Introduction

The first historians of suffrage restriction were the contemporary victors in the struggle. Southern Democrats of the late nineteenth century skillfully purveyed several false but lingering myths about their era. According to their distorted scenario, the North, finally realizing the uselessness and malevolence of the Reconstruction attempt to exalt black over white, resolved in 1877 to allow the Southern whites to control their own region. Paternalistic leaders then set about to heal racial and economic cleavages and construct a New South by introducing industry into the agrarian society. Some Negroes continued to vote freely while others lapsed into apathy, content to allow the “better sort” of white men to guide politics. When some temporarily misguided whites betrayed their race by opposing the party of their fathers and appealing for the corrupt Negro vote, the vast majority of white men united to end the threat. They first rejected the Populists in elections and then proceeded, with commendable speed and unanimity of purpose, to disfranchise the ex-slaves. This movement to purify the ballot box merely ratified the natural dominance of the superior over the inferior race. The various means of restriction did not matter much; what counted was the commitment to deny the franchise to the unfit in a legal, constitutional manner. Afterwards, the South settled down to racial peace and economic prosperity that was broken only after half a century (their later white Southern counterparts would say), by Communists, outside agitators, and hypocritical Yankees.1

Easily condemned in the 1970s as racist and self-serving, this explanation of suffrage restriction did satisfy an earlier America that was even more suffused with racism and anxious to conceal from itself the paradox of brutal inequities in a “democratic” country. But few

historians or political scientists have attempted to replace the contemporary legend with a nonracist, nonpartisan, yet comprehensive view. While considerably more objective and often more sophisticated, recent analysts have usually focused on a few states, a few crucial events, or a relatively brief period. In narrowing their focus and thereby excluding important data, these historians have missed the benefits to be gained by systematically comparing the experiences of all eleven of the ex-Confederate states. Relying chiefly on such traditional sources of information as newspapers and paper collections, they have paid less attention to the most crucial type of data for the study of democratic politics—election returns. Some have also seriously misinterpreted the evidence they did scrutinize. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that no modern explanation for the alterations that occurred in Southern politics at the turn of the century commands general assent. It is time to replace the earlier mythic tale with a new, systematic, general analysis of political change in the South from 1877 to 1910.

Many historians have viewed the South as “solid” after 1877. Focusing on the fact that the Democratic party carried every ex-Confederate state in the presidential elections from 1880 to 1920, these scholars have belittled the Southern Republicans of the era as impotent and interpreted the Independent and Populist movements as little more than factional fights within the Democratic party. For instance, Oscar Handlin states that “after 1876, the South was solidly Democratic. . . . Republican efforts to maintain a foothold below the Mason-Dixon line were half-hearted and ineffectual. . . . The only effective dissent came from among the Democrats.” By reading the characteristics of the twentieth-century Southern political structure back into the pre-disenfranchisement era, historians holding this view


3. The History of the United States, 2: 72. Similarly, Richard M. Current, T. Harry Williams, and Frank Freidel states in American History: A Survey, p. 470, that after 1877, the Democratic party was “the only party in the [South]. . . .”

4. The terms “disenfranchisement,” “suffrage restriction,” “suffrage limitation,” and similar variants will be used interchangeably in this book to avoid more repetition of the same phrase than necessary. As employed here, none of the terms implies an absolute, unequivocal provision which bans a discrete category of persons from the ballot box. No Southern state passed such a law after 1868. Instead, the laws made the economic and social costs of voting so high
dismiss too easily the national Republican party’s post-1877 commitment to protecting the political rights of its Southern followers, underestimate the residual power of the Southern GOP in the late nineteenth century, and disregard the transformation of Southern politics that took place about the turn of the century.

Assuming that Southern politics did retain a good deal of vigor after 1877, what forces sapped that energy? Why did party competition and voting turnout decline so sharply throughout the South? Key set forth probably the most general explanation: “The evolution of suffrage restrictions differed from state to state, and for some, perhaps even for all, southern states, the thesis could be argued plausibly that formal disfranchisement measures did not lie at the bottom of the decimation of the southern electorate. They, rather, recorded a fait accompli brought about, or destined to be brought about, by more fundamental political processes” (Southern Politics, p. 533). In other words, the core of Key’s thesis is that modifications in suffrage laws merely formalized changes produced by such extralegal forces as violence, intimidation, the growing hegemony of a socioeconomic elite, and the decline in party competition, a decline Key apparently believed came about for reasons not directly connected with suffrage restriction.

