certainly was so.

But, as cities like Greenwood show, the times of plenty did not last in the Delta. Starting in the 1940s, the mechanization of cotton production dramatically reduced the need for agricultural labor; in tandem with the Great Depression and the migration of blacks out of the rural South, cities like Greenwood fell into cycles of poverty and recession, further exacerbated by racial violence and tensions through the 1950s and 1960s. Between 1940 and the present day, close to half of the population of the Mississippi Delta left for opportunities elsewhere, and, today, Greenwood is a city peppered with boarded up buildings and vacant lots. In the traditionally African American neighborhood of Baptist Town, just outside the city center, many abandoned "shotgun"-style houses line the streets, calling to mind a past when mostly black agricultural workers lived there.

Towns like Greenwood are reminders that many places across the Southern Black Belt—roughly the hook shaped swath from the Mississippi Delta through Alabama, Georgia, and into the Carolinas—are today disproportionately poor and disadvantaged. Within Greenwood, the unemployment rate for African Americans is nearly twice that of the state average, which is in turn higher than the national average. Incomes for African Americans in Greenwood are also lower than state and national averages: the median income has been around half of the national median income for most of the last decade. And the overall poverty rate in Greenwood is about twice the overall Mississippi poverty rate. Segregation is perhaps the strongest reminder of this: following desegregation of public schools in the 1960s, many Black Belt towns established private "segregation academies" for white students, leaving desegregated public schools black and starved of resources. Today, Greenwood High School is 99% African American, while nearby Pillow Academy—founded in 1966 to provide segregated schooling for Greenwood's white children—is today 96% white.

Greenwood's historical trajectory contrast with another Southern city, Asheville, North Carolina (2010 pop. 83,393). Whereas Greenwood's land was its primary natural resource, Asheville's location in western North Carolina was by far less

friendly to large-scale agriculture, setting its course on a different path. Indeed, Greenwood was settled primarily as a base for the production and shipment of cotton, but Asheville and Buncombe County, a mountainous region nestled in the Blue Ridge and Smoky Mountains, was settled primarily as a trading outpost. For that reason, the city remained small and secluded for most of the 18th and 19th centuries, and it was only until the arrival of the Buncombe turnpike (1827) and particularly of the railroad (1880) that the area started to blossom. For the early parts of the 20th century, its relatively crisp climate and scenic mountain location made it an ideal vacation destination for Southerners from hotter lowland areas, and, over time, its boardinghouses started housing travelers from around the country.

Today, Asheville is a dynamic city, with affluent suburbs and an attractive downtown. The city's family median income, around $45,000, is very close to North Carolina's median. These numbers would probably be higher but for the presence of large numbers of university students from the local campus of the University of North Carolina. In fact, 43.3% of Asheville residents have bachelor's degrees or higher, a figure that far outpaces both the North Carolina average (27.3%) and the American average (30.4%). In addition, a thriving tourist industry brings visitors to Buncombe County's famous Blue Ridge mountains and to cultural attractions like the historic Biltmore Estate; the city is also home to a variety of other industries, including health care, grocery and retail, and higher education. Perhaps the strongest sign of Asheville's prospects for prosperity lies in the fact that it is a growing city, with 13% rate of growth from 2000 to 2010, a rate that bests the United States as a whole (9.7%) and puts the city on par with other parts of the "New South." It would be hard to deny the optimism behind these numbers, which are echoed in Buncombe County's can-do motto, "People to Match Our Mountains."

This is not a history book, nor is it a book about the geographic diversity of the South. This is a book about politics and political attitudes. And our reason for discussing these two cities—Greenwood, Mississippi, and Asheville, North Carolina—is because, although they look very different today, they share an important trait in common: they both lean strongly Democrat in terms of their politics. In 2008 and 2012, for example, Barack Obama lost both Mississippi and North Carolina (handily), but won both Leflore County and Buncombe County, the homes of Greenwood and Asheville, respectively. But, as we will discuss in this book, the reasons why are very different. Greenwood, which is 67% black, has followed the trajectory of African American politics more generally (although, as we'll discuss throughout this book, this was not always been the case). Since African American voters today tend to overwhelmingly side with the Democratic party, this

means that Greenwood—as have other majority-black counties throughout the Black Belt—has sided with Democratic candidates. On the other hand, and perhaps more revealing, Barack Obama won *nearly no support from the area's white voters*.[1] Nearly all of Leflore County's white votes went to Obama's two Republican opponents, John McCain (2008) and Mitt Romney (2012). This is a pattern seen again and again throughout the Black Belt: black voters supporting for Democratic candidates, but white voters overwhelmingly supporting Republican candidates.

Asheville, on the other hand, also leans Democratic, as do some other areas in the the Southern "upcountry." But the area's Democratic leanings do not follow from the preferences of a black majority—only around 15% of Asheville and 6% of Buncombe County is black. Indeed, looking at the 2008 election, the relatively small numbers of black voters mean that Obama actually did well among Buncombe County's *white* voters: he won with 57% of the vote, but blacks only make up 6% of the population. Even with all 6% of African Americans turning out and voting for him, Obama appears to have picked up over 50% of the white vote, an unusually high figure in the U.S. South. Many of these votes surely come from the retirees and the students who call Asheville home. But, even accounting for this mobile population (which we discuss in later parts of this book), whites whose families have lived in the Asheville area for generations have been on average more liberal than residents of parts of the South. What explains this?

These cities—Greenwood, Mississippi, and Asheville, North Carolina—are just illustrations of the broader puzzle that we explore in this book. Why are whites in places like Greenwood, Mississippi, so much more conservative than whites who live in places like Asheville, North Carolina? Why is there greater racial polarization in places like Greenwood? Why did these differences develop? And why would these differences persist?

This contemporary political puzzle forms the core inquiry in this book. But even though this is a contemporary puzzle, we believe that the answers to these questions lie in the history of these places. We argue in this book that *political attitudes persist over time, making history a key part of how we understand contemporary politics*. Looking at the U.S. South, we focus this conceptual argument on the "peculiar institution" that drove the South's economy and politics for nearly 250 years: chattel slavery. We argue *that Southern slavery has had a lasting local effect on Southern political attitudes, and therefore on regional and national politics*. Whites who live in parts of the South that were heavily reliant on slavery and the inexpensive labor that the institution provided—such as places like Greenwood,

[1] The estimate of the white vote for Obama comes from our estimation strategy in Chapter 3.

