POLITICAL ATTITUDES

The political legacy of slavery

Racial tension continues to influence political attitudes in U.S. regions that once depended on slave labor

Deep Roots
How Slavery Still Shapes Southern Politics
Avidit Acharya,
Matthew Blackwell,
Maya Sen
Princeton University Press, 2018. 296 pp.

By **Amber Spry**

Debates about immigration, the emergence of #BlackLivesMatter and NFL activism, and the lingering presence of alt-right and white supremacy movements signal that racial attitudes still color interactions in the United States. Amid this backdrop, *Deep Roots* emerges as a story about the determinants of white racial attitudes in the South, a region known for being more ideologically and politically conservative than the rest of the country, particularly on racial issues.

The book argues that political culture in the South can be explained by the path dependence of political attitudes—that is, that ideas, norms, and behaviors of the past can influence the present. The argument sits in dialogue with a long-standing literature in institutional path dependence but differs in its approach by making political attitudes and behaviors, rather than institutional outcomes, the subject of observation. The authors make an important contribution by showing that just as attitudes and behavioral norms can be passed down through families and social circles, so too can they be reinforced by institutions.

Authors Avidit Acharya, Matthew Blackwell, and Maya Sen begin *Deep Roots* by highlighting two southern cities: Greenwood, Mississippi, and Ashville, North Carolina. Situated in the Mississippi Delta, Greenwood has a little more than 15,000 residents, the majority of whom are African American and vote predominantly for the Democratic Party. Greenwood's white residents, who are in the minority, are overwhelmingly conservative. In contrast, Ashville, a city with around 83,000 residents, has a predominantly white population that is more liberal by comparison.

The authors use these two cities to reveal what they believe to be a broader pattern in the present-day politics of the American South: Some areas have grown relatively liberal in their politics while other areas—particularly areas along the "Black Belt" region, where slavery was most prevalent—remain among the most

ideologically and politically conservative places in the country.

These differences, the authors argue, exist because cities like Greenwood were places where the local economy was rooted in slavery, whereas in places like Ashville it was not. Through survey analyses, they show that in areas of the South where slavery was prevalent, white respondents were less likely to identify as a Democrat, less supportive of affirmative action, and more likely to express racially resentful attitudes.

The book provides a detailed account of how behavioral paths in the South diverged, supported by quantitative analysis and compelling anecdotal evidence, and explains why these trajectories were not disrupted by events such as the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. And although the authors show that outcomes did improve for minorities in the Black Belt after both acts were passed (more African Americans were registered to vote, educational attainment increased, and gaps in income inequality narrowed), the political attitudes and behaviors of whites in this region remained conservative.

The authors reassure readers that targeted policy interventions can attenuate the effects of slavery on important outcomes related to social, political, and economic inequality between white and black Americans. But to the related question of whether these policy
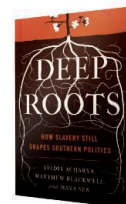
interventions have impacted latent attitudes among conservative white Americans, the book's evidence suggests that negative racial attitudes held by southern whites about black Americans are remarkably persistent.

Although the analysis in *Deep Roots* is limited in scope to the American South, the theory of behavioral path dependence presents several ways forward for continued work to examine the contours of political attitudes, both in the United States and in comparative contexts. For example, I wonder whether behavioral path dependence is a useful framework for understanding race-related political attitudes on issues such as immigration. Additionally, I am curious to know the extent to which behavioral path dependence also helps explain more positive attitudinal developments, or whether the emergence and persistence of progressivism requires a different theory.

Scholars of racial attitudes have long considered how such attitudes are transmitted across generations through history, culture, and institutions, and *Deep Roots* makes a historically penetrating and theoretically meaningful contribution to that body of literature. The book is engaging and thorough in its analysis and puts forth theory that will be useful for readers specifically interested in the intersections of political geography, racial attitudes, and political behavior. ∎

10.1126/science.aav1297

The reviewer is at the Departments of Politics and African and African American Studies, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA 02453, USA. Email: amberspry@brandeis.edu

Barack Obama hosts an online virtual town hall in 2009.

PODCAST

Politics with the People
Building a Directly
Representative Democracy
Michael A. Neblo, Kevin M. Esterling, David M. J. Lazer
Cambridge University Press, 2018. 182 pp.

Town hall meetings in the United States tend to attract politicians' biggest supporters and their most vocal critics, leaving out a wide swath of constituents. But with the advent of online communication platforms, that needn't remain the case. This week on the *Science* podcast, David Lazer outlines a technology-enabled framework for creating a more representative democracy.

10.1126/science.aav5181

Science

The political legacy of slavery

Amber Spry

ARTICLE TOOLS	http://science.sciencemag.org/content/362/6413/408.1
PERMISSIONS	http://www.sciencemag.org/help/reprints-and-permissions

Use of this article is subject to the Terms of Service