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The South in American Political Development

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Abstract

Recent years have seen a renewed interest in southern distinctiveness within the United States and its ramifications for the nation. This review provides an analysis of recent works and the interpretive issues they raise. I argue that collectively they have broken with the long-established image of the South in political science, the study of which was long organized around the region's anticipated convergence to the patterns of the post–New Deal North. Recent texts have instead emphasized an enduring commitment to white supremacy and a determining influence for the region in shaping national politics and institutions. I identify two broad pathways of southern influence and discuss the debates over its sources. I then discuss recent works on southern regimes and the debates these have provoked. I conclude by suggesting that overcoming the limits of recent works will ultimately undermine some of our more sweeping interpretive claims and foundational premises.

The entire South is a problem. (Myrdal 1944, p. 70)

They're all Southern! The whole United States is Southern!

—George Wallace (quoted by Olson 2008, p. 710)

INTRODUCTION

Political scientists in recent years have shown a renewed interest in the significance of the US South for American political development. Collectively, these works mark a break with what was for decades the discipline's dominant image of the South: a distinctive region whose anticipated convergence to national standards provided an organizing premise for research.[1] Recent texts have instead been more concerned with how the South has historically shaped the country's institutions and politics, not as a passive drag on national development but as a complex and creative force.

This changed emphasis potentially dovetails with a more subtle change in how the region's distinctiveness is conceived. Since Key (1949), few political scientists have disputed that race and racism—usually conceptualized as white racial attitudes—are foundational to southern politics. Recent scholarship, if anything, underscores this centrality. The historical significance of poverty and underdevelopment, a once-crushing reliance on export agriculture, the complexity of the South's party politics, and its distinctive regional subcultures have either receded or are treated as incidents of this more fundamental commitment. At the same time, we can see a broadening of how the centrality of race is understood. A growing focus is on white supremacy, a term capacious enough to include not only racial attitudes but also institutionally embedded racial orders (King & Smith 2005) and political regimes (Mickey 2015). Emphasizing the regime character of southern politics has raised issues that had been sidelined in political science, including those of regime maintenance and elite coordination, while reinvigorating debates about their social bases and the scope they afforded white public opinion.

These distinct emphases for the most part appear complementary. The South emerges out of recent literature as a region capable of shaping national politics and institutions in line with an overarching commitment to white supremacy, the attitudinal and institutional bases of which in turn provide a foundation for the southern unity so central to the region's influence. The stress is on continuity despite change, through the persistent legacies of earlier, more nakedly undemocratic and coercive regimes, and the successive reconstitution of white supremacist orders (Acharya et al. 2018, Eubank & Fresh 2022, Williams 2022).

This review provides an analysis of these works and some of the interpretive issues they raise. I identify two broad pathways of southern influence and discuss their respective strengths and weaknesses: (*a*) direct and institutionally situated influence over national policy-making (e.g., Bateman et al. 2018, Farhang & Katznelson 2005) and (*b*) more amorphous processes of southernization, in which the efforts of national or nonsouthern actors to achieve their own goals lead them to accommodate southern priorities, emulate southern practices, or reproduce southern patterns of politics on a national scale (e.g., Devinatz 2015, Gaillard & Tucker 2022, Maxwell & Shields 2019). These pathways dovetail with renewed debate over the character of the southern regimes, their social bases, and sources of their durability (Aldrich & Griffin 2018, Caughey 2018, Johnson 2010, Mickey 2015).

All research programs have blind spots, and recent works are no exception. Black politics still needs more attention than it has received (Francis 2018, Johnson 2016a); there is a reliance on overly simplified schemas of intra-southern variation, and our interpretations rest primarily on a few critical moments (Johnson 2016a). Scholarship on southern politics also faces the perennial

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[1]For a valuable survey of the southern politics literature more generally, see Bullock & Rozell (2012).

problem of how to conceptualize racism and white supremacy in relation to a changing political economy. Recent works have made important advances on these fronts (e.g., Johnson 2010, 2017; Maxwell & Shields 2019; Reed 2022; Taylor 2018; White 2019) and should provide models for incorporating more of the complexity of southern politics into our analyses.

I suspect that in doing so, however, we will quickly confront the limits of conceptualizing the South as a coherent and bounded unit of study or as unified political actor (Johnson 2016a, p. 597; King & Tuck 2007). Further advances are likely to require a more historically grounded and contingent approach to the study of the South. I suspect this will in turn undermine many of our more sweeping claims about southern influence or distinctiveness. I conclude by suggesting that political scientists should reject calls to either "center" or "decenter" (King & Tuck 2007, Parker & Perry 2022) the South in favor of a more disaggregated and dialectical understanding of how diverse southern actors have helped shape politics in and beyond their region.

THE PROBLEM SOUTH

For over half a century, the study of the South in American politics followed lines traced by three contributions from the 1940s: V.O. Key's *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (1949), Wilbur Joseph Cash's *The Mind of the South* (1941), and Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944). Each was written at a moment in which the ramifications of southern distinctiveness seemed central to national development. This context, and the authors' broadly liberal inclinations, provided the texts with a shared premise: the South was not just distinctive but a problem, one that threatened to inhibit national progress.

Since the early twentieth century, social scientists had produced countless volumes covering various facets of southern life (see Grantham 1968, Ring 2012). Its system of racial hierarchy was often one among others [Raper 2005 (1936), Vance 1934, Vance & Danilevsky 1945], sometimes predominant (e.g., Odum 1943) but often neglected or treated as a special instance of a broader economic pattern (Natl. Emerg. Counc. 1938; see Katznelson 2013, p. 172).