Mississippi, and other places in the Southern Black Belt—and are more conservative today, more cool toward African Americans, and less amenable to policies that many believe could promote black progress. By contrast, whites who live in places without an economic and political tradition rooted in the prevalence of slavery—places like Asheville, North Carolina—are, by comparison, more progressive politically and on racial issues. These patterns have persisted historically and are the direct consequences of the slaveholding history of these areas, rather than being simply attributable to contemporary demographics or contemporary political debates.

To go back to our original question, then, what explains the differences in politics in cities like Greenwood versus places like Asheville? Why are whites so much more conservative in the Black Belts versus other parts of the South? *What we argue in this book, and what we show using empirical evidence, is is that some of the differences in the politics of these two cities can in part be traced to one important fact: Greenwood was a place whose economy was rooted in the historical prevalence of slavery and the provision of inexpensive black labor whereas Asheville was not.*

## How Could the Past Still Matter?

Many people might think this is an outrageous claim. It seems preposterous to think that something could happen so long ago could possibly affect people's attitudes attitudes today; it's even just as ludicrous to think that all of the things that happened between 1860 and today haven't served to diminish those sorts of influences. To put it simply, how could something that was abolished 150 years ago possibly affect our political beliefs today?

This is a smart, reasonable viewpoint—one shared by many political observers and scholars. Slavery ended over 150 years ago, a time when the U.S. population numbered around 31 million, about ten percent of what it is today. In the 1850s, roads in the U.S. were mostly unpaved, horses and wagons (and human feet) were the modal form of transportation, and railroads were beginning to replace steamboats as the standard way to haul goods across the country. Alexander Graham Bell wouldn't make his first telephone call for another 25 years (in 1876), and the Wright brothers wouldn't take their first flight for 50 more (in 1903). Women couldn't vote, there were only 33 states in the (fragile) union, and Buffalo, New York, was America's 10th largest city. (As of 2015, Buffalo is America's 45th largest city.) And this younger United States was also yet to face the wave of internal and international migration that would characterize the 20th century. A lot has changed in

American society and culture in the 150 years since slavery was abolished.

From the vantage point of politics and of race relations, these changes appear especially salient. For starters, the institution of slavery was itself permanently and fairly quickly abolished, both by the Emancipation Proclamation (1863) and more forcibly by the defeat of the South in the U.S. Civil War (1861–1865). The subsequent federal involvement of Reconstruction (1865–1877) brought forth massive strides toward equality, including the enactment of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution, which together formally abolished slavery, guaranteed newly freed African Americans the right to vote, and brought to all people the right to equal protection of the laws. Although historians have challenged how forcibly these Amendments were enforced (as we will, later in this book), there is no denying that the formal institution of slavery had collapsed by the 1880s, marking a significant transition point in the American racial order. Many have argued that the inclusion of African Americans into public life moved at best in fits and starts (e.g., Klinkner and Smith, 2002), but it would be entirely misleading to say that these massive political and economic forces didn't substantially shift and shape political and social attitudes through history.

Even greater movements toward equality have been made in the 20th century, further distancing the United States from its slave past. For example (and just to name just a few things), the 1920s and 1930s saw the remarkable rise of African-American visionaries in disparate fields, including literature (Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston), the arts (Marian Anderson, Josephine Baker), and athletics (Jesse Owens, Joe Louis, Jackie Robinson). Within politics as well, the voice of black political and intellectual leaders such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and Booker T. Washington guided the nation toward a fairer treatment of African Americans (although they voiced their opinions in different ways). By the 1960s, these efforts had culminated not just in the formal constitutional disavowal of segregation (with the Supreme Court ruling in 1954 of *Brown v. Board of Education*), but also with the massive grass-roots movement that we now recognize as the Civil Rights Movement. Today, as many Americans pay their respects to prominent African American leaders like civil rights visionary Martin Luther King, Jr., and former Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall as they do prominent white leaders from the same time period. It would be simply absurd to deny the progress associated with these monumental changes, and with the significant leadership and intellectual vision within African American communities.

Taken together, these social, political, and cultural changes have meant that Americans live in a more integrated, multicultural environment than has ever been possible, although challenges do remain. Explicit racism is, in most communi-

ties, seriously condemned, as are acts of violence directed toward particular racial or ethnic groups. Institutional protections of minority rights include not just the far-reaching provisions of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, but also the Fair Housing Act, the Equal Opportunity and Employment Commission, and the promotion of minority hiring and applications by state and federal governments via the use of affirmative action. In terms of criminal justice, many jurisdictions have stronger sentences for hate crimes or other kinds of crimes targeted toward minority groups. The political inclusion of African Americans has extended not just to the 2008 election of the nation's first black President (Barack Obama), but also the appointments of two Supreme Court Justices (Clarence Thomas and Thurgood Marshall), a Secretary of State (Condoleeza Rice), two Attorneys General (Eric Holder and Loretta Lynch), and numerous other high-level federal and state officials.

The South has been no exception to this progress. A visitor from the 1860s would hardly recognize the city of Atlanta today. In the 1860s, Atlanta was a small city (pop. 9,554, about the size of Greenwood), mostly reliant on local railroads for business and trade. Today, Atlanta is a reflection of the "New South," a true metropolis full of construction, corporate offices, and fine restaurants. Just as importantly, Atlanta is home to a large and growing black middle and upper class—one that drives much of the local economy and provides substantial cultural contributions to the city. In more recent years, cities like Atlanta, including Nashville and Miami, have lured many middle and upper class blacks away from cities in the North and back to the South. For many African Americans, this "New South" is simply a more comfortable, welcoming environment than many parts of the racially segregated North.

We also note that a strong part of the American creed is simply that the past is the past. The United States is a nation of immigrants, and many came in large part to escape family histories (although many Americans—particularly African Americans—had no choice). Many Americans believe, to use a familiar expression, that sins of the father should not pass onto the sons. These ideas have been put into practice by the nation's legal system. For example, bankruptcy law clears a debtor's slate after seven years, and statutes of limitations ensure that no undue time has passed between crime and punishment. U.S. courts take as a starting proposition that defendants should never be put on trial twice for the same crime and that citizens should not be punished for crimes committed by parents or relatives. Americans put strong moral weight on the idea of individualism—both in terms of individual responsibility and also on idea that a person can move past his or her family circumstances and move forward through hard work and effort. Un-

dergirding this is the idea of forgiveness and, simply, letting bygones be bygones.