To a degree, Key’s fait accompli hypothesis merely states a tautology: any statute passed by any legislative body reflects the structure of power at the time. If blacks and other advocates of widespread political participation had not been somewhat suppressed already, the disfranchisers could not have pushed their laws through the assemblies.

But Key went beyond the obvious to argue that in Texas and, by implication, throughout the South, “Negroes [had] been disfranchised . . . and the electoral abdication of a substantial part of the white population signed and sealed” before the major law limiting the electorate was passed (p. 535). In making this contention, Key reflected a more general belief shared by many other political scientists that electoral laws play a minimal role in shaping the political system. For example, the authors of twenty pages of entries under “Voting” and “Political Participation” in the recent International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences include only two paragraphs on franchise laws. Nor are
such laws considered among the “determinants of party systems” by the Encyclopedia’s expert on political parties.\(^5\)

Political scientists who do investigate the impact of voting statutes usually concentrate on the extension of the suffrage, while ignoring the process of franchise contraction in their theories.\(^6\) Most would probably still accept Tocqueville’s view, at least as applied to “democracies”:

When a nation modifies the elective qualification, it may easily be foreseen that sooner or later that qualification will be entirely abolished. There is no more invariable rule in the history of society: the further electoral rights are extended, the greater is the need of extending them, for after each concession the strength of the democracy increases, and its demands increase with its strength. \ldots no stop can be made short of universal suffrage.\(^7\)


Despite such reasoning, we shall see in the following pages that changes in electoral laws and procedures did in themselves have very substantial impacts on both the scope of political participation and the mode of political activity in the South. The analysis I will present in this book not only shows that the fait accompli thesis as Key originally stated it ought to be abandoned, but also implies that political theory needs to be altered to take account of the fact that election laws can be and have been employed to limit the suffrage, restrict political choice, and, therefore, restructure the political system.

If procedural changes were indeed the most fundamental factors in the metamorphosis of Southern politics, then the crucial issues become the identity and motivation of the disfranchisers and their opponents. Perhaps the most widely accepted explanation among historians is that lower-class whites and politicians who relied chiefly on support from that stratum fostered restrictions on suffrage in order to exclude Negroes from voting. For instance, Hampton M. Jarrell asserted that “egalitarians in the class struggle were most extreme in their opposition to Negro participation in politics.” An American history textbook declared that “the white masses demanded the disfranchisement of the Negro.” Other historians have contended that the “agrarians,” “white farmers,” “small-farmer leaders,” or disenchanted former Populists, angry at “Bourbon” control of the Negro vote, led or at least initiated


8. A similar controversy seems to be developing now among political scientists over the effect of the Australian ballot on split-ticket voting and related changes in the nineteenth century “political universe.” See W. Dean Burnham, “The Changing Shape of the American Political Universe,” American Political Science Review, 59 (1965), pp. 7–28; Rusk, “Australian Ballot”; an exchange between Rusk and Burnham in ibid., 65 (1971), pp. 1149–1157; Converse, “American Electorate”; and Burnham, “Theory and Voting Research: Some Reflections on Converse’s ‘Change in the American Electorate’” (unpublished manuscript, M. I. T., 1973), a copy of which Professor Burnham was kind enough to send me. In his article (pp. 297–299), Converse has discussed in a general way the effects of the Australian ballot and personal registration laws on electoral participation. He sees the nationwide decline in turnout at the turn of the century as an “unintended consequence” of these “reforms.” His comments appear to be directed primarily, but not exclusively, at the Northern experience.
the movements to limit the electorate. The “rich whites” or “black belt planters” merely “acquiesced” in the campaigns.9

Two other theories relate political competition to electoral limitation. According to the first, the 1890s taught all whites the danger of allowing blacks to hold the balance of power when whites split over political issues. Therefore, all the whites collaborated to expel the Negroes from the electorate. V. O. Key put forth another view. Reasoning that any faction in power feared that the “outs” would appeal to the Negro to regain office, Key argued that the “ins,” whether “Bourbon” or “radical” in each state, promoted laws to expunge black voters from the lists.10

All these hypotheses presuppose that the sole target of the restrictive movements was the black voter. The sizable decline in white turnout and the limitation of the whites’ effective range of choice to a single party are treated as either coincidences, unintended consequences of Negro disfranchisement, or the result of other factors such as the decline in the national Republican party’s interest in carrying the South.11