With Key, Cash, and Myrdal, the emphasis shifted. Southern distinctiveness might have multiple dimensions, but the most significant was the region's commitment to racial hierarchy. This in turn was rooted in white public opinion, whose political, institutional, and economic manifestations were epiphenomenal to this deeper substrate. For Cash, the white South was defined by a "fairly definite mental pattern" (1941, p. vii) the core of which was a consensual attachment to what he termed the "proto-Dorian bond" (1941, pp. 66–67)—what today might be called the privileges and prerogatives of whiteness.[2] Any material advantage whites might accrue from racial exploitation was secondary to the status conferred on them by a culture of white supremacy. "If worse came to worse," wrote Cash (1941), "the planter and, for that matter, the better sort of farmer had other effective bolsters for their ego than this one superiority. The cracker didn't. Let him be stripped of his proto-Dorian rank and he would be left naked, a man without status" (p. 110; see also p. 169). Myrdal (1944) interpreted the "race problem" as fundamentally a moral one, a conflict between what he argued was the higher plane of America's unified cultural values—the "American Creed," in which southerners shared—and whites' deviations from these standards in their relations with Blacks. The South's racial codes, especially its obsession with sex, he interpreted as "an irrational escape on the part of the whites from voicing an open demand for difference in social status. . . . *What white people really want is to keep the Negroes in a lower status*" (Myrdal 1944, p. 541, italics in original). Key's argument was more political (Greenberger 2022, pp. 649–53). The heart of the South's problem was its one-party politics, impeding accountability and tilting

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[2] Cash also emphasized resistance to outside criticism (see Maxwell 2014).

policy toward the "haves" (Key 1949, pp. 307–10). The Solid South emerged out of the region's preoccupation with white supremacy: It was the "southern attitude toward the Negro," strongest in but not exclusive to the Black Belt, that ultimately defined the region's politics (Key 1949, p. 5).

Out of these premises emerged a shared concern in the region's convergence to the patterns and standards set by the post–New Deal North. For Cash, Myrdal, and Key, what hope there was lay in the breakdown of political unity and a gradual softening of white southerners' obsession with race, whether through education or urbanization and economic growth (Cash 1941, pp. 326–37; Myrdal 1944, pp. 465–66, 1015; Key 1949, pp. 260, 655–83). They did not expect racism to disappear, but the South might cease to be exceptional in its intensity of expression or in the extent to which it restricted *white* vote choice and thus national political development.

Prophesying, measuring, or explaining convergence to national patterns quickly became a central theme in studies of southern politics (Heard 1952, Grantham 1956, Odum 1948). For political scientists, this largely meant a focus on party performance in elections and on "race relations," i.e., the racial attitudes held by whites (see Walton et al. 1995). Charting southern politics in terms of convergence, they also raised doubts that economic growth would lead smoothly to racial moderation. While not anticipating the successes of the civil rights movement, political science scholarship of this era could fold much of what followed into this framework.

Later scholarship reproduced many of its premises. Scholars traced how diverging patterns of white backlash and moderation, as well as the explosive growth in Black voting, were reshaping post–civil rights southern politics, often by charting state progress along the teleology of convergence, as in Havard's (1972) categorization of "evolving," "wavering," and "protest" states [see also Bass & DeVries 1995 (1976), Lamis 1984]. The results were to spark two-party competition and to give the southern electorate a closer resemblance to the patterns of the post–New Deal North.[3] By the 1980s, the South was frequently said to have "rejoined. . .national politics" (Lee 1988, p. 2). On most dimensions—racial attitudes, economic growth, political behavior, and even racial segregation—the region increasingly appeared more an inflection on national patterns than a stark exception to them.[4]

The older premise of southern convergence had naturalized the politics and economics of the post–New Deal North. But rather than being absorbed into these structures, an electorally competitive and economically dynamic South disrupted them. The Republicans' "southern strategy" (Maxwell & Shields 2019) reshaped both the GOP and the Democratic Party, which sought to limit white defections while incorporating Black activists, representatives, and officials (Button et al. 1998, Hadley 1994, Jones 1978). And so long as the South was an electoral battleground, national political campaigns magnified the region's conflicts and emerging accommodations.

By the 1980s, the South appeared to be less a laggard to the normal standard of American politics than the vanguard in their transformation (Schulman 1991, p. 218). The distinctive features of the South's new "sunbelt capitalism"—including hostility to labor and uneven patterns of growth, leaving many rural areas and towns behind—seemed to be spreading to the rest of the

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[3]The emergence of two-party competition, with biracial southern Democratic parties, rested on complex local calculations (Black & Black 1987, Hood et al. 2012).

[4]White southern voters showed a high level of class voting (Nadeau & Stanley 1993). Racist attitudes were more pronounced among southern whites (e.g., Valentino & Sears 2005), but much of the political science literature now focused on what was called symbolic racism, less immediately rooted in localized racial threat and more national in its referents. The political transformation sparked extensive debate on the causes and future directions of southern political alignments, indexed often by an end to or persistence of regional exceptionalism (see Kousser 2010).

country (Wright 1986, 1987, but see 2015). Many racial disparities worsened, as antidiscrimination enforcement retreated and as a more conservative policy environment took hold nationally (Cancio et al. 1996, Minchin 2012). Myrdal's (1944) and Key's (1949) hopes for growth and competition took a backseat to Cash's (1941) more pessimistic belief in whites' enduring attachment to race.

The anticipated "nationalization of southern politics" seemed to instead bring about "the southernization of national politics" (Havard 1976, p. 755; Jackson 1988). By the second decade of the twenty-first century, the white South had become overwhelmingly Republican, and in 2016 it gave overwhelming support to a presidential candidate evocative of George Wallace (Lowndes 2018, Sides et al. 2018). The two-party politics and biracial coalitions oriented around class voting, which the premise of convergence had sustained, now seemed a way station; "the future ain't what it used to be," announces one recent volume (Kapeluck & Buchanan 2018).

SOUTHERN NATION

This is the backdrop to the new image of the South in US politics that has emerged in recent works. While still indexing regional distinctiveness and ongoing political changes (Bullock et al. 2019, Hood & McKee 2022), recent scholarship is more likely to stress the legacies of earlier institutions or the recurrence of patterns such as Jim Crow or so-called Redemption (e.g., Acharya et al. 2018, Eubank & Fresh 2022, Johnson 2018, Mazumder 2021, Williams 2022). Instead of southern convergence to national standards, scholars are more likely to emphasize southern influence over national institutions and politics (e.g., Katznelson 2013).

