"We Need the Strength Which Comes from Believing Alike" — The Poll Tax and the White Democratic Primary

**TAXING THE RIGHT TO VOTE**

The poll tax, adopted by every ex-Confederate state by 1904, further discouraged poor people from registering and voting. A South Carolina congressman in 1901 noted that many of the literate Negroes in his state did not bother to register “because they would rather save the dollar which would be required as poll tax.” In light of its modern use as a restrictive device, it is ironic that the levy of a capitation tax in the nation’s early years expanded the electorate. In British America, the franchise had generally been limited to property owners. After the Revolution, several of the new states shifted to a taxpaying qualification, and four, including Georgia and North Carolina, required all propertyless adult males to pay a small tax. These requirements provided for almost universal white male suffrage.

The poll tax limited rather than expanded the suffrage in the South after 1870 because those in power made every effort not to collect the tax from men they deemed undesirable voters. There is no record of prosecution of a poll tax delinquent. In some states, only property holders received reminders of their poll tax assessment while other states assessed no one at all. More important, the tax usually fell due several months before election day. In the early part of the twentieth century, four states required payment six months before the November election, and three states asked voters to pay nine months ahead. An Alabama delegate clearly stated the discriminatory purpose of these provisions: “... the Negro and the vicious element will not pay two months ahead of time [sic]; Alabama required payment nine months in

advance] a dollar and a half in order to exercise this privilege, but if the business man knows he is liable for [the] tax, although he will not give a dollar and a half to vote or exercise the franchise, he will put it on the list of liabilities like he does everything else and tell his clerk to pay it when it is due. . . .”

Although the $1 to $2 levies did not seem high to the middle-class convention delegates and legislators, they represented a significant charge to many inhabitants of the nation’s economic backwater region. The estimated per capita income (including noncash income) for the inhabitants of the eleven ex-Confederate states was $86 in 1880 and $100 in 1900, in terms of dollar values at the time. Since these amounts were not apportioned equally, the vast majority of the population received a good deal less. Table 3.1 presents some (admittedly imperfect) estimates of the average incomes received by the bottom three-quarters of the Southern population. It shows, for instance, that the bottom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of the Population</th>
<th>% of Total Income Received</th>
<th>Average Income in Dollarsa</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1880</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.17</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>27.46</td>
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<tr>
<td>16.70</td>
<td>6.35</td>
<td>32.69</td>
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<tr>
<td>26.08</td>
<td>11.20</td>
<td>36.92</td>
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<td>38.92</td>
<td>19.02</td>
<td>42.08</td>
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<td>51.54</td>
<td>27.86</td>
<td>46.48</td>
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<td>61.33</td>
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<td>69.43</td>
<td>42.48</td>
<td>52.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75.96</td>
<td>48.73</td>
<td>55.16</td>
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Source: Columns 1 and 2 were taken directly from King, table xlv, p. 228. Columns 3 and 4 were computed from these figures and the averages computed from Kuznets, 2:185.

aThe average income figures are in contemporary (1880–1900) dollars. They do not reflect inflation since that time.


7.17 percent of the population received 2.29 percent of the income, which amounted to $27.46 per person per year in 1880. For a family of four or five, this would amount to about $100 to $125 per year. Incomes for the bottom 76 percent of the population averaged only $55-$64 per person!

Moreover, the cash income of most Southerners was probably much smaller. Under the ubiquitous lien and sharecropping systems, merchants or plantation owners advanced tools, food, and other essentials, and received, in return, a portion of the crop or a legally guaranteed sum from its sale. Many agriculturalists—three-fourths of the Negro farmers were sharecroppers or tenants by 1900—saw very little cash at all during the year. In such cases, a dollar or two amounted to a substantial proportion of a man’s cash income.

The cumulative features of capitation taxes in a few states raised another barrier to voting. The voter who neglected to pay his tax in an off-year or in the year of an unexciting election had to make up these taxes before he could exercise the franchise. The taxes could accumulate for two years in Florida and Mississippi, three in Virginia, and indefinitely in Georgia after 1877 and in Alabama after 1901. One knowledgeable observer termed Georgia’s cumulative poll tax “the most effective bar to Negro suffrage ever devised.”