## How the Past Persists

On the other hand, a reasonable position is that the past actually has enormous consequences for our present. We know institutions and norms (and perhaps also political attitudes, as we will discuss) change remarkably slowly over time. Slavery was abolished only around 150 years ago—which represents the lifetime of two 75-year olds put together. As reminders of how close this "past" is to us, the last person believed to be born into slavery died in the 1970s, while the last recognized living child of former slaves died only recently, in 2011. Thousands of people living during the 2000s and 2010s were born during the times of sharecropping in the 1920s and 1930s, meaning that the inter-generational contact extends only a few generations back. The temporal proximity of all of these events means that all Americans had close relatives who were alive during these key periods in history. For many Americans living in the U.S. South, and also for many Americans whose grandparents and parents have subsequently migrated to other parts of the country, these connections forge a close temporal and generational contact with slavery and its aftermath. The past that we consider here simply was not very long ago, and certainly not when compared to broader events in human history.

Indeed, while many things have changed, a large number of things have not. Greenwood in many ways quite like it did in the 1950s and 1960s. In the city center, the famous local restaurant Lusco's has been a town mainstay, run by the same family since 1921. (Until desegregation in the 1970s, the restaurant was "for whites only;" other restaurants in town responded to desegregation by turning into private "supper clubs.") The town so captures the feelings of the pre-Civil Rights Movement Deep South that it stepped in for Jackson, Mississippi, in the film *The Help*, a 2011 motion picture about African-American women working in domestic employment. In terms of an even older past, just outside of the city, a visitor can still see long-staple cotton farms or stop by the abandoned shotgun style homes that housed thousands of African-American agricultural workers earlier in the 20th century. Within the city, traditionally working-class and sharecropping neighborhoods continue to be African American neighborhoods; neighborhoods north of the city continue to be white neighborhoods. In places like Greenwood, as in places throughout the Black Belt, the remnants of a segregated past are in plain sight.

There is also a broader pattern of racial violence within the Southern United States. Greenwood, for example, was the location of the 1954 kidnapping and

lynching of 14-year old Emmet Till, the African-American teen who was allegedly caught whistling at a white woman; Till's body was found in the Tallahachie River with a cotton-gin fan tied around his frame. (His killers, even after confessing to the crime, were acquitted by an all-white jury in nearby Tallahatchie County, Mississippi.) Although instances such as these have greatly decreased in number and in their monstrosity, they have not been completely extirpated. In 2015, for example, a young white supremacist shot and killed nine black churchgoers in Charleston, South Carolina. The shooter, from nearby Richland County, South Carolina (prop. slave in 1860, 0.60), had written earlier that he "chose Charleston because it is most historic city in my state, and at one time had the highest ratio of blacks to Whites in the country."

The statement from the 2015 Charleston shooter also illustrates another narrative that we explore throughout this book, which is that it is easy for Americans (particularly those living outside of the South) to overlook is the sheer importance and historical prevalence of slavery—and its subsequent demographic legacy. At its peak shortly before the Civil War, the United States had an enslaved population of 4 million. This constituted nearly *one-fourth of the entire population of the U.S. South*. In looking at the country as a whole, one in eight Americans were enslaved. In terms of whites' interactions with the institution, this translated into more than one in four Southern families holding enslaved people as property, and, in places like Mississippi, this number rose to almost one-half of Southern families. Thus, nearly every Southern white living in those parts of the slaveholding South either was directly or indirectly linked to the maintenance of enslaved labor. Of course, the impact of slavery was not limited to the Southern United States. Many northern cities reaped the economic benefits of enslaved labor, including in the building of roads, buildings, parks, and universities. Later on, industrial centers across the North cities benefited from the cheaper production of cotton, a labor-intensive and lucrative crop, and other labor-intensive extracted resources. But it was in the Black Belt of the American South that the institution of slavery was the most firmly embedded and had its furthest reach.

The impact of slavery on the Southern economy and on Southern politics hardly ended once the Civil War was over in 1865. The brief optimism of racial progressives during the period of Reconstruction (1865–1877) succumbed to the Southern Redemption following the Compromise of 1877 and the significant withdrawal of federal involvement from Southern politics. Southern white elites consolidated and regrouped politically, forging new alliances with whites who had previously supported federal intervention. The player left out of this new power dynamic was the black freedman, who had limited independent political or economic power. In

the absence of federal government intervention, Southern whites moved toward a system that looked tremendously similar to slavery, but stopped legally short of violating the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution—at least as interpreted by Southern judges and by the U.S. Supreme Court (Valelly, 2004). Throughout the former Confederacy, a wave of anti-black laws made it difficult, if not impossible, for African Americans to pull themselves up out of poverty and economic dependency. They made it difficult for blacks to vote, hold jobs, travel freely, or gain access to education. Vagrancy laws made it illegal to be unemployed and tended to be targeted at blacks; anti-enticement laws made it illegal for whites to try to recruit black workers from other white men's lands. Together, these laws and practices formed a network that strongly limited the ability of freed former slaves to become economically independent and to exercise political rights. In this way, the institution of slavery transformed within a period of 30 years into a system of widespread segregation and subjugation—different in form, but in many respects just as devastating. As the historian C. Vann Woodward wrote, "[u]nder slavery, control was best maintained by a large degree of physical contact and association," but the "temporary anarchy that followed the collapse of the old discipline produced a state of mind bordering on hysteria among Southern white people" (pp. 22–23 Woodward, 2002 [1955]). Violence, segregation, and complete disenfranchisement soon followed.