Complex Influence

There is now an extensive literature assigning the South an active and complex role in shaping the United States' institutional development. The image of the South as a stubborn brake on national power, for worry that national power might undermine slavery or Jim Crow, has been supplanted by that of a diverse section whose interests in state-building were not abstractly conservative, but concrete, contingent, and contested, at times even progressive.

Southern defenses of slavery often led the region to oppose federal state-building (Balogh 2009, p. 144) or to limit state or federal taxing capacity or confiscation authority (Einhorn 2006, Stohler 2019, Suryanarayan & White 2021). But slavery was embedded in federal policy and practice (Ericson 2011), and in its defense southern politicians could also demand elaborate positive guarantees from the federal government or northern states. Slavery might encourage not only the enhancement of local and state capacity (Quintana 2018, Sullivan 2008; see also Majewski 2011) but also the construction of a federal capacity to override state and local practices that threatened it.

Southern legislators participated more broadly in state-building where they saw gains for their constituents, or where they believed doing so might cultivate national allies for their (conflicting) priorities (Bateman et al. 2018, McConarty 2022). Instead of barricading federal state-building, southerners often drove it forward and profoundly shaped its priorities and form (Sanders 1999). Sectoral exclusions and decentralized or even private administration often made federal authority compatible with white supremacy (Johnson 2011, 2016b; Katznelson 2005; Lieberman 2001). The region could certainly act as an obstructive force, as when labor and civil rights organizations began to redefine the substance of New Deal liberalism (Fraser 1989). But the result of a southern veto, as with Truman's Fair Deal (Katznelson et al. 1993), was not delayed or anemic state-building but new and durable institutional arrangements that would shape the preferences and behavior of subsequent actors (Farhang & Katznelson 2005, Finley 2008).

Pathways of Influence

Two broad pathways of southern influence can be identified in this literature. The first is exercised by specific individuals or blocs operating within well-defined institutional settings. The preeminent example is Katznelson's (2013) image of the "southern cage" that bounded the New Deal, but others include the ability of southern delegates to secure constitutional protections for slavery (Dougherty 2020), and the capacity of southern legislators to shape federalism and the "agricultural welfare state" in the progressive era (Johnson 2011, 2016b). Southern influence in these cases is active and deliberate, and debates here speak more generally to the study of the relevant institutions, especially Congress (Bateman et al. 2018, Bloch Rubin 2017, Caughey 2018).

The second pathway is through more amorphous processes of southernization, in which national or nonsouthern actors, in pursuit of their own goals, accommodate southern priorities or emulate southern practices. The most important example is the Republican Party's post-1968 "southern strategy" (Maxwell & Shields 2019). Others include the accommodation of southern anxieties by northern state party leaders in the antebellum era (Bateman 2018) and the diffusion of institutions or practices of politics associated with the South—such as "right-to-work" laws, populism, and subnational authoritarianism (Devinatz 2015, Lowndes 2018, Mickey 2022)—to other regions.

The mechanisms of southernization can be hard to pin down. In some cases, it risks being more a metaphor than a causal claim. Its distinguishing features, however, are (*a*) that the issues, debates, practices, or tenor of southern politics become central to or characteristic of national politics; and (*b*) that this occurs because of how the region—its representatives, but more significantly its voters, citizens, and economic interests—is broadly situated in relation to the goals of other national actors.

Sources of Southern Influence

Southern influence in both pathways rests on overlapping sources. The first source includes different forms of institutional biases; the Constitution's three-fifths clause, the so-called "balance rule"—an antebellum practice of timing state admissions to retain sectional parity in the Senate—and the nonenforcement of the Fourteenth Amendment's reduction in representation are prominent examples. The seniority rules of Congress and the Democratic Party further buttressed the advantages provided by these institutional biases, as did the appointment structures of the antebellum federal judiciary (Crowe 2010).

A second source of southern influence has been southerners' relative likelihood of being pivotal in Congress, i.e., casting the marginal vote needed for passage of legislation. From the formation of the "conservative coalition" in the mid-1930s to the 1990s, white southerners were likely to be located around the House or Senate median (Caughey 2018), theoretically giving the region's individual lawmakers a critical role in deciding on the terms of legislation. But in many periods and issues—such as the long period from Reconstruction to the early New Deal, or on civil rights policy before the Voting Rights Act—southerners were not pivotal. Here the emphasis is on supermajoritarian rules or the multidimensionality of the issue space. The Senate's cloture rules meant southerners needed only a few allies to block legislation, making Congress an unpromising site for civil rights action in the 1940s and 1950s (Jenkins & Peck 2013). Of more general significance is the fact that, despite southern extremism on slavery and Jim Crow, these issues usually came embedded in others (and in no period did they exhaust the policy agenda). In the constitutional convention, for example, South Carolina and Georgia were well positioned to win whenever a vote "advanced Southern interests while protecting states' rights or advancing the interests of the large state coalition" (Dougherty 2020, p. 642). Where they were pivotal on a particular issue, southern

lawmakers could leverage this position for concessions on other issues, including the defense of racial hierarchy (e.g., Finley 2008).

Perhaps the most significant source of the South's influence found in this literature has been the supposedly greater ability of its political class to act as a coherent bloc in national policy-making arenas. The role of southern unity is developed most explicitly in the work of Ira Katznelson, including a series of coauthored articles and books (Bateman et al. 2018, Farhang & Katznelson 2005, Katznelson et al. 1993, Katznelson & Mulroy 2012), as well as his field-defining *Fear Itself* (2013). For starters, Katznelson and coauthors have defined the South expansively (Springer 2019) to include all 17 states on whose territory slavery was established by local legislation or practice, and which mandated segregated schools at the time of *Brown v. Board*. "The South," write Katznelson & Mulroy (2012, p. 607), "composed a long-standing compulsory racial order of white supremacy" (see also Degler 1977, p. 125).