The efficacy of the poll tax in limiting the suffrage has long been a subject of controversy. Those who campaigned from about 1930 on for state and federal laws or constitutional amendments to repeal it no doubt exaggerated its impact. Simplistically comparing turnout and party competition in “poll tax states” with election returns from other areas, these crusaders often blamed Southern apathy and devotion to

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American Philosophical Society, 1960), vol. 2, table A 4. 1, p. 185. He gives estimates of the per capita income for each state in 1929 dollars. I averaged these for the Southern states, weighted by population, and deflated the resulting figures according to the price index used in the calculation, given in vol. 2, pp. 143–144. The only estimates of income distribution we have for this period are estimates for the U.S. as a whole in 1910, given in Wilford Isbell King, The Wealth and Income of the People of the United States (New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1969), table 44, p. 228. I do not claim that they are absolutely reliable, but only that they may give some impression of the real distribution. Since the distribution for the South was no doubt more skewed than for the U.S. as a whole, table 3.1 probably overstates the incomes of the poorest groups.


the Democratic party solely on that voting prerequisite. Reacting against such naïveté, V. O. Key and Frederic Ogden tended to belittle the power of the poll tax. Ogden concluded that "the poll tax helped in a minor way to achieve disfranchisement but it primarily reflected in law a trend already begun" (p. 122). According to Key, "the poll tax has had little or no bearing on Negro disfranchisement, the object for which it was supposedly designed" (p. 618). How important was the poll tax?

Contemporaries thought it very important. A member of the Mississippi constitutional convention's Franchise Committee stated in 1902 that the poll tax had proven "the most effective instrumentality of Negro disfranchisement." An 1896 Mississippi survey made in preparation for a contested election case in the national House of Representatives found the poll tax, coupled with the requirement that voters register four months before the election, "more effective in disqualifying colored persons for suffrage than all other constitutional provisions on the subject." A Mississippi congressman stated that 90 percent of the Negroes in his state were disfranchised by the poll tax. The president of the Mississippi constitutional convention and "leading citizens of North Carolina" were quoted as saying that the provision gave the Democrats more "relief" than any other.?

A. J. McKelway testified that the cumulative poll tax in Georgia "practically disfranchised the Negroes" after 1877. Although some would have felt McKelway exaggerated, many politicians, travelers, and contemporary Southerners noted the restrictive effect of the "Georgia plan." Drawing on experiences from other states, Alabama


the poll tax as the provision "by which the [whites in] the Black Belt will live or die," "the only thing that will give permanent relief." According to a recent scholar, Harold C. Livesay, "the Negroes were virtually disfranchised" by passage of a poll tax in Delaware in 1872. A Mississippi disfranchiser, Judge Simrall, appearing before the Louisiana constitutional convention's Suffrage Committee as a consulting expert, pointed out that the literacy test would soon be outmoded by Negro progress in education, but the poll tax would last as long as black poverty.8

Election returns also evidence the impact of the poll tax. Table 3.2 compares the turnout rates in poll-taxed Georgia with the participation in the other ten Southern states during the 1880s. Sixteen to twenty-eight percent fewer Georgians participated in elections than other Southerners. Although other factors were partly responsible for the unusually low turnout in Georgia, the contrast between that state's voting patterns and those of the states without effective legal restrictive devices does suggest the centrality of the poll tax in Georgia's late nineteenth-century politics.9 A comparison of the estimated Negro turnout

Table 3.2. Impact of the Poll Tax on Overall Turnout: Rates for Georgia and the Rest of the South in Presidential Elections, 1880s.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Election</th>
<th>Georgia</th>
<th>Rest of South</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>65.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1884</td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td>65.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1888</td>
<td>37.3</td>
<td>65.7</td>
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9. For a fuller discussion of Georgia politics and the effect of the poll tax, see chapter 7.
in Georgia and Florida, both Deep South states and both 47 percent Negro in 1880, corroborates this view of the tax's impact (see table 3.3). No study of either state has suggested any variable or combination of variables besides the poll tax weighty enough to account for the fact that more than twice as large a proportion of Negroes seems to have voted in Florida as in Georgia in this period.