On the other hand, what we shall call the “black belt thesis” portrays suffrage restriction as a movement by predominantly upper-class whites from Negro-majority counties to secure their power against both blacks and lower-class whites. The plantation elite’s reasons for wanting to


11. Paul Lewinson apparently believed that the lower class white leaders were so myopic they failed to see that poll taxes and literacy tests would discourage white as well as black voting. See his Race, Class, and Party, p. 97.
disfranchise blacks were obvious. The end of Negro voting would solidify their control over their tenants and free them from having to deal with elected or appointed black officials—a type of contact almost all Southern whites found distasteful. The reasons for disfranchising whites are less obvious. Traditional enmity between lowland (black belt) and hill country (white county) whites fed on malapportionment (in favor of the black belt), of legislatures, of party conventions, and of taxes, and on the rich rural whites’ desire to keep taxes low in the face of urban and up-country demands for increased public services. The easiest way for the black belt leaders to avoid conflict over these issues was to reduce the power of the white counties by disfranchising the poor whites who largely populated them.

Historians have slighted another possible but obviously potent motive for disfranchisement—partisanship. As we shall see, the vast majority of the members of opposition parties fought against the restrictive laws, while virtually all the disfranchisers were Democrats. Excluding Negroes from politics did have partisan as well as racial consequences: it deprived any anti-Democratic group of the hope of attracting the votes of those most persecuted by the political and economic status quo. Moreover, many of the laws that disfranchised blacks worked nearly as potently against lower-class whites. In case the white underclass in large numbers threatened to join any party opposed to the Democrats, suffrage laws could be enforced tightly enough to put down the challenge.

Contemporary Democrats sometimes even admitted to partisan

motives. For example, Thomas J. Semmes, one of the South’s most prominent lawyers and a leading delegate to three of his state’s constitutional conventions, affirmed that the 1898 Louisiana constitution, which sharply restricted the franchise, “is the work of a Democratic convention. . . . It has been stated in some quarters that we have been actuated to a certain extent by party spirit. What of it? What is the State? It is the Democratic party. [Applause] . . . Whenever there were political questions involved, of course, we looked to the interests of the party, because they are the interests of the State.”

While many historians and political scientists have agreed that the procedural changes were important, there has been no consensus on the goals and efficacy of particular measures. Thus, the most recent work on the Australian or secret ballot pictures it as a “major reform issue . . . part of the general reforming spirit of the age”; whereas Southern Populists and Republicans attacked the secret ballot laws passed in their states as partisan attempts to disfranchise illiterate opponents of the Democratic party. Although a knowledgeable political observer stated 70 years ago that the poll tax had proven “the most effective instrumentality of Negro disfranchisement,” V. O. Key believed that “the poll tax has had little or no bearing on Negro disfranchisement.” Finally, historians and contemporaries have viewed the direct statewide primary as, variously, a “progressive reform,” a potent device for disfranchising Negroes, and a technique for preserving the Democratic party’s supremacy.

This cacophony of opinions expressed by participants in the political ferment after 1877 and by scholars studying the period both suggests and serves as an introduction to the central questions to be addressed in this book:

What formed the Southern political system that operated in the first half of the twentieth century? Was it a product of the Civil War and Reconstruction, or did it take shape later? Was it an unintended con-

13. La. Con. Con. Journal (1898), p. 374. See also a speech quoted by the New Orleans Daily Picayune, March 17, 1898, in which Semmes identified the Democratic party with Christ, “the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man,” and “the success of civilization.”

sequence of a movement by lower-class whites to expel the Negro from politics? Or did a political and economic elite consciously seek to destroy party competition and widespread political participation—the bare requisites of a democratic political system?

Did the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century laws and constitutional amendments restricting the suffrage merely give legal form to conditions already brought about by other forces? Or were those legal changes themselves the most significant forces molding the new political structure?

What were the objectives of the changes that Southerners made in the rules of the political game, and how effective were those procedural alterations in accomplishing their goals?

To state the questions in the most general manner: How important were the turn-of-the-century restrictions on suffrage and the legalization of the white Democratic primary in the transition from a competitive democratic political system to a structure that severely limited political choice and inhibited mass political involvement? Did disfranchisement and the primary shape twentieth-century Southern politics?