Two consequences follow from this expansive definition: Southern unity becomes less likely, given the greater heterogeneity in the larger South, but the latent possibility of its achievement could make the region a "structural pivot" (Katznelson & Mulroy 2012), capable of vetoing legislation despite southern legislators' extremism. Unity and size are reconciled by attributing an order to southern preferences (Bateman et al. 2018, Katznelson 2013). Despite their many differences, white southern lawmakers historically prioritized the defense of white supremacy. Their willingness to subordinate all other issues to this paramount concern provided a latent source of unity covering the whole region, giving it an immense advantage in obstructing legislation and in shaping policy. When in the majority, southern representatives could use committee and party prerogatives to bend policy outcomes to their liking, getting much of the regional investment they wanted while safeguarding white supremacy. When in the minority, they often had to make choices between their contested priorities—federal support for schools, a reduced tariff, more flexible and expansionary money and cheaper credit—and their consensus around "home rule" (Bateman et al. 2018). But unity advantaged the region in obstructing legislation, and their prioritization of white supremacy ensured that on this issue, at least, their preferences usually won out.

A preference-based account of southern influence has been critiqued by Bloch Rubin (2017), who has emphasized the importance of deliberate coordination and member organization rather than shared preferences, and by Caughey (2018), who has noted that individual southerners were often most likely to be pivotal when the region was cross-pressured and divided. White supremacy might have made southerners as a bloc less supportive of labor or economic liberalism after the early New Deal, but consensus on white supremacy did not translate into consensus on these other issues. Preference- and organization-based accounts differ primarily in the extent of coordination required for regional influence, a difference that conditions expectations for how pervasive this influence has been across history. Influence derived from shared and intensely felt priorities would make southern lawmakers a much more constant parameter shaping policy, given that they have only rarely organized in an explicit caucus. But this influence might not always be visible, insofar as it shapes the anticipations of what other actors believe is possible, and is thus harder to verify empirically.

The sources of influence are subtly different for accounts of southernization. Here, the region is less an agent imposing its will than a site whose conflicts and internal arrangements provide opportunities for others. Particular features of southern politics have often made the region a more hospitable environment for certain types of policies, which could then be leveraged or emulated across the country. The success of the region's political and economic elite in opposing labor organizing—an issue on which there was no daylight between planters and industrialists (Cobb 1988)—could be used by business and politicians to limit or roll back labor rights outside the region. Desegregation helped create a context in which school vouchers or charter schools could

be implemented and gain institutional support, providing examples for the rest of the country (Hackett & King 2019). The so-called white primary's tradition of race-baiting, as presidential candidate George Wallace discovered, could gain traction across the country.

Institutional biases still matter in accounts of southernization, but less for putting individual southerners into power than for making national politics and politicians more responsive to southern concerns. This responsiveness can powerfully shape national politics when there is broad consensus among the southern political or enfranchised classes. For example, southern electoral college votes, boosted by the three-fifths clause, sensitized northern politicians, interested in their own advancement, to the defense of slavery (e.g., Bateman 2018, Wood 2011).

But regional disunity and conflict have the potential to be even more potent forces of southernization, insofar as they allow a greater range of nonsouthern actors to find regional allies. Caughey's (2018) argument about individual members of Congress has a correlate in national politics more broadly: Intraregional conflict can make the South nationally pivotal, whether by cross-pressuring voters or by proliferating the interests and organizations that could contribute to a regional or national majority. Institutional biases might in practice advantage not the region as a whole—always an abstraction—but distinct and even opposing groups of southerners.[5]

It is no accident that the language of southernization is most commonly identified with Reconstruction and the post–civil rights era, moments that are difficult to reconcile with an image of a unified and deliberate southern agency. Political conflict within the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction South created opportunities for national actors to chart paths to their own priorities through the regional complexity, through local alliances with contending political actors (e.g., Fitzgerald 1989; Postel 2019, ch. 3; Valelly 2004). It was only with the consolidation of the Jim Crow regimes, when much of the complexity and contradictions of southern politics were suppressed, that the influence of "the South" again appears in a primarily institutional and elite form.

SOUTHERN (REGIME) POLITICS

Accounts of southern influence tend to be nationally focused. A growing political science literature also approaches the history of southern politics as a succession of regimes—the institutions and principles governing access to office and the social classes and groups most significant in shaping and benefiting from state policy. These works are as likely to draw on comparative politics scholarship, or debates in history (see Cobb 1988), as on American politics research on southern electoral behavior. Change is framed less around electoral realignments and more as moments of regime transition, with the possibility of accompanying changes in policy (e.g., Cascio & Washington 2014, Chacón et al. 2021, Gainous et al. 2007, Logan 2020; but see Terry 2016).

The central questions of a regime approach to southern politics concern its class character and the mechanisms of regime maintenance. Broadly speaking, three overlapping tendencies can be identified: (*a*) works that emphasize the structure of southern agriculture in motivating the political regime (e.g., Samuels & Thomson 2021), (*b*) works that emphasize the governing institutions and political interests of subnational authoritarian regime elites (e.g., Gibson 2013, Mickey 2015), and (*c*) works that emphasize the capacity of southern institutions to provide broad representation to white public opinion (e.g., Caughey 2018).

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[5]The nonenforcement of the Fourteenth Amendment, for example, gave the white South disproportionate weight in the electoral college. When reproduced in presidential nominating rules, it provided a countervailing source of leverage for "Black and tan" Republican parties from Reconstruction to the mid-twentieth century (Heersink & Jenkins 2020).

Labor-Repressive Agriculture

Structural accounts emphasize the class interests of the southern regimes' social bases, which provide a nearly sufficient account of regime maintenance so long as these interests were relatively homogeneous.[6] For the most part, both Woodward's (1981) emphasis on the changing class character of southern elites after Reconstruction and Wright's (1986) distinction of "labor-lords" versus landlords are downplayed in favor of the more general construct of the "planter class." This provides a connection to comparative politics theories of democracy and authoritarianism, where labor-repressive agriculture has long been associated with intense opposition to democratic institutions (e.g., Feigenbaum et al. 2020, Samuels & Thomson 2021).