Though few deny that the chief target of the poll tax was the blacks, there is no scholarly consensus on whether those who framed it meant it to include whites among its victims. While one scholar claims that "no one seems to have intended the poll tax as a means of disfranchising the lower income white voters," another declares that it was mainly "a method of discouraging from voting that class of whites which was beginning to challenge [the disfranchisers'] control of southern politics."10

Had the disfranchisers wished the electorate to include the lower strata of whites, they could have written a grandfather clause or some equally efficacious exemption into the poll tax. In virtually every convention and legislative session that considered the prerequisite, newspapers and members of the assemblies warned that a poll tax would disfranchise at least some, and perhaps a great many, whites. That the final documents contained no exemptions from the tax for the white masses adds considerable weight to the view that the delegates wished to exclude the poorer whites from the electorate.11

Much of the direct evidence of the intentions of those who passed

Table 3.3. Impact of the Poll Tax on Blacks: Estimated Negro Turnout in Presidential Elections in Florida and Georgia, 1880s.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Election</th>
<th>Georgia</th>
<th>Florida</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1884</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1888</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

poll taxes and other restrictions on the electorate is difficult to evaluate. The framers could not have openly avowed a desire to disfranchise whites without courting defeat in the referenda on calling conventions or ratifying amended documents. Their stress on the effect of the suffrage restrictions on black voters, therefore, may have concealed an intent to strike whites from the rolls. Since a defense of Negro rights was politically suicidal at the time, parties or factions which opposed the disfranchisers naturally charged that the hidden purpose of the poll tax and other disfranchising schemes was to eliminate white voters. Their comments, consequently, do not prove that the restrictionists meant to disqualify whites any more than the restrictionists' silence proves the opposite. Furthermore, after passage and ratification of the suffrage plans, Southern propagandists seeking to persuade Yankees not to invoke the Reconstruction Amendments often denied that they had meant to discriminate on the basis of race.12

Nor does circumstantial evidence relating to political conditions at the time provide a sure guide to the motives of the disfranchisers. One historian argued that the impotence of the Populists in 1901 proved that Republican-oriented Negroes, not poor white Populists, were the targets of the Alabama tax. Conversely, the drop-off in Negro voting by 1902 convinced two political scientists that the Texas poll tax was aimed not at the blacks but at the Populists. But the significance of such immediate threats to the Democrats cannot be properly assessed without considering previous efforts to pass such laws and the probability of future challenges to the party from groups relatively powerless at the time of enactment.13

Private affirmations of the desirability of limiting white suffrage and


public statements made before or during the conventions or referenda provide more convincing testimony as to the objectives of the supporters of the poll tax and other disfranchising measures. Although he mentioned only black disfranchisement in public, William A. Anderson, a leading Virginia restrictionist, avowed privately that he favored eliminating many white voters, too. The *New Orleans Daily Picayune* assailed universal manhood suffrage as "the most unwise, unreasonable, and illogical notion that was ever connected with any system of government," and later stated that it was as desirable "to shut out every unworthy white man" from the franchise as to exclude "every unworthy Negro." Ex-Governor William C. Oates offered the Alabama convention a suffrage plan consisting of a literacy test, an understanding clause, and a poll tax, a proposal designed, he said, to "eliminate from the electorate 'the ignorant, incompetent and vicious' white men" as well as most Negroes. Similarly, a North Carolina Democratic paper remarked that the struggle for suffrage restriction was an effort to rid that state of "the danger of the rule of Negroes and the lower classes of whites." In the same vein, a Virginia convention delegate said he favored the poll tax "because I believe it will disqualify some white men in Virginia who ought to be disqualified," and an Arkansas newspaper supported restriction because it would disfranchise "the ignorant white man who votes without paying taxes," as well as the Negro.14