By the early 20th century, slavery had transformed into a system known as Jim Crow, a time period fresh in the minds of many Americans born through the 1940s, 1950s, and even 1960s. Writing in the 1940s, the Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal observed that "the historical tradition through slavery, Civil War, Reconstruction, and Restoration…ties together the judgments on the South and on the Negro." Observing the reactions of white Southerners, he wrote, "a friendly attitude toward the South carries with it unfavorable views toward Negroes or at least a tendency to minimize the fact that they are a substantial proportion of the South's people. Conversely, a sympathetic attitude toward Negroes, their shortcomings, their grievances, and their problems, and especially the attempt to explain them on any basis other than racial inferiority, will be taken as a criticism of the social and moral order of the South" (pp. 1037 Myrdal, 1944). Most Americans who were alive during this time period recognize the shocking racism and racial hostility that characterized many black-white interactions during this time period.

Looking at the Southern Black Belt, the vestiges of slavery, of Reconstruction, and of Jim Crow are still visible in places like Leflore County, Mississippi, and Barbour County, Alabama. Cotton entrepreneurs were drawn to these places for the land, which provided excellent growing conditions for the cultivation of cotton.

Over a period of time in the early 1800s, they forced the movement of thousands of enslaved people from the Upper South into the Deep South parts of the Mississippi Delta and Black Belt counties in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. Many of these enslaved people lived on rural plantations, but, after emancipation, thousands moved to shotgun style dwellings on the outskirts of towns like Greenwood. In time, forced desegregation and the efforts of the Civil Rights Movement alleviated some inequalities between blacks and whites but ultimately failed in reducing many racial divisions. This history is living for the large number of whites and African-Americans who participated in the Civil Rights Movement. It is not hard to see the threads that weave through the overlapping generations of Southerners and bind the past to the present.

## Historical Persistence in Attitudes, Institutional Path Dependence, and Behavioral Path Dependence

The rich history of the South points to the possibility of a remarkable *historical persistence* in the politics of these areas. This might be obvious looking at highly segregated and economically struggling places like Greenwood, Mississippi, and Eufala, Alabama, and when considering just how short the time has been since the end of slavery. However, to understand this persistence, we must understand why and how the economic geography of the 19th century led in part to the political geography of today. To do this, we will build an argument throughout the book that is rooted in the historical development of the South.

As historians have argued, slavery created an entire way of life that was utterly and completely dependent on the provision of cheap labor. When this was forcibly removed by the threat of war and emancipation, Southern whites who were heavily reliant on the institution of slavery looked for other ways by which to maintain and protect the social order. Depending on how reliant an area was on black labor, this meant turning to informal and local institutions to reign in newly emancipated black workers and potential black voters. After all, if black workers left, there would be no one to cultivate lands, maintain infrastructure, build roads and railways, operate newly profitable mining and timber production, and provide domestic labor. And if blacks could freely vote, then the entire political system of the South—one built on white dominance—would be thrown into tumult. The entire way of Southern living would, in a sense, be upended.

The institutions that came out of slavery are just part of the story, however.

For Southern whites, cultural institutions and informal norms reinforced differing political attitudes—for some reinforcing the idea that blacks were somehow inferior, less deserving, and more worthy of this kind of subjugation. These reinforced attitudes were a necessary companion to the laws and customs that implemented these ideas: if whites truly believed that blacks were inferior, then it would be easier to inflict economic hardship, racial violence, and the denial of blacks' political rights—and all of these things were necessary for whites to maintain their political and economic positions. This operated in tandem with informal and socially rooted organizations like the Ku Klux Klan and other informal networks. The goal was the same as with the formal institutions: to keep blacks in a subjugated position, economically and politically. The net effect of this white "hysteria" (to use the phrase from Woodward) is that whites "dug in," creating an environment that reinforced culturally, socially, and politically the idea that blacks were racially inferior. As we shall see below, this was particularly the case among those who had the most to lose—that is, those whites living in the Black Belt.

These ideas point to the notion that there are channels of persistence that operate via *path dependence*. This path dependence, as we discuss throughout this book, can take on two forms. The first is through *institutional path dependence*, an idea that has been developed via several scholarly literatures (e.g., Pierson, 2004). This type of path dependence posits that institutions become self-reinforcing—once we start down a path, it becomes harder and harder to extract ourselves from that path. In the Black Belt South, for instance, local governments, to the extent they could, participated and sanctioned the enforcement of anti-black laws: the localized black codes gave way to state-sanctioned Jim Crow laws, put into place by numerous state constitutions that were enacted at the turn of the 20th century. In turn, as many have argued, Jim Crow laws have given way to increased incarceration rates, increased radicalized violence, and laws that are otherwise unfavorable to African Americans. As these institutions gained hold in the South, reversing them and fully integrating blacks into society became increasingly difficult and the institutions became more important to Southern whites. Of course, any path can be disrupted and these institutions eventually ran up against the the Civil Rights Movement, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. These laws were hugely effective in addressing racial inequalities, particularly with regard to economic indicators and schooling; however, as we show below, the vestiges of slave-related institutions on contemporary political attitudes can still be felt across many parts of the South.

## Behavioral Path Dependence

But there is a second kind of path dependence at work here. Just like institutional path dependence, ideas, norms, and behaviors can be passed down as well, and they interact with institutions, reinforcing each other over time. We call this idea *behavioral path dependence*. That is, similar to religion and language, attitudes—including political and racial attitudes—are passed down from generation to generation, fostered and encouraged by families and local institutions such as schools and churches. These institutions, along with family members, ensure that the cultural norms, values, and attitudes are recreated in the next generation. As such, behavioral path dependence does not exclude institutional channels of reinforcement over time; rather, it incorporates institutions and behavior by emphasizing the interplay between them and the reinforcement mechanisms that strengthen each. All of this is not to say that people don't change: they do. Children change, they grow up, and they marry, but—just like religion—politics is a culturally ingrained quality that extends across multiple generations and changes only slowly and in response to significant life events (Green, Palmquist and Schickler, 2002).

At its core, behavioral path dependence suggests that the political attitudes of a place can actually last a long time, nurtured by both institutions and laws, and also by families and communities. This idea of path dependence in politics more broadly suggests that significant historical forces, and the attendant political economic and political incentives that they create, can create patterns that carry down for generations over time—and these patterns can outlast the original institutions and incentives. For example, looking at Greenwood, a possible explanation is that its history of slavery and its subsequent reliance on black labor has contributed to the development of more conservative political and racial attitudes among whites. We think—and we will show in this book—that these attitudes have persisted over the course of the 20th century. Thus, whites living in Greenwood and in other parts of the Southern Black Belt are more conservative today than are whites living elsewhere, even though those institutions that initially spurred on these attitudes—slavery, sharecropping, disenfranchisement—are no longer in existence.