The Jim Crow regimes in particular are understood as manifestations of the planter class's material interest. Potential differences between the so-called Redeemers of the 1870s and the disenfranchisers of the 1890s are muted, distinguished primarily by the latter's greater institutional capacity (Epperly et al. 2020). White racism is important for sustaining the regimes, but emphasis is placed on its instrumental value for the planter class (Acharya et al. 2018). Opposed to taxation, the planter class undermined state capacity, ostensibly supported in its efforts by working-class whites concerned with their social status (Suryanarayan & White 2021). When Populists posed an alternative, the planters and their allies in control of the Democratic Party led a campaign of racist incitement against them (Ali 2013, Ottinger & Winkler 2022).

A long-recognized implication of such structural accounts is that shifts away from this form of agriculture can alter elite preferences and the relative weight they are given in policy, potentially opening space for democratization (Bloom 1987, Samuels & Thomson 2021). Recent work by Feigenbaum et al. (2020), for example, finds that an exogenous shift away from labor-repressive agriculture in some counties resulted in less repression and violence against Black southerners. Acharya et al. (2018) have found that such a shift led to a faster convergence of white racist attitudes toward the norm that existed in the non–Black Belt South (see also Hornbeck & Naidu 2014).

Authoritarian Regimes

Structural accounts emphasize the material interests of planters rather than the political and institutional features of regime rule, which are more often the outcome than a causal force. Empirically, they are concerned with identifying cross-national relationships, or with testing theoretical arguments using local geographic variation within the US South. But county-level variation in coercive agriculture, such as the prevalence of slavery, is less useful in explaining why or how specific interests were able to gain a predominant influence over state-level politics and how they negotiated or sustained their authority.[7]

A complementary literature has recently emerged that takes seriously the independent role of politics and institutions against a structural predetermination rooted in coercive agriculture or even white racial attitudes (for precursors, see Kousser 1974, Valelly 2004). One of its central contributions has been to situate southern states within a larger schema of regime types. The challenge of categorization has been most squarely taken up by Gibson (2013) and Mickey (2015), who have argued that the Jim Crow regimes are best thought of as forms of subnational

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[6]Political economists have been especially drawn to the question of elite persistence in recent years, engaging with the extensive historical debate on whether slaveholding families were able to reconstitute their economic and political hegemony after the Civil War (e.g., Ager et al. 2021, Poulos 2021).

[7]The changing temporal significance of coercive agriculture versus other economic interests is also not straightforward (Luders 2010), and their relative influence shaped not only opposition to democratization but also the capacity to harness and limit its consequences (Mickey 2015).

authoritarianism or authoritarian enclaves. Like other authoritarian regimes, Jim Crow institutions of popular participation, its elections and party primaries, are better thought of as mechanisms of regime coordination—of institutionalizing leadership transitions among the regime's political classes—than as a right for the citizenry to determine leadership or broad parameters of policy. But unlike national authoritarian regimes, southern states were embedded within an otherwise democratic national regime. While rooted in the interests of Black Belt planters, regime stability could never be a straightforward manifestation of this class's institutional preferences.

The emphasis instead is on active elite management within particular institutional arrangements. One critical task confronting regime elites, according to Gibson (2013), was "boundary control," i.e., controlling linkages between national and local politics whether embodied in party networks, federal authority, or cross-regional constituencies. Federalism facilitates enclave rule while posing a latent threat to regime stability, and southern participation in national institutions could be interpreted as attempting to manage this possible threat.

Mickey (2015, pp. 53–59), focused especially on the Deep South, has placed more emphasis on the significance of mechanisms of internal control and elite coordination, which included disenfranchisement and malapportionment, the "white primary," the restriction of political competition and civil society, physical coercion, and Jim Crow segregation and its sustaining ideologies. In his account of southern democratization, specific institutional circumstances shaped the capacity of regime elites to weather a succession of external shocks, producing substantial variation in democratization across the region.[8] Stability could not be assumed due to a congruence of regime type with class interest or racist consensus, but required active management and control.

White Representation

If subnational authoritarianism places the emphasis on regime elites, representational accounts emphasize the degree to which southern institutions were responsive to white public preferences. One variant of this argument, going back to Du Bois (1935) and Cash (1941), treats the Jim Crow regimes as the institutional realization of white southerners' consensual commitment to racial hierarchy.[9] While benefiting the planter class, the regimes' stability was rooted in an ongoing "grand bargain" by which "the southern white masses" supposedly "relinquished political power to the few in exchange for maintaining their social status as better than the black man" (Maxwell & Shields 2019, p. 1). The preeminence of the planter class in these accounts, as well as the institutional arrangements they desired, (e.g., Suryanarayan & White 2021) rest on the strength of whites' collective commitment to racial supremacy. As with accounts of legislator unity (Bateman et al. 2018), southern white conflict is suppressed at the mass level in the name of racial solidarity.

The verisimilitude of such accounts draws on the uncontested breadth and intensity of commitment to white supremacy. The regimes allocated legal privileges and civic status according to race, such that "whites' power—any white person's power—over livelihood, life, and death never disappeared entirely" (Reed 2022, p. 34). Few whites were not invested in at least some element of the codified racial hierarchy. Its limitation, beyond the metaphor of an unverifiable society-wide "bargain," is that the history of southern politics suggests conflict among southern whites could not be

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[8]A critical component of regime maintenance emphasized by Mickey was the effectiveness of southern state security agencies. There is a substantial literature on the importance of violence to the Jim Crow order, much of it focusing on the causes of lynching and its long-term legacies (e.g., Tolnay & Beck 1995, Williams 2022) and on private violence (Makovi et al. 2016, Obert 2018, Weaver 2019). There is also a growing literature on the relationship of the carceral state and southern democratization (Eubank & Fresh 2022, Taylor 2018). There has been less political science work on variation in southern states' ability to harness violence and surveillance.
[9]Key (1949), too, emphasizes this commitment, although he grounds it more in the attitudes of the whites of the Black Belt.

safely cordoned off by a racist values consensus. A real consensus on white supremacy provided no unambiguous guidance on how intrawhite conflict could be safely regulated, nor even how white supremacy should be maintained, since any plan would inevitably bias some white interests over others. The fact of this consensus was insufficient to sustain white political solidarity absent the binding constraints on political choice that were imposed at the end of the nineteenth century, raising the question of how causally significant white attitudes were in defining the parameters of southern regime politics in the first place.