Despite the Louisiana convention's unanimity on the issue of Negro suffrage, a battle over the poll tax split the body into poll tax and anti-poll tax caucuses. This struggle further indicates many delegates' desire to use the tax to purge poor whites from the rolls. "The main purpose of the poll tax prerequisite," announced a Louisiana disfranchiser, "was to exclude not only the illiterate Negro, but also the unworthy white elements, who had been the curse to large cities." Those whites whom the tax would bar, he went on, were "as great a menace to the country as is the ignorant Negro." Delegates who agreed with his judgment of the tax's effect, but not the desirability of white disfranchisement, fought the provision. The *New Orleans Democratic*

machine opposed the poll tax because it would disfranchise its poor supporters, most of whom were white. Though they could not finally prevent inclusion of a poll tax qualification in the constitution, opponents did manage to force the suffrage committee to compromise. The final document provided that the tax would not go into effect until after the 1900 election, and could be repealed by referendum as early as 1902.15

Since it was usually enacted as part of a comprehensive plan, the precise effect of the poll tax on white voting is somewhat difficult to gauge. In Texas, where it was the only major restrictive device adopted, only 53 percent of the adult males paid their poll taxes in 1910. Assuming that all the Negroes defaulted, only 64 percent of the whites paid to vote in that year, at a time when the Democratic gubernatorial primary was hotly contested. Sheldon Hackney has estimated that 23.6 percent of the adult white males in Alabama in 1904 were disfranchised solely because of the poll tax. Senator Furnifold Simmons, boss of the North Carolina Democratic party, admitted that 17,000 whites in that state were voteless because of the poll tax, and Republican guesses ran as high as 40,000. The Virginia poll tax in effect from 1876 to 1882, according to a Richmond newspaper, kept a quarter of the whites from the ballot box.16 If my estimates are correct, between 24 percent and 34 percent fewer white Georgians voted in presidential contests during the 1880s than their Florida counterparts (table 3.4). At least part of this difference must be attributed to the cumulative poll tax.

In summary, then, the poll tax amounted to a panacea for the restrictionists. Pushed through as the buttress of "white supremacy," the tax also disfranchised many whites, or, rather, encouraged them to think that their inability to spare a couple of dollars for a poll tax proved them

15. Wise of Shreveport, quoted in New Orleans Daily Picayune, March 9, 1898. For similar sentiments, see statements by Burke, March 10, 1888; Ransdell, Bruns, and Stubbs, March 11, 1898; and quotes from Homer (Louisiana) Guardian-Journal, Shreveport Times, Baton Rouge Bulletin, and West Baton Rouge Sugar Planter, March 15, 1898. The anti-poll taxer, A. L. Ponder, is also quoted in Picayune, March 11, 1898; Kruttschnitt, March 9, 1898. The clash and compromise may be followed in the Picayune, March 2, 12, 15, 17, 1898, and Ford, "Louisiana Politics," pp. 169–170.

unworthy to vote. As the *Montgomery Advertiser* put it, “any white man in Alabama who will disqualify himself by the failure to take the trouble to register or will refuse to pay $1.50 a year for the privilege, is not worthy to be classed among the voters.” “If our institutions are to be preserved,” warned the *Little Rock Arkansas Democrat*, “it must be done by the intelligent voter—the man who at least thinks enough of the privilege of the ballot to pay a dollar or two for it.” By lopping off the lower economic strata, the poll tax preserved Southern institutions by creating a fairly homogeneous polity—white, middle-class, and Democratic.

