Appendix B The Use of Proportionate Reduction Statistics to Measure the Impact of Suffrage Restriction

One could assess the effect of the laws restricting the suffrage in several ways. The simplest method would be to subtract the proportion voting in each state in the first election after the restrictive law was passed from the proportion voting in the last election before passage. One could then use a “t” test to decide whether the declines in voting and in the percentages for opposition parties were significantly different from zero. In fact, the declines in overall turnout, in white and black turnout, and in opposition voting for the elections in table 9.2 are statistically significant at the .0005 level; i.e., the declines could be expected to occur by chance only five times out of ten thousand. Such tests, however, only tell us that, if there is no other explanation of the declines, the laws had some effect on voting. Significance tests do not measure how much impact the laws had.

To quantify the extent of the impact, we could present a table simply showing the percentage declines in turnout and opposition voting for each election pair. Although I did not include such tables in the text, I did give the unweighted means of these figures in parentheses on the last lines of tables 9.2 and 9.3.

Even though the percentage decline figures give us more information than mere tests of statistical significance, they are not by themselves adequate measures of the impact of the laws, for they include nothing about the conditions preceding disfranchisement. Consider two hypothetical states which passed new election laws; after the laws’ passage both the overall turnout and the percentage of the population supporting the opposition fell 5 percent in each state. But suppose that in one state, the figures for the last election before the law was passed were: majority party, 50 percent; opposition party, 40 percent; not voting, 10 percent. Whereas in the other state, the figures were: majority party, 20 percent; opposition party, 10 percent; not voting, 70 percent.

I would argue that the laws would have different effects on the two political systems. Only one previously active voter in eighteen would have stopped voting in the first state, and the opposition, although damaged, would continue to be within striking distance of a majority if a small percentage of the dominant party’s voters should, for some reason, defect. In that state, there
might still be a good deal of party competition within an essentially democratic framework. In the second state, however, one previously active voter in six would have been disfranchised, the opposition would be a hopeless minority, and party competition would be nonexistent. To take into account political conditions preceding the passage of the laws, I therefore focused on the proportionate reduction in turnout and opposition strength.

The proportionate reduction figures, in effect, provide an answer to the question, "What percent of those who, on the basis of past behavior, could have been expected to vote in a given election, did not vote?" Other things being equal, the best guess of how many people will turn out for an election is the same as the number of voters who participated in the preceding election. Proportionate reduction measures the impact of events which took place between the two elections not on the whole potential electorate but only on those whose behavior might really have been changed by the events. In this sense, proportionate reduction is superior to the simple decline in turnout as an index of the effect of legal changes on the electorate.