A more sophisticated representational account emphasizes instead the degree to which southern institutions were responsive to the white public's varied class and material interests as well as its more consensual commitment to racial hierarchy. The most important statement comes from Caughey (2018), who has argued that the southern regime type is better thought of as a "white polyarchy," in which the preferences of southern whites over economic policy were relatively well-represented in the Jim Crow era. "The fact that the South's exclusionary one-party regime was reasonably responsive to Southern whites' racial and economic preferences," writes Caughey (2018, p. 167), "helps us understand why it lasted so long."

The most sustained argument against treating the Jim Crow regimes as "herrenvolk democracies," that is, as democratic for whites, has come from Mickey (2015; see also Aldrich & Griffin 2018). The argument is not primarily that some whites were denied the vote, not least because disenfranchisement was never race-neutral in its application (Keele et al. 2021), but that in largely extinguishing the Black electorate, the disenfranchisements of the late nineteenth century transformed the general electorate. Along with malapportionment, disenfranchisement fundamentally biased which white interests could gain a majority and the coalitions and terms for doing so. The restriction of civil society and free speech further limited the degree to which even enfranchised whites could formulate and advocate for their preferences. Elite white southerners could not rely on free and fair elections to produce a stable voting majority aligned with their interests, not even in states with white racial majorities (Aldrich & Griffin 2018, p. 97). Competition within the "white primary" was generally factional and personalistic, rather than programmatic, and in the absence of systematic political competition between substantive alternatives, "southern politics operated from the top down" rather than from the bottom up (Aldrich & Griffin 2018, p. 37). Disenfranchisement, violence, and the suppression of political organizing targeted and most severely burdened Black southerners; but it amounted to an extinguishment of democracy for the region as a whole.

The empirical findings of these accounts can be reconciled, but not without substantially modifying one interpretation or the other. The legislative responsiveness identified by Caughey (2018) might have occurred if the region's "white primaries" provided sufficient opportunities for voters to place issues on the agenda, make informed choices, and hold legislators accountable (see also Grynaviski 2004). But it might also have been an artifact of the period, venue, or issues studied. The national organization of politics, especially during the New Deal, might have clarified choice, facilitating preference formation and accountability beyond the state-level norm.[10] It is perhaps for this reason that Caughey & Warshaw (2018, p. 257) have found that southern state policy, by contrast, was nearly wholly unresponsive to either social or economic preferences before 1972. This suggests that the "white polyarchy" interpretation might be limited to national politics. More work on state politics across different regime eras is required to know whether this pattern of state policy nonresponsiveness was rooted in the limits of a dyadic representational connection under Jim Crow.

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[10]Olson & Snyder's (2021) finding that southern legislators were aligned with local preferences concerned the issue of prohibition, similarly easy and salient.

Still, that would not settle the conceptual issue. Even a limited responsiveness to white public opinion, along with the rituals of primary elections, would have likely provided the regimes some additional increment of stability and durability. But to evaluate whether these are better thought of as authoritarian enclaves or white polyarchies requires some agreed-upon standard: either the degree of responsiveness to observed opinion or the ability of voters to choose candidates from outside the ranks of the one-party regime. The boundaries separating our conceptual categories can be fuzzy, as differences in degree shade into differences in kind. It is possible that the various southern states approximated different regimes at different periods, even during the hegemony of Jim Crow, or that still more fine-grained regime categories are required. But the level and breadth of responsiveness have important consequences for how we interpret the foundations and objects of southern influence.

THE LIMITS OF THE SOUTH

In the growing literature on southern influence, what is most striking is the basic consistency in the ends to which this is directed. Across a succession of eras, the South re-emerges as a bloc capable of exercising consequential influence in pursuit of its white supremacist projects. The complexity of southern influence, in this sense, appears in how other interests or projects are rendered compatible with Phillips's (1928, p. 31) "common resolve" that the South "shall be and remain a white man's country," or in how white southerners reconstituted this commitment across successive transitions.

Just as the "problem South" emerged out of a specific historical context, the contemporary focus on reconstituted and enduring white supremacy reflects the persistence of racist inequalities and the emergence of a southern-backed conservative revanchism. But it is also a theoretically consequential premise: the observed dedication to white supremacy is the most plausible source of the unity often treated as the critical source of disproportionate southern influence, and its institutionalization and legacies are what have most clearly distinguished the region from others. The defense of white supremacy is simultaneously cast as the ends and means of southern influence, the substantive motive and defining context of southern politics.

The limit of such a premise is not that it distracts from other dimensions of southern politics. Rather, it runs the risk of overstating white supremacy's historical and political coherence, obscuring what it was and the diverse and often conflicting goals that contested, constituted, sustained, and transformed it. Most critically, historically oriented political science has not given sufficient attention to the complexities of Black politics in the South. Instead, as Johnson (2016a) has argued, Blacks are most often constructed as the "object" of politics rather than consequential agents who shape it. Positioned as the target of white supremacist suppression, the substance of Black agency often appears as something that can be assumed or neglected, especially if more hyperbolic claims about the success of slavery or Jim Crow in muting Black politics are given credence.[11]

This is one manifestation of a more general tendency, in which politically consequential intra-southern variation is defined in terms of the intensity of support or opposition toward white supremacy. Opposition to this can appear to exhaust the substance of Black politics; meaningful variation among whites is translated as the relative intensity of white support for it, often simplified to geography—Black Belt versus non–Black Belt counties or their state-level correlates. Temporal variation is similarly reduced to moments of transition between stable racial regimes, or

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[11]From a methodological perspective, the data out of which Black politics could be reconstructed for many historical eras are necessarily archival. Before the advent of civil rights protests, we have much more systematic quantifiable data on lynching than on Black political activity.

to a sequence of progress, backlash, and accommodation.[12] Organizing southern variation along these axes captures an essential truth. But it comes at the cost of flattening groups, subregions, and time. All southerners, Black and white, had interests beyond white supremacy. If none of these interests could be defined entirely outside of it—as during the high points of pro-slavery or Jim Crow hegemony—how they intersected with it, negotiated its terms, or even evaded or secured pragmatic exceptions to it, amounted to something other than mere variations in intensity in a shared commitment or opposition.

Both these limits—the relative neglect of Black politics and the reliance on overly simplified schemas of southern variation—are related to the lack in many accounts of an articulated framework situating racism within the region's changing political economic order (see Bateman et al. 2023). This might be more apparent in the literature on southern influence, where accounting for how varied economic interests were subordinated to or convergent with white supremacist practices might seem a diversion from the central focus on demonstrating influence over policy. But regime studies can also emphasize the interests of the planter class without considering the substantial change in the South's political economy and the possible contradictions that emerged within this class, defined simultaneously by the cotton market and a reliance on low-wage labor and sharecropping.

Invoking a generic racialized political economy sidesteps which (if any) of different and potentially diverging political economic frameworks (e.g., Alston & Ferrie 2007, Bloom 1987, Wright 1986) best capture the specific dimensions of southern politics being studied. The white supremacist ideology of an industrial managerial class could converge or diverge from the overlapping white supremacies of planters, middle-class white homeowners, civic leaders, and industrial white laborers. That their different priorities could be reconciled under the umbrella of white supremacy is clear, but the mechanisms by which this occurred and its consequences—for national influence or regime maintenance—are often undeveloped.

With a few exceptions—most notably Caughey (2018)—recent works emphasizing southern influence have not engaged with the expanding literature on the regime character of southern politics, and vice versa. This is unfortunate, given that these accounts provide potential alternative bases for southern unity, rooted in the governing control exercised by a succession of political regimes with a social base in either the planter class or in a broader white public. They might also help us understand processes of southernization. For example, studies of regime transition can illuminate how the internal conflicts of southern politics were projected onto the national stage.

Attending to this complexity, and more explicitly grounding national influence in models of regime coordination or representation, would substantially enrich our understanding of the region and its role in American political development. Recent works have made important advances on all these fronts, examining Black political agency (e.g., Johnson 2010, Parker 2009), variation in party organization and representation (Heersink & Jenkins 2020, Olson 2022), alternative substate regions (Hood & McKee 2022, White 2019), or the variety of strands out of which a Republican majority was woven (Maxwell & Shields 2019).

But I suspect that incorporating more of southern complexity into our accounts will complicate or undermine many of our current premises and interpretations, including the coherence of the regimes and the scope and pathways of influence. For instance, the concept of labor-repressive

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[12]As Johnson (2016a) has noted in a different context, a focus on critical moments risks ignoring other periods as inconsequential, or as mere transitions that do not need to be understood on their own terms. Bateman et al. (2018), for instance, find that models of influence during the New Deal need to be modified substantially for earlier periods.

agriculture could be tied to specific political economic frameworks such as Alston & Ferrie's (2007) euphemistic "paternalism" (see also Mazumder 2021), or Naidu's (2010, 2020) emphasis on market power. Alternatively, it could be discounted relative to other features of the southern labor market, such as its national isolation (Wright 1986). The upshot of the first choice, however, is a reduction in the scope of southern influence in national politics, since plantation regions, or even the Black Belt, were not sufficient on their own to exercise the level of influence claimed for the region as a whole. This raises the question of why—and even whether—the wider South, 11 or 17 states, rallied behind these more particular interests. Grounding national influence on the interests of shared economic interests, whether those of the planter class or employers in a region-wide labor market, in turn alters our interpretation of southern motivation in national politics (Wright 2015).

In a similar spirit, much of the southern influence literature could be interpreted in terms of boundary control. This too would invite a narrower definition of the South, encompassing only those states that could be fairly described as authoritarian enclaves. But it would also leave unexplained southern participation in national state-building and its occasional role in pushing forward a more expansive vision of federal authority (Sanders 1999). No matter how calibrated the design, national programs inevitably meant a reduction in the ability of regime elites to control their boundaries, and yet southerners were often at the forefront of legislative activism. Emphasizing trade-offs and contingent choices (Bateman et al. 2018, Katznelson 2013) is a first step but does not, on its own, account for how legislators evaluated and identified threats to white supremacy or what specific interests were put in the balance.

A more elaborate regimes perspective could help identify the conditions and mechanisms under which "the South" in national policy-making could extend beyond the planters of the Black Belt, or through which the diverging priorities of state-building and boundary control could be reconciled. Coordination over national policy could be located in the southern Democratic parties' influence over congressional delegations, requiring more work on state parties during the period of authoritarian rule. Such coordination would be most straightforward if southern representatives were not locally responsive or were responsive only to a coherent subset of public opinion. Caughey's (2018) findings stand in the way of such an interpretation: Even if one does not agree that these regimes were white polyarchies, the legislative responsiveness in national politics that Caughey documents could only have made it harder for the South to act as a coherent bloc in the manner theorized for regional, rather than individual, influence.

Incorporating Black politics as well as other forms of intra-southern variation, will generally make it harder to sustain the notion that these were coherent regimes disrupted only by the exogenous decline of planter power or the federal imposition of democratization. Johnson's (2010) *Reforming Jim Crow*—a groundbreaking model for future analyses—breaks from the genre's political science conventions by placing a dynamic and complex Black political agency at the center of southern politics, and by doing so not during a moment of transition but at the apex of Jim Crow hegemony. Crucially, this focus allows Johnson to identify contradictions that might otherwise be missed by a focus on the planter class or strategies of external boundary control and internal repression. Johnson shows how improvements sought and sometimes achieved by Black and white reformers, as well as their willingness to work within the regimes' parameters, might have provided Jim Crow some additional stability; but the author also demonstrates how the consistent foreclosure of basic equality pushed Black reformers toward a more forceful confrontation with the regimes. The rapidly changing political context of the 1950s emerged endogenously out of the regimes' contradictions.

Ultimately, I suspect that to better understand the scope and substance of southern influence, we will need to pay closer attention to the complexities of southern politics—temporal, geographic, economic—and the specific mechanisms by which unity could (or could not) be forged

and put toward deliberate ends. But the more we unpack the South, the less coherent it appears, and the less deterministic and more uncertain its influence.

CONCLUSION

Recent years have seen some political scientists declare the "end of southern exceptionalism" (Shafer & Johnston 2009) and of southern politics as a special area of study (Aldrich & Griffin 2018). This is usually grounded on claims of convergence—claims that the peculiar political conditions analyzed by Key (1949), which laid the basis for the early political science study of the region, have largely ended. But the South might cease to be exceptional for another reason: Rather than having been absorbed into national patterns, it might also have defined those patterns, making the country as a whole much more like itself than the older scholarship had recognized.

If the framing of convergence naturalized the politics of the North, the danger those of us who have focused on southern influence need to beware of is letting the North off the hook. The North—or non-South—has been a cocreator of white supremacy, whether through disinterest in the South's racial orders (Jenkins & Peck 2021b) or through its own participation in constructing and institutionalizing racist ideologies. King & Tuck (2007) are, in this respect, entirely right in their call to decenter the South: for much of US history, white supremacy has been national.

Rather than decenter (King & Tuck 2007) or center the South (Parker & Perry 2022), however, we might instead consider breaking it open further. This would involve situating the South's myriad contesting and conflicting actors within larger national and international relationships, and interrogating the ways in which its multiple internal commitments and contradictions meshed or collided with others in the region and beyond.

Debates over southern influence on the New Deal, for example, often turn on questions of motivation and marginality—whether the goal was white supremacy or administrative convenience, whether the result would have been different had the South not been involved. These questions are important, but so is the fact that multiple actors from across the country converged upon public policies whose effect would have been the same regardless of motivation. Perhaps one of the most enduring ways in which southern and nonsouthern actors have been cocreators of white supremacy has been through the competing pursuit of joint priorities which were not reducible to racial control and exploitation, and yet which ultimately reproduced these or generated new forms of racial inequality. The South alone could not have passed the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, nor were southern representatives alone in wanting agricultural laborers excluded from the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, whose passage divided the region's representatives into so-called liberal and conservative groupings. Southern representatives might have interpreted the stakes in terms of white supremacy, though they must also have disagreed; but nonsoutherners converged on similar positions regardless of the region's racial order. Competing groups of southerners—white and Black—united in support of late-nineteenth-century education proposals (Jenkins & Peck 2021a, Rose 2022), as did other groupings of Black and white southerners in support of populism (Ali 2013); they also united to oppose them. In each case, the competing projects were both regional and national in scope.

Even where the scope of southern possibilities was limited by institutional restrictions and shared commitments to white supremacy—as with slavery and Jim Crow—conflict within the region shaped national politics dialectically, attracting allies around shared political projects while repulsing others outside the region, who in turn could look for alternatives within it (e.g., King & Smith 2005). Slavery became the central cleavage in national politics not through a southern imposition; specific southern actors took advantage of the emergence of the northern antislavery movement to gain regional influence and make alliances with nonsouthern politicians pursuing their own goals. The result—the coalition between governing institutions, national partisan

networks, and social and economic actors excoriated as the "slave power"—in turn produced a reaction that a subset of northern politicians could turn toward antislavery, eventually (post-War) looking for allies in the South itself. Even secession was less the manifestation of a consensual white interest than a particular political project forged by aspiring political leaders who saw in the unleashing of slavery a way to resolve local economic conflicts as well as a path to power. A similar dialectic shaped how the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and northern liberals came to interpret the South's influence in the 1940s (Schickler 2016). They too would look for southern allies, making some inroads in the 1950s, with contradictory consequences, even as backlash reoriented southern politics yet again (Badger 1999, Johnson 2010).

Such an approach shares much with what I have termed the southernization pathway of southern influence, insofar as it connects contestation within southern politics to the political priorities of actors outside the region. I suggest that this be treated as a real possibility, even if latent, during periods of regime stability as well as during moments of transition (Johnson 2016a). While this approach ought to be focused on specific sites where verifiable claims can be evaluated, the goal would be less to identify the decisive vote or exercise of influence than to understand the processes by which diverse interests and perspectives were harmonized. Above all, it would involve treating the fiction of southern unity for what it is, a political construct that could be more or less approximated in specific institutional settings and circumstances but should not be assumed.[13]

Treating the South as "a singular causal variable," which Johnson (2016a, p. 597) warns against, obscures both white supremacy as a national pattern and the contradictions embedded within it. The white supremacist regimes never achieved their stated goal of suppressing the possibility of Black politics, nor could the actual substance of these regimes be uniquely defined by this objective given the demands and responsibilities placed upon it. A plural Black politics was always constituted by more than a singular opposition to white supremacy. Moreover, the South was never fully isolated: Political actors pursued common causes with those outside the region, finding national allies against local antagonists. These conflicts, and the efforts to suppress them, defined the South in the nation and the influence southerners have had over it.

Pursuing these lines of inquiry, however, will likely require different approaches to the study of southern politics than are common among many political scientists: more contingent, more localized and archival, and more critical of our current interpretive impulses. The upshot is that in doing so we might also fulfill the promise of recent work.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Errata

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