**The White Primary: Preserving One-Party Rule**

Democrats attempting to persuade white Populists and Republicans to support disfranchisement, and opponents of the Democrats seeking to persuade themselves that franchise restriction did not spell the end of their careers, often argued that the elimination of Negro voters would reanimate the two-party system in the South. Future Governor Charles B. Aycock of North Carolina promised in 1899 that disfranchisement would bring “a larger political freedom and a greater toleration of opinion. . . . The Republican party will be freed from the stigma of being called the ‘Negro party,’ and . . . will have somewhat more of influence in making and shaping a wholesome public opinion. Discussion of policies and principles will take the place of heated declamation and partisan abuse.” In spite of Aycock’s assurances—a trifle ironic in light of his own racist demagoguery during the vicious 1898 campaign to overthrow the Fusion government—there was less party competition in the South after 1900 than before. Nor was the section particularly noted for its tolerance or the reasoned, principled tone of its political debate. One of the chief reasons for the South’s failure to develop a two-party system was the institution of the white primary. Dean Burnham has noted that in states where one party is dominant, the

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primary has often "sapped the minority party's monopoly of opposition." As we shall see, this was not an unintended consequence.

Many scholars have presented the direct primary as a triumph of democracy. Others have noted, however, that in the South it limited participation to whites only. Thomas B. Clark and Albert D. Kirwin went so far as to say that "from the time of its adoption [it] became the great obstacle to Negro voting, more effective than all others combined." To understand the functions and effect of the primary in the evolution of Southern politics, we must review its development.

Almost from the first, Democrats utilized the primary to substitute intra- for interparty competition. County conventions or mass meetings nominated most candidates in the antebellum South. Use of the primary did not become widespread until the middle and late 1870s, when it was touted as the best means of uniting white Democrats and preventing defections to the Republicans and Independents in the general elections. In 1878, for example, Walter L. Bragg, chairman of the Alabama Democratic state executive committee, proposed that delegates to the state convention be elected in primaries in order "to promote harmony, secure a more full and satisfactory expression of the wishes of the great, patriotic and intelligent masses of the party, and to prevent as far as possible the occurrence of combinations injurious to the party and subversive of the best interests of the people of this state." It was no coincidence that this proposal came at the height of Greenback-Independent party activity which challenged Democratic hegemony with the spectre of a poor white-Negro coalition. In those circumstances, declared a black belt newspaper, the primary was "the only thing that can unite and hold the [Democratic] party together."


According to its proponents, deciding party nominations in semi-public primaries rather than in backroom caucuses would legitimize the nominees, settle intraparty differences before the general election, and greatly reduce the power of opposition voters—most often, Negroes—by confronting them with a solid Democratic party. Thus, in 1878, Wade Hampton advised Democrats in Anderson County, South Carolina, that “we cannot afford to be divided on State matters. Your county is the first to adopt the system of primary elections—be governed by its results and allow no independents to run.” A Georgia newspaper favored the primary in 1876 because other methods of nomination might have encouraged disgruntled politicians to run as independents, and “support of an independent by a party in defiance of Democratic nomination may destroy or so cripple it [the local Democratic party] as to throw the balance of power into the hands of ignorant, illiterate, and corrupt radicals.”

In Louisiana, the contest between pro- and anti-Lottery forces in 1892 became so bitter that Democratic gubernatorial candidates from each faction agreed to hold a preelection white primary to prevent the possibility of a Republican or Populist victory against the divided Democrats in the general election. This was the first direct statewide primary in the country’s history, so far as I know. The fact that its purpose was clearly to prevent party defeat rather than to allow popular control of nominations or wrench power from the bosses should give pause to those who describe the primary simply as a beneficial, progressive reform.

There was little controversy over black participation in Democratic


primaries in these years, since the vast majority of Negroes were staunch supporters of the party of Lincoln. A few were allowed to vote in primaries in scattered areas of the South, probably on the theory that black Democrats threatened the dominant whites less than black Republicans did. In other areas blacks were specifically excluded from the primaries as early as 1878. Practices varied from county to county until the early twentieth century, when most Democratic state committees or conventions adopted statewide whites-only regulations.23

During the nineties, the Alabama and Louisiana Populists realized that the Democrats would use their control to count black votes for themselves, whether or not those votes were actually cast. They also understood the effectiveness of the Democratic charge that they endangered white supremacy by putting the blacks in the position of holding the balance of power between divided white groups. The People’s Party men therefore proposed that they and the Democrats settle their battles in white primaries. (In other cases, the Populists invited Negroes to participate in their primaries.) Unwilling to give up their advantages, the Democrats refused. After the presidential fusion arrangement of 1896 had weakened the Populists, however, the Democrats invited their erstwhile opponents to submerge their party identity in a solid white front.24

But the debility of the Populists and the disfranchisement of most Negroes after 1900 did not end the Democrats’ difficulties. A Richmond paper reported that many Virginia Democrats believed that “the elimination of the Negro as a voting factor means the disintegration of the Democrats who have been held together by antipathy to the black race.”25 For the most reliable means of guarding against disintegration, Democrats turned to the primary.


Talks with Democratic leaders in Mississippi, South Carolina, and Louisiana convinced Josephus Daniels, editor of the Raleigh (North Carolina) News and Observer, that the white primary was necessary “in order to keep the white men united” after the limitation of the suffrage. “Without the legal primary,” he went on, “the fear was expressed by several that the divisions among white men might result in bringing about a return to the deplorable conditions when one faction of white men call upon the Negroes to help defeat another faction.” The primary would “secure permanent good government by the party of the White Man,” by which Daniels meant the Democrats. Ex-Governor Thomas J. Jarvis of North Carolina favored the primary because, he explained, “I know of no better way to insure the continued success of the Democratic party.” Tarheel Republicans opposed a legal statewide Democratic primary for the same reason. As a GOP spokesman commented, enactment of a primary law would mark “the final burial of Republican or other opposition parties in North Carolina.”

In Alabama, too, political leaders pushed the primary as the best means of aborting a nascent two-party system. A few spokesmen had broached the idea of using the statewide direct primary to minimize defections and prevent party division among the whites as early as the eighties. After the 1901 disfranchising convention, leaders of both “conservative” and “liberal” Democratic factions took it up.

In the struggle to defeat the 1901 Alabama constitution, the remaining Populists coalesced with the “liberal” forces of ex-Governor Joseph F. Johnston. Their defeat in the referendum did not prevent them from establishing their own factional newspaper and setting up a continuing organization to contest the 1902 governor’s race against the former Gold Democrat, incumbent William D. Jelks. Believing that the Jelks-controlled Democratic state executive committee would fear Johnston’s popular appeal and therefore rebuff the “reformers’” demands for a primary, the Johnstonites apparently plotted to avenge their losses by bolting the party and campaigning on the charge that the “bosses” had rigged the election machinery—the same issue Reuben Kolb had used to animate the “Jeffersonian Democrats” a decade earlier.

Seeing through this strategy, conservatives advised the party leaders


27. Mobile Register, June 16, 1886, quoted in Jones, “Primary in Alabama,” p. 151.
to accede to half of Johnston’s request by ordering a white primary, but keeping Populists and Republicans out, at least for the present. “Give him [Johnston] the Democratic primary he don’t [sic] really want,” the Montgomery Advertiser counseled party leaders. “Take away the opportunity of organizing a bolt from a State Convention. Cut off an independent movement like that of Kolb and other leaders in other Southern States on similar pretexts.” The primary was a modest change designed to buttress the “harmony and strength” of the Democratic party by maintaining “a sense of fair dealing within its ranks,” the newspaper explained. “The Advertiser wants to see the Party maintain its easy and deserved domination in Alabama affairs, and this can be ensured only by holding within its organization all the adherents it has, and by attracting all the others it can.” “We have had turmoil and strife enough in our ranks,” warned the conservative organ, “and if it can be avoided by adopting a primary, why not try it?”

Other newspapers and leaders agreed. A primary, announced the Birmingham Ledger, would “settle the matter and hold the party together and leave practically nobody outside the party lines except those persistently in opposition. Let us have a harmonious primary and a unanimous election.” The Mobile Register advocated a primary “because its adoption is the only way of preserving the Democratic organization and the control of political machinery in this State by the Party organization.” Noting that allowing white Populists and Republicans to participate in the 1896 local primaries “practically broke up the Populist Party in this State,” former Governor William C. Oates argued that a statewide primary in 1902 “would allay all fears of fraud and save the grand old Democratic Party under which so many victories have been won, from further bickering, strife, and division within its own ranks.” Johnston’s party leader George P. Harrison predicted that a primary would restore “peace and harmony” and “reconcile all elements of the party,” “This is necessary,” he went on, “for the future success of the Democratic Party in both State and Federal elections.” The Alabama state Democratic executive committee agreed to hold a primary in 1902 but carefully defined the election rules to exclude those who had supported Populist candidates in 1898 or 1900, most of whose votes would have probably gone to Johnston.28

28. All quotations in this paragraph and the preceding one are taken from Montgomery Daily Advertiser, March 7, 25, 26, 28, 29, April 1, 6, 10, 16, June 15, July 10, 12, 1902. See also Hackney, Populism to Progressivism, pp. 232–234; Jones, “Primary in Alabama,” pp.
After the hatreds of the 1890s had had time to dissipate, Georgia "liberals" insisted on opening their primaries to white Populists and Republicans. Excluding them, the Democrats thought, would tend to "divide the white people of the state into two parties, rather than to build up the [D]emocratic party by obliteration of the factional lines." In North Carolina, Governor Charles B. Aycock declared in 1904 that "the Democratic party is alone sufficient. We need a united people. We need the combined effort of every North Carolinian. We need the strength which comes from believing alike" (my italics). Substitution of the primary for the convention may have slightly annoyed those who always opposed any change, but the irritation was bearable if the reform conserved the Democratic monopoly of politics.29

But the primary could not have worked so well for this purpose had the electorate not already been restricted. Before disfranchisement, Democrats in most states had to guard against even small defections, for large numbers of Negroes and hill country whites could be counted on to vote for the opposition. Add to them a small percentage of disgruntled Democrats and a modicum of honesty in the ballot count, and one had the recipe for Democratic disaster. The disfranchisement of a large proportion of opposition stalwarts in most states, however, greatly increased the number of Democratic turncoats necessary for a Republican or Populist triumph. With this much leeway, the primary, which pledged defeated candidates not to run in the general election, was sufficient to preserve Democratic hegemony except in the most extreme circumstances. It was the final step in transforming the Southern polity, but it required that the electorate be reduced before it could become a workable solution.

There were, of course, other reasons for adopting the primary. Politicos who felt their chances would be increased if the focal point of campaigns were speeches outside the courthouse rather than deals inside it naturally preferred primaries to conventions. Those in power hesitated to change the rules by which they got there, while those out of office tended to attack any system under which they lost. For example, in its attempt to elect the war hero John B. Gordon to the Senate in 1886 over a candidate who had already corralled most of the local

politicians, Henry Grady’s *Atlanta Constitution* crusaded for local primaries. Its shout, “Let the People Revolt against the Politicians,” was somewhat misleading, for Gordon had previously held the posts of governor, senator, head of the Ku Klux Klan, and servant to the Collis P. Huntington railroad lobby.\(^{30}\)

In South Carolina, Ben Tillman called for a primary in 1886 and 1888, but his enthusiasm cooled when it became apparent that he would control the 1890 nominating convention. At that point the Conservatives reversed themselves and demanded a statewide primary. Tillman did agree in 1892 to set up an indirect primary in which, on a single election day, voters in each county would select convention delegates pledged to him or his opponent. But this temporary concession probably represented less a devotion to democratic procedures than a desire to head off formation of a permanent opposition party with white as well as black support, organized around the Conservative forces which contested the 1890 general election. In any case, the Tillman-bossed Democratic party did not authorize direct statewide primaries until 1896, after the disfranchisement convention, at a time when Ben was safely ensconced in the second year of a six-year United States Senate term.\(^{31}\)

Virginia Congressman William A. Jones, who wanted Tom Martin’s Senate seat, organized the “May Movement” in 1899 around the issue of a senatorial primary. Martin was a shy railroad lawyer, virtually unknown to the public when he persuaded (some said bribed) a majority of the state legislators to send him, rather than the popular Fitzhugh Lee, to the Senate in 1893. A master organizer and lobbyist, Martin was less proficient on the stump than Jones or several other aspirants for his Senate seat. After the disfranchising convention, Martin, realizing that a tight organization might win primaries in the limited electorate as well as it had previously controlled party conventions, and also desiring to remove the single issue which really divided the “Independents” from the “Machine” men, endorsed a senatorial


primary. This endorsement further evidenced the fact that quarrels over the primary between "Progressives" and their opponents were merely tactical maneuvers in the larger struggle to get and hold offices. And they were tactical maneuvers whose final consequences were not always clear to those who initiated them, for much to the chagrin of those who had been advocating the primary for a decade, Martin won handily in both 1905 and 1911.\(^{32}\)

If the switch from the convention to the primary did not damage those politicians with well-run organizations, it did encourage demagoguery. Whereas earlier aspirants chiefly had to convince convention delegates of their fitness for office or their willingness to pass out favors, primary candidates had to lambaste their opponents publicly. Moreover, in the period before disfranchisement and the primary killed party competition and eliminated from the electorate those in the lower socio-economic strata, Democratic nominees often had to contest general elections seriously. In those elections, real issues often divided the voters, and party organizations allowed some continuity and rationality in political choices. When the statewide primary became the only important election, candidates had to fabricate issues. Since no deep cleavages divided the voting public in the primaries, campaigns usually revolved around questions of personality, petty scandal, or charges that one or more candidates represented an evil political machine or a despised, but politically impotent group such as the Communists or the blacks. To attract attention, competitors were virtually forced to make charges they could not prove, promises they could not keep. Political campaigns in Arkansas became "a sort of legalized knife fight and perpetual stomping contest." A Mississippi newspaper believed that in the primaries, "the men who can shake hands best, wear the broadest smile, know the most people, and tell the funniest stories, have the best chance to win."\(^ {33}\)


33. Non-partisan elections, which are similar to Southern primaries, generally encourage candidates to avoid issues. See Charles R. Adrian, "Some General Characteristics of Non-Partisan Elections," *American Political Science Review* 46 (1952): 766–776. While primaries are certainly sometimes fought over real issues, they were not, by most accounts, in the South throughout most of the twentieth century. The leading authority on such matters, of course,
Probably more important than his smile, however, was the candidate's bankroll. In a polity divided along party lines, nominees can count on loyal campaign workers and voters. The contest is for the independent voters, the switchers, the normally apathetic. In a system with no consistent party or factional groupings, a much larger proportion of the active electorate is usually uncommitted to any candidate. Campaign organizations also must be constructed anew for every election. These tasks require money as well as the proper connections. Whereas a convention can afford to nominate a somewhat penurious candidate, relying on traditional party sources for funds, publicity, workers, and votes, the same man, unless he has rich friends, can rarely get enough exposure to contest a primary seriously.34

While it increased the power of affluent whites, the primary shut out Negroes almost entirely. But the extent of its effect on black political power in the early years of the twentieth century has been greatly exaggerated. Few blacks considered themselves Democrats until the New Deal. What they wanted was a chance to cast their ballots in the general election for opposition party candidates who would pose alternatives to the white supremacy rhetoric of the Democrats and the "lily-white" position which many Republicans espoused, especially after most blacks were disfranchised. Moreover, even if the blacks had desired to enter the Democratic primaries, and whites had let them, it is difficult to believe that they would have found any appealing can-


candidates. The Democratic party had been held together since the Civil War chiefly by its members' devotion to the doctrine of white supremacy; only a masochist would have openly bid for black votes in a turn-of-the-century primary. Most important, there would have been only a minuscule number of Negro electors to bargain for. For before they instituted their first permanent, statewide direct primaries, every Southern state had passed at least one major piece of restrictive legislation. Indeed, no seceding state passed any important suffrage qualifications after the establishment of the statewide white primary except Georgia in 1908, and that state's cumulative poll tax had barred the majority of Negroes almost since the date of its passage in 1877. Despite its name, the white primary had virtually no effect on Negro voting in the period from 1880 to 1910.