## How Behavioral Path Dependence Is Different from Other Approaches

Looking across the U.S. South, the path dependence of political attitudes suggests that some part of the variation in political, and specifically racial, attitudes that we see today in the U.S. South are fundamentally related to events that happened in

the distance past. This is a break from what research in political science and specifically on public opinion. Of course, the questions of how Americans formulate their political beliefs are not new. During each election cycle, teams of journalists, pundits, and scholars set out to understand why certain places vote the way they do, and what this means for national and state electoral maps. However, most of these predictions and analyses hinge on *contemporary* factors. For example, what is an area's level of unemployment? What is its average income? What is the racial, gender, and age composition of a particular city? Who won in the last election and by how much? Perhaps the more sophisticated inquiries use survey data to make predictions about political outcomes. For example, we know that wealthier people tend to be more conservative, so what is a person's income? Employment or marital status? Race or gender? These sorts of contemporary economic and political factors, and these sorts of individual characteristics, can tell us a lot about the political leanings of a place.

This approach is in contrast with what we do in this book. For example, campaign strategists, political scientists, and journalists are very concerned with what it takes to change people's minds. Campaigns have spent millions of dollars and mobilized countless volunteer hours trying to mobilize voters, trying to predict their behavior, and assessing what kinds of appeals work and what don't. Numerous studies have looked at the same questions, trying to use randomized controlled trials to assess the most effective sorts of mailers, telephone solicitations (or robocalls), and in-person solicitations. The result of all of this? In terms of increasing voter turnout, the most powerful known interventions have managed to increase voter turnout by around nine percentage points (Gerber and Green, 2000; Gerber, Green and Larimer, 2008). In terms of changing people's minds, the most impactful study—a study on whether gay canvassers could change people's minds about gay marriage—showed a large impact, but was later proved to be fraudulent (LaCour and Green, 2014). The bulk of this research implies that large changes in the political attitudes and behaviors of Americans are both rare and costly.

These studies are important, especially so given today's political climate. However, we are not surprised by either the lack of findings or, if there are findings, findings that are so substantively small. Mailers, phone calls, or volunteer canvassers wouldn't significantly alter the effects of a century and a half of history in places like Greenwood, Mississippi, or Asheville, North Carolina. And it certainly wouldn't affect history's role in shaping attitudes on long-standing questions on race relations, affirmative action, or voting rights. We do think, as we will see later in this book, that important interventions throughout the 20th century—including the mass mobilization of thousands of African Americans during the course of the

Civil Rights Movement—have had powerful effects on attenuating institutional outcomes and also the expression of racial hostility over time. However, at the root of our argument is the idea that behavioral path dependence means that attitudes change quite slowly. Counties like Leflore County, Mississippi, or Barbour County, Alabama are places with 150 years of tense race relations and a respective white dominance over a subjugated African American population. These have spurred on certain kinds of political attitudes. And these have been rooted in the historical forces that shaped these areas. In other words, contemporary factors can only take us so far in explaining the gulf between political attitudes in the Mississippi Delta and political attitudes in other parts of the South.

## Our Argument

Instead, we think that the path dependence of political attitudes is a more likely explanatory mechanism. Because of that, although this is not a history book, we take Alexis De Tocqueville, Gunnar Myrdal, and W.E.B. Du Bois as our examples, and draw our explanation for Southern attitudes on race—and, by extension, attitudes on politics—from the South's distinctive racial past. This was a past solidly grounded in the economic and political importance of slavery and, once it was abolished, the institutional and cultural features of the Jim Crow era. Like Myrdal, we believe these historical forces shape the racial order of the South, as well as the way that Southerners think about race, politics, and policy. In other words, Americans' political attitudes are in part a direct consequence of generations of ideas that have been collectively passed down over time, via institutions such as schools and churches and also directly from parents and grandparents—that is, via behavioral path dependence. Our hope is, therefore, that we push our collective understanding of what shapes and forms contemporary political opinion and contemporary political behavior further, beyond contemporary factors. We also hope that, in so doing, to develop the idea that our political attitudes today are intimately intertwined with, and shaped by, those political attitudes of our parents and grandparents, nurtured by historical institutions and by intergenerational socialization.

As we will discuss throughout this book, viewing contemporary political attitudes as developing and being sustained over time and across generations represents a new way of thinking. This account focuses not on *contemporary factors*, the study of which can only get us so far in understanding the deep persistence of political cleavages. Instead, we start with the perhaps radical proposition that *where*

*people live, who their families are, and where they grow up all collectively have a significant role to play in the on the kinds of political attitudes they express as adults*. That is, deep political predispositions and social attitudes are in part the product of historical forces that subsequently create and drive the inter-generational transmission of attitudes, norms, and preferences. Put simply: many of our attitudes—including attitudes on politics—are shaped by our families, by our history, and by our environments, and these attitudes are passed down over time and through generations, reinforced by behavioral path dependence. For that reason, we think that looking at the history of places like Greenwood, Mississippi, is very important in trying to understand why the whites of these sorts of Black Belt cities are among the most conservative in the country, and more conservative than other whites living elsewhere in the South.

**Ultimately, the argument of the book concerns the core idea that the formation of public opinion more broadly can have historical roots. In turn, attitudes can persistent over time and across multiple generations via behavioral path dependence. History can shape contemporary political attitudes.**

Over the course of this book, we will illustrate this core idea by looking at three components. *First*, in looking at the U.S. South, we document that Southern whites who live in areas where slaveholding was more prevalent are today more conservative, more cool to African Americans, and more likely to oppose race-related policies that many feel could potentially help blacks. *Second*, these attitudes, we argue, are rooted in historical incentives to subjugate African Americans—incentives that strengthened through the antebellum period and that morphed in the postbellum period into significant institutional and social customs designed to keep blacks in socially, politically, and economically marginalized positions. *Third*, these attitudes have been passed down over time through a variety of different institutional and cultural channels, including via *behavioral dependence*. As we shall see, however, some outcomes have attenuated over time with effective interventions such as the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, but the gulf in political attitudes among whites living in the South continues to exist today.

