CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

> "98% probably of white people in
> Mississippi were segregationists.
> My family was, my father was, I
> was, everybody was. Everybody
> that I knew was for segregation."
>
> *Greenwood, Mississippi, resident*

Greenwood, Mississippi (2010 pop. 15,205), is, by all accounts, a typical
town in the Mississippi Delta. It isn't big, but it is bigger than many
others in the area. The town's gridded streets line up in a roughly north-
south direction, and its two rivers—the Tallahatchie and the Yazoo, parts
of the web of smaller rivers forming the Mississippi flood plains—roughly
encircle it. North of the Yazoo, historic mansions line Greenwood's "Grand
Boulevard," and cotton and corn fields dot the roads leading away from
the city. South of the Yazoo, in the historic city center, long-standing
restaurants and shops—some of which have been in existence for decades—
continue to serve Delta specialties like broiled shrimp and crabmeat. But
perhaps Greenwood's greatest claim to fame, at least today, is serving as the
birthplace and former home to a number of great blues artists, including
Robert Johnson.

Looking around the town—and elsewhere in the broader Mississippi
Delta region—it is easy to see remnants of older, different times. The
Mississippi Delta is an alluvial plain, and its system of rivers have provided
rich, fertile soil for agricultural use for two centuries. To cultivate these
lands in the early 1800s, white entrepreneurs forced the transportation
of enslaved African Americans westward into this region. The area is
part of the broader hook-shaped region of the South known as the Black
Belt, due to the rich color of the soil. Together, the fertile land, the
"inexpensive" enslaved labor force, and the area's navigable rivers made
cities like Greenwood the engines behind "King Cotton," with Mississippi

The quote in the epigraph comes from the film *Booker's Place: A Mississippi Story*, directed by
Raymond De Felitta. Courtesy of Raymond De Felitta.

providing roughly 480 million pounds of ginned cotton in 1859—nearly a quarter of all cotton production in the United States that year.[1] In turn, this production helped to propel the nation through the Industrial Revolution in the late nineteenth century. This past is evident today in Greenwood's Grand Boulevard district, with its mansions and wide, tree-lined streets. A sign on the outskirts of town still proudly welcomes visitors to "Greenwood, Cotton Capital of the World."

But, as in many cities across the Mississippi, these economically rich times did not last. Starting in the 1940s, the mechanization of cotton production dramatically reduced the need for agricultural labor; in tandem with the Great Depression and the migration of African Americans out of the rural South, cities like Greenwood fell into cycles of recession, further exacerbated by racial tensions through the 1950s and 1960s. Between 1940 and the present day, close to half of the population of the Mississippi Delta left for opportunities elsewhere, and, today, downtown Greenwood is peppered with boarded-up buildings and vacant lots. In the traditionally African American neighborhood of Baptist Town, just outside the city center, many abandoned shotgun-style houses line the streets, calling to mind a past when mostly black agricultural workers lived there.

Forces such as these have hit African American communities in Black Belt cities like Greenwood particularly hard. In Greenwood, which was sixty-seven percent black in 2010, the unemployment rate for African Americans is nearly twice that of the state average, which in turn is higher than the national average. Incomes for African Americans in Greenwood are also lower than state and national averages, with half of Greenwood families headed by African Americans living in poverty. The median income of the city has been around half of the national median income for most of the last decade. Residential and institutional segregation is also persistent. For example, following the legally mandated desegregation of public schools in the 1960s, many Black Belt towns such as Greenwood established private "segregation academies" for white students, leaving desegregated public schools mostly African American and starved of resources. Today, Greenwood High School is ninety-seven percent African American, while the nearby Pillow Academy—founded in 1966 to provide segregated schooling for Greenwood's white children—is ninety percent white.[2]

These racial divides are echoed in the political environment of the Delta. At a city level, the politics of cities like Greenwood have followed the trajectory of African American politics more generally (although, as we will discuss throughout this book, this has not always been the case). Since African American voters today tend to overwhelmingly side with the Democratic Party, this means that Greenwood—like other majority-black cities throughout the Black Belt—has sided with Democratic candidates.

The same does not hold, however, for Greenwood's *white* residents. For example, in 2008 and 2012, Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama won *nearly no support from the area's white voters*.[3] Indeed, at the county level, nearly all of the votes of Leflore County's white residents went to Obama's two Republican opponents, John McCain (2008) and Mitt Romney (2012). This pattern—black voters supporting Democratic candidates, but white voters overwhelmingly supporting more conservative candidates—is one we see again and again throughout the South's Black Belt.

Greenwood's historical and political trajectory contrasts with another Southern city, Asheville, North Carolina (2010 pop. 83,393). Whereas Greenwood's fertile land was its primary natural resource, Asheville's location in western North Carolina was by far less friendly to large-scale agriculture, setting its course on a different path. Indeed, Greenwood was settled primarily as a base for the production and shipment of cotton, but Asheville and Buncombe County, a region in the Blue Ridge and Smoky Mountains, was settled with the intent of establishing a trading outpost. For that reason, the city remained small for most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and it was only upon the arrival of the turnpike and the railroad later in the nineteenth century that the area started to blossom. For the early parts of the twentieth century, its crisp climate and mountain location made it a desirable vacation destination for Southerners from hotter lowland areas, and, over time, its boardinghouses started housing travