

Prospectus for  
*Deep Roots: The Political Legacy of Southern  
Slavery*<sup>\*</sup>  
Book Manuscript

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## 1 Overview

How did American racial attitudes originate? How can we make sense of consistent and stubborn regional divides on race and race-related questions? Why is the South more conservative than other parts of the country? This book tackles these questions by arguing that contemporary politics is shaped in part by the *historical persistence of political attitudes*.

To explain contemporary attitudes on race and politics in the South, we center our argument on the “peculiar institution” that drove the South’s economy and politics for nearly 250 years: chattel slavery. Using extensive quantitative analyses and a wide variety of data, we show that whites who live in parts of the South that were more reliant on slavery are *today* more conservative, more racially hostile, and less amenable to policies that could promote black progress. We also show that these

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patterns have persisted historically and are the direct consequences of the slaveholding history of this area, rather than being simply attributable to demographic factors (such as people moving around over time) or the large presence of minority populations in these areas today. More optimistically, we also document how some attitudes and outcomes have attenuated over time as a result of effective interventions like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. However, these interventions have been less effective at eliminating differences in political and racial attitudes.

These empirical findings are noteworthy in and of themselves, but the book also develops a novel theory to explain these findings. Specifically, we advance a theory of *behavioral path dependence*, by which we mean the idea that the development of attitudes over time and across generations follows a trajectory guided by major events and critical junctures—including events such as the rise and collapse of chattel slavery. Behavioral path dependence builds off a rich literature in American political development, and, as we show in the book, it has been a major force in the shaping of contemporary public opinion.

Ultimately, the book puts forth the broader idea that our history can leave a lasting impact on our current-day politics, and that institutions can have a persistent effect on attitudes well after their collapse.

## 2 Market Considerations

This book is targeted broadly and, although it relies on extensive statistical analyses, it presents the evidence in a non-technical way. This makes the book suitable for advanced undergraduate political science courses, for introductory graduate courses, and for academic social scientists. The topic will make it interesting and thought-provoking to historians and sociologists, while its methodological approach and use of data will also make it appealing to economists, journalists, and scientists.

The book is also written to engage a broader, non-academic audience. The original article that forms the basis for the empirical findings in this book (revisions on this paper were requested by the *Journal of Politics* and were resubmitted in January of 2016)<sup>1</sup> was downloaded from our websites more than 32,000 times in the last three years and was covered extensively in the media. This includes coverage by the *New York Times* (in Paul Krugman's [blog](#)), *New York Magazine*, the *Washington Post*,

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<sup>1</sup>The book includes material that is drawn from three other articles. One of those is now forthcoming at the *American Political Science Review*, while another is “Revise and Resubmit” at the *American Journal of Political Science*. The third article is currently under review.

the *Rochester Democrat & Chronicle*, the *Huffington Post*, the *Daily Mail* (UK), PBS Newshour, the *Monkey Cage*, the *Rochester Review*, and Rochester Channel 8 (TV).

We have reason to believe that reaction to the book will be equally strong. We are also planning to set up a website to promote the book, provide additional resources, and store all data, replication code, and additional findings.

### 3 Status of the Book

A draft of the entire manuscript was completed in May of 2015, with an academic book conference, sponsored by Harvard University, taking place on June 12, 2015 in Cambridge, MA.<sup>2</sup> The draft has since been revised in light of the feedback generated at the book conference. We have also presented material from the book at many departments across the country<sup>3</sup> and incorporated much of this feedback.

### 4 Chapter Overview

We organize the book into three Parts. Part I examines the “Now” of our findings, showing the persistent effects of slavery on contemporary politics. Part II explores the “Then,” showing how these effects might have their roots in the economic and political incentives growing out of the swift collapse of slavery. And Part III documents the “In Between,” or how these attitudes might have persisted over time via 20th-century institutional and cultural channels. The theoretical lynchpin uniting these parts is the idea of behavioral path dependence, or that attitudes can be passed down across communities and through generations.

#### Part I: The Contemporary Effects of American Slavery (Now)

Part I establishes the idea of persistence broadly, using data-driven examples that link America’s slave past with political patterns today. The goal of this Part is to

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<sup>2</sup>The book conference participants were Justin Grimmer (Stanford), Marc Meredith (University of Pennsylvania), Robert Mickey (University of Michigan), Eric Schickler (University of California, Berkeley), Michael Tesler (University of California, Irvine), and Vesla Weaver (Yale University).

<sup>3</sup>This list includes BU, Chicago, Columbia, Dartmouth, Harvard Economics, Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard Law School, Notre Dame, Princeton, Rochester, Stanford, Warwick, UC Berkeley, UC Riverside, UC San Diego, Pitt, WashU-St. Louis, USC, and UVA. Talks have also been scheduled at Wisconsin, LSE, and Georgetown.

show, using quantitative data and examples, that *broad historical patterns can predict contemporary attitudes*. This Part also develops the theoretical intuition behind behavioral path dependence.

### **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This Chapter provides a brief introduction to the argument and to the organization of the book. We motivate the book by juxtaposing two counties in the U.S. South that illustrate the findings that we develop later in the book. We also explain the quantitative methodology of the book and describe how our book differs from works by historians and by economists.

### **Chapter 2: A Theory of Behavioral Path Dependence and the Persistence of Political Attitudes in the U.S. South**

Chapter 2 presenting an overview of the key theoretical concept of the book, that of *behavioral path dependence*. This Chapter situates the theory within two broader literatures: (i) the literature on historical institutionalism and (ii) the literature on American political behavior. 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.

### **Chapter 3: How Slavery Predicts White Political Attitudes Today**

Chapter 3 presents our core empirical findings documenting the role of historical persistence in shaping contemporary political attitudes. Here, we show that parts of the U.S. South 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 blacks as a group. These results, although surprising, are remarkably robust, and they hold up even the face of additional statistical tests.

### **Chapter 4: Historical Persistence, Demographic Persistence, or Racial Threat?**

Chapter 4 addresses questions that many skeptical readers will have, which is whether these results aren't simply being driven by contemporary factors. First, we address

the important counterargument that these findings are simply being driven by contemporary black concentrations, an explanation that has strong roots in the racial threat literature in political science. As we show in this Chapter, once we account for the prevalence of slavery in the Southern Black Belt, the effects of contemporary black populations disappear, calling into question a large literature in Southern politics. We also consider whether our findings are being driven by substantial population sorting over time. Although the evidence on this point is thinner, we nonetheless find that this explanation does not appear to be fully driving our results. The forces at play do not originate in contemporary demographics but instead appear to have historical roots.

## **Part II: The Origins of Slavery's Effects (Then)**

Part II addresses the questions left open by the empirical findings in Part I: if our finding that whites who live in former parts of the slaveholding South are more conservative isn't explained by contemporary factors, then what is the explanation? We argue in this Part that the answer lies in slavery itself: that is, slavery led many Southern whites to be more conservative, more cool toward race-related policies, and more racially hostile toward African Americans. This Part therefore takes the reader back to the antebellum and Reconstruction eras in order to develop these ideas more fully.

### **Chapter 5: Antebellum Politics of Slavery and Race in the South**

Chapter 5 starts this historical discussion by examining the historical progression of political differences between the slaveholding Black Belt and other parts of the South in the antebellum period. As the Chapter shows, antebellum political cleavages between the Black Belt and non-slaveholding areas were rooted mostly in economics, rather than over the question of slavery. It was not until the years immediately preceding the war, and in the subsequent years, that the regional political divides that we see today developed. This suggests that the collapse of slavery played an important role in exacerbating and fomenting regional political differences over the treatment of African Americans.

## **Chapter 6: Economic and Political Incentives After Emancipation and the Reinforcement of a Racial Hierarchy**

Chapter 6 addresses the question of how these differences emerged by looking more closely at the end of slavery and time period surrounding Reconstruction and Redemption. We show that this time period was a critical juncture 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. However, the end of slavery meant, for these whites, the end of this steady supply of workers. These economic and political incentives led Southern whites to engage in widespread racial suppression not just via legal means (e.g., black codes) but also via extensive local racial violence and intimidation. This in turn solidified the subjugated status of blacks compared to whites.

## **Part III: Historical Persistence and the Evolution of Political Attitudes (Connecting Then to Now)**

Part III turns toward the idea of persistence. How can we explain the fact that economic and political incentives dating back 150 years continue to cast a shadow over 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: Jim Crow, Oppression, and Mobility, 1900-1940**

Chapter 7 more closely examines the post-Reconstruction environment and the early 20th century movement toward Jim Crow. It discusses how the regional prevalence of slavery is predictive of a number of early anti-black institutions, such as voter suppression, economic anti-worker policies, and lynchings and racial violence. 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.

## **Chapter 8: Civil Rights, Attenuation, and Persistence, 1940-Today**

Chapter 8 tackles the Southern environment 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 in terms of their impact on economic inequality, educational outcomes, and voting. However, we still find a persistence in political attitudes, which suggests that institutions and culture—including cultural transmissions from parents to children—play an important role in the propagation of political patterns and attitudes. Ultimately, we conclude that interventions are effective primarily when it comes to institutional outcomes; they are less effective when it comes to changing hearts and minds.

## **Chapter 9: What Lessons Can We Draw from Southern Slavery?**

Chapter 9 concludes by considering these questions in the broader context of national politics and Southern and American exceptionalism. Although we note that attitudes on issues like race and politics are highly path dependent, our final 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.