## How This Book is Organized

A brief roadmap will orient the reader to our book's organization. We start this book in Chapter 2 by presenting an overview of the key theoretical concept underlying our analysis, namely that of *behavioral path dependence*. This Chapter aims

to situate this theory within two broader literatures: (i) the literature on historical institutionalism, which argues that distant events can have lasting impact on politics by affecting the way in which politics unfolds over time, and (ii) the literature on American political behavior that includes contemporary studies of partisanship and race politics, as well as studies of Southern political behavior originating in Key's seminal book *Southern Politics*. Although previous studies have alluded to the fact that attitudes can persist over time, ours is the first to develop fully this concept within the context of *political* attitudes and behavioral path dependence. We lay the groundwork for this theory by examining how nonpolitical customs and norms could be transmitted over time, and by considering other examples of this kind of transmission outside of American politics, including some important recent studies in the political economy literature.

The rest of the book is then organized into three Parts. **Part I ("Now")** develops the main analysis documenting path dependence of political attitudes among white Southerners. Specifically, we examine the "Now" of our findings, showing the persistent predictive power of slavery on contemporary politics. This forms the core part of the empirical puzzle that we explore in later sections of the book. **Part II ("Then")** then takes the reader back in time to antebellum, Reconstruction, and post-Reconstruction periods. Here, we argue that these effects might have their roots in the economic and political incentives growing out of slavery and, also importantly, its collapse. **Part III ("In Between")** then takes up how path dependent forces shaped the development and trajectory of political attitudes at the local level, across generations. It focuses on how incentives shaped both actions and attitudes among Southern whites, and how these incentives attenuated in some circumstances due to external interventions but how other attitudes have remained. Throughout, we highlight the important role that the transmission of beliefs via both institutional and behavioral path dependence played in the regional development of Southern racial attitudes.

## Part I: The Contemporary Effects of Slavery

Part I establishes our main evidence for the path dependence of political attitudes, relying on several data-driven analyses to show that the South's slave past predicts regional patterns today. The goal of this Part is to show, using data and examples, that *historical patterns can predict contemporary attitudes*.

Chapter 3 presents the core empirical evidence for the possibility of path dependence in political attitudes. Here, we start with the observation that the South

is more conservative than the North across a host of important issues.[2] We show that Southern counties that had higher shares of slave populations in the time period before the Civil War are today areas where whites are (1) more likely to be conservative in terms of their partisan self-identification and (2) more likely to oppose policies that many believe could benefit African Americans, such as affirmative action. These are also areas of the U.S. South where various measures show that (3) whites have the coolest views toward black as a group. Figure 1.1 previews the data and findings from this Chapter and shows measures of white political preferences disaggregated by region of the country: non-South (which includes the Midwest, Northeast, West Coast), formerly low-slave Southern counties, and formerly high-slave Southern counties.[3] The Figure shows that, across all measures, non-Southerners are more racially liberal—they are more likely to identify as Democrat, more likely to support affirmative action, and more likely to say that slavery has hurt the ability of blacks to work their way out of the lower class. Within the South, formerly low-slave areas are more likely to express these views as well. *It is within formerly high-slave areas that whites are the most likely to oppose the Democratic party, oppose affirmative action, and express sentiments that could be construed as racially resentful.* We present these and other results in Chapter 3. And, as we show, although these results may be surprising, they hold up even in the face of a battery of statistical tests.

Chapter 4 addresses questions that many skeptical readers will have, which is whether these results aren't simply being driven by contemporary factors, such as contemporary demographics. First, we address the important counter-arguments that these findings are simply being driven by contemporary black concentrations or population mobility over time. We are motivated in these questions by the seminal work of Key, who noted that one of slavery's legacy was in the high shares of African Americans living in this part of the country today. A voluminous literature following Key has made the point that white populations, being threatened by high concentrations of black populations, develop more conservative views and stronger anti-minority attitudes—a mechanism that the literature refers to as "racial

[2] We use the term "South" to mean Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. This represents the 11 confederate states plus Kentucky, Missouri, and West Virginia, though the inclusion or omission of the latter three are not important to the broad conclusions of the book.

[3] To divide the formerly low- and high-slave parts of the South, the figure uses 25% population enslaved as the cut-off point; this represents roughly the median. That is, approximately half of counties in the South had fewer than 25% of the population enslaved in 1860 and roughly half had more.

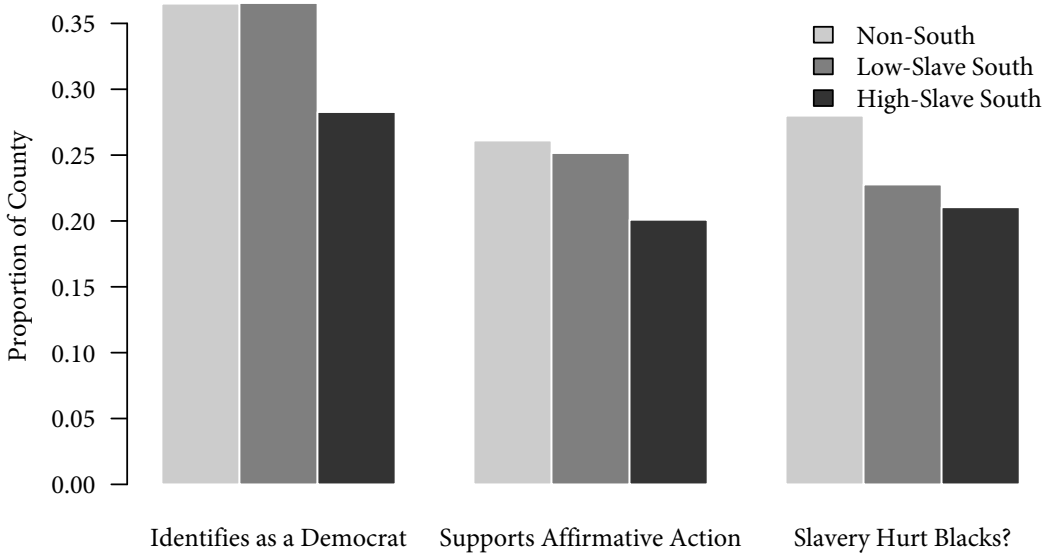


*Figure 1.1:* White attitudes on race-related issues. Low-slave refers to counties in the U.S. South that had fewer than 25% of the county population enslaved; high-slave refers to counties that had more than 25% of the population enslaved.

threat." As we show in Chapter 4, however, this explanation does not fully explain the distinctiveness of the Black Belt. Once we account for the prevalence of slavery in the Southern Black Belt, the effects of contemporary black populations disappear. This is an important point, and, because it casts doubt on a significant portion of literature in American politics, we discuss it at length. We also consider whether our findings are being driven by substantial population sorting over time, leading to demographic changes in the Black Belt. Although the evidence on this point is thinner, we nonetheless find that this explanation does not appear to be fully driving our results. Instead, we argue that the forces at play do not originate in contemporary demographics, but, rather, in the historical economic incentives for oppression and anti-black policies, which, via behavioral path dependence, continue to shape attitudes today.

## Part II: The Origins of the U.S. Racial Order in Economic and Political Incentives

Part II addresses the questions left open by the empirical findings in Part I—if our findings that whites who live in former parts of the slaveholding South are more racially conservative aren't explained by demographic factors, then what explains this pattern? We argue in this part of the book that the answer lies in the complicated historical institution of slavery itself: that is, the economic and political system of slavery and its collapse led whites living in those areas most dependent on slavery to be more conservative, more cool toward race-related policies, and more racially hostile toward African Americans.

How is it that slavery has led to whites who were reliant on it to become more racially conservative? And when did these differences come to light? Chapter 5 examines the historical progression of political differences between the slaveholding Black Belt and other parts of the South. As the Chapter shows, slavery affected much of antebellum politics leading to some cleavages between the Black Belt and non-slaveholding areas in the antebellum period. But these differences were mostly rooted in economics, rather than over the question of slavery. In elections that focused on Southern Rights and the future of slavery, low-slave areas were just as likely to support the institution as the high-slave counties. Similarly, on race and the treatment of enslaved people, we are unable to distinguish meaningful differences between high- and low-slave areas; if anything, it appears that whites living in low-slave areas saw slaveholding as a means of economic upward mobility. It was not until the years immediately preceding the war, and in the subsequent years, that we can detect those meaningful partisan differences between former slaveholding and non-slaveholding areas. Slavery had a massive impact on Southern society and politics in the antebellum period, but the political geography we find today only begins to develop in the years leading up to the Civil War and immediately after, suggesting the important role that the threat of the collapse of slavery played in exacerbating and fomenting political differences and differences over the treatment of African Americans.

This addresses *when* the political geography of slavery solidified into the patterns we see today. But *how* did these differences come about? Chapter 6 tackles these questions conceptually by looking more closely at the end of slavery and time period surrounding Reconstruction and Redemption. We show that time period around emancipation and Reconstruction were critical junctures for the United States and for race-relations in terms of whites' (1) economic incentives and (2) political incentives to engage in black suppression. Indeed, Southern whites—and

particularly Southern Black Belt elites—had created a business economy that was reliant on labor-intensive agriculture and extraction. The success of these industries was predicated on the generous provision of inexpensive and renewable labor. However, the end of slavery meant, for these whites, the end of this steady supply of workers. Black workers could now, at least in theory, demand to be paid or, even worse, pick up and move. In terms of political incentives, with the passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, newly freed blacks could (in theory) vote. This presented a problem for Southern Black Belt whites that was unprecedented in nature: in some politically powerful parts of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, blacks outnumbered whites 10 to 1. Rather than accede to a free black vote, these areas turned to voter suppression and ballot stuffing, using the numbers of blacks living in these areas as ways to accumulate greater political power. These economic and political incentives led Southern whites to engage in widespread racial suppression, intimidation not just via legal means (e.g., black codes), but also extensive localized racial violence and intimation. Thus, a key point in this discussion is that economic and political incentives can, and did, lead to racist actions.

## Part III: The Historical Persistence of Political Attitudes

Part III turns the question toward examining the forces that have led to *path dependence*, both via *institutional path dependence* and *behavioral path dependence*. How can we explain the fact that economic and political incentives dating back 150 years continue to affect political attitudes in the present-day period? This Part attempts to draw the line between point A (slavery) and point B (today) by looking at the events of the 20th century, as well as important interventions that occurred both before and after the Civil Rights Movement.

Chapter 7 begins this discussion by looking at the post-Reconstruction environment and the early 20th century movement toward Jim Crow. Drawing on ideas of *institutional path dependence*, it discusses how slavery was predictive of a number of early anti-black institutions, such as voter suppression laws (including the state constitutions enacted around the turn of the century), economic policies, and more conservative voting on New Deal era interventions. These interventions worked in tandem with a more conservative racial culture, one that emphasized social segregation in homes, schools, churches, and businesses. We also show how, in contrast to what racial threat theories would predict, that increasing black mobility—and blacks' departure from the rural South via the Great Migrations—greatly alarmed whites and led to further restrictions on labor mobility, including anti-enticement and anti-vagrancy laws. The Chapter does, however, raise the

possibility that attitudes could attenuate with weakening root economic incentives. Specifically, we show that, as the South moved more and more toward the mechanization of agriculture—and thus away from the need for inexpensive black labor—whites' anti-black attitudes attenuated more quickly. This suggests attenuation in behavioral path dependence.

This attenuation sets the stage for Chapter 8, which tackles the regional differences within the South during and after the Civil Rights Movement, including the important interventions of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. These interventions, as the Chapter documents, were massively impactful and suggest a very optimistic view about what our findings mean for American politics today. Our experience shows that change can come from within the United States, and affect both behavioral and institutional outcomes. The Civil Rights Movement helped change the way that millions of people think about race and race relations, while the Civil Rights Act of 1964 helped secure the protection of laws for millions of African Americans and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 made it possible for millions of blacks to exercise their rights under the 15th Amendment for the first time. Although we find the persistence of historical patterns, we see a certain kind of decay over time as well—in part thanks to these organized efforts. We see this decay particularly in terms of those arenas in which the federal government has the Constitutionally enumerated power to act—e.g., instances involving commerce, federal spending (e.g., education), and, in some cases, voting.

This raises the fundamental conceptual question of how attitudes are passed down over time. Is it by institutional mechanisms or by cultural ones? Consistent with the theory of behavioral path dependence, we argue that both institutions and culture—including cultural transmissions from parents to children—play an important role in the propagation of political patterns and attitudes. Ultimately, however, institutional interventions are effective when it comes to institutional outcomes; they are less effective when it comes to changing hearts and minds—that is, the are less effective when changing behavior. Federal interventions have succeeded in things like opening up educational and economic opportunities, leveling the playing field in terms of political participation, and encouraging black migration. They have been less successful at changing at a fundamental level how people of different racial groups view one another. We present evidence that parent-to-child transmission of racial attitudes has occurred in the last 50 years, highlighting at least one source of cultural transmission of beliefs.

We conclude in Chapter 9 by considering these questions in the broader context of national politics. We argue here that America's slave history has affected our politics on a broader level, making the United States in part more conserva-

tive on racial issues, including redistribution, welfare, and law and order. We also consider what our findings mean for the future of policy interventions. Our conclusion is not necessarily without optimism: our history has shown that there are effective modes of intervention, particularly when it comes to economic inequality and educational disparities. Effective interventions might have an important role to play in the attenuation of path dependent attitudes. However, our results also suggest the importance of vigilance: in the absence of interventions—both institutional and cultural—there is a possibility of retrenchment.

Our ultimate conclusion, however, is straightforward: history plays a deep and important role in how we understand contemporary political attitudes—and, by extension, contemporary politics.

## Our Methodological Approach

This book relies on data analysis and quantitative methods. We use data from a variety of public opinion surveys, including the Cooperative Congressional Election Survey (CCES), the American National Election Survey (ANES), and Pew Research. We also use data from other kinds of economic indicators and demographic statistics, including the U.S. Census, the United Nations, and other outlets.

Because we attempt to analyze large quantities of data, we often turn to regression analyses and other kinds of statistical modeling, including matching, instrumental variables analysis, and other kinds of correlations and corrections. This makes our approach fundamentally different from the approach taken by historians. Historians who have looked at these questions have done so through the lens of historical narratives, carefully piecing together the events of the past and tracing their process moving forward. The work of historians like Eric Foner, Barbara Fields, Steven Hahn, and C. Vann Woodward has made careful and thoughtful progress in understanding moments of the past, telling important stories about how and why slavery appears to have had long-lasting effects within individual time periods.

Our goal is not to replace an historical account, but rather to learn from and add to historical narratives. History, in its rich descriptions of particular individuals or events, provides many of the stepping stones from an institution long abolished to attitudes in the modern period. We understand that our modern society is a product of historical forces, so to understand modern society better, we must look to the past. But we hope that our story is broader than any collection of stories or

events, and so our focus is necessarily broader than an historical account. That is, history informs our story, but it is not the story itself.

For that reason, this is not a history book; it is a book about contemporary politics that draws lessons and explanations from history. Our approach is to examine quantitative relationships between things of the present and things of the past. We try to make sense of large quantitates of information, trying (to the extent possible) to let the data tell us patterns about history. Sometimes, we look at very long-term patterns, such as basic relationships between things that happened in 1860 and things that are happening today; other times, we look at more micro-level data to tell a story about a particular time period. We also note that significant advances in "Big Data," including massive data collection and survey techniques, mean that these sorts of approaches were far from feasible even as little as twenty years ago.

Our approach also differs from the traditional approach of economic historians. Many economists have looked at questions related to slavery and America's slave legacy, including Stanley Engerman, Gavin Wright, Claudia Goldin, Nathan Nunn, and others. But this important work mostly looks at the economic legacy of American slavery, rather than its political legacy. Indeed, most of these works look at GDP per capita, income inequality, black-white gaps, etc., much of it also in a historical (rather than contemporary) context. These questions are obviously important, and we discuss them throughout. But what concerns us is how America's slave legacy has left a lasting *political* imprint, how it has shaped political differences within the South, and how it has potentially questions of national policy. Our ultimate interest, in other words, is how slavery has affected our contemporary political climate. Because of that, although our techniques might be similar to those used by economists, we primarily look at measures that economists usually do not look at, including public opinion indicators and other measures of Americans' contemporary political and cultural attitudes.

We do note that, because we use quantitative data and quantitative approaches, some of what we do might be unfamiliar to some readers, for example those without familiarity with statistical analyses. Throughout, we have attempted to take our quantitative analysis and translate it into straightforward substantive interpretation. It is our view that quantitative analyses add little unless they can be interpreted in meaningful, substantive ways. We therefore opt in favor of graphical representations and other, more intuitive ways of presenting this kind of information, leaving the more technical material to various appendices and our other published work.

# Conclusion

We conclude this brief introduction by highlighting what we believe to be the core contributions of this book. The first is that we show that *political attitudes are path dependent*, making history an important component to the study of politics. Here, we show that America's history with slavery, emancipation, and Reconstruction has fundamentally affected white Southerners' political attitudes, making some more conservative—particularly on racial issues—then they otherwise would have been. But this is just one example. History matters and shapes our politics, beliefs, and attitudes. And does so via the important channels of both institutional path dependence and also behavior path dependence.

Second, we show that *Americans' attitudes on race can in part trace their origins to the economic and political incentives borne out of the mass enslavement of African Americans*. We use data and other quantitative techniques to show that Southern whites had huge incentives to use informal institutions and localized customs to try as much as possible to recreate the system of institutionalized subjugation that slavery had once provided. We show that, once slavery ended, other institutions—some formal and some informal—arose to take its place. However, although we use the example of slavery and black-white relationships here, we believe that economic and political incentives matter significantly in structuring race relations not just the United States, but across other societies as well.

Third, and more optimistically, we show that *differences in attitudes can attenuate over time with institutional interventions*. As we show in our analysis, important legislation like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, along with the societal change instigated and moved forward by the Civil Rights Movement and subsequent leadership from African Americans and other groups, have been massively successful in eliminating systematic inequalities between former slaveholding and non-slaveholding parts of the country. However, these institutional interventions, and, apparently, cultural interventions, are *less effective at changing attitudes*, suggesting the persistence of behavioral path dependence. Laws can change economic indicators and voter registration; once economic incentives have created a culture of racial hostility, however, they cannot so easily change people's hearts and minds. These components take longer to change, and the dramatic persistence of these attitudes, we believe, are a contributing factor to ongoing racial inequality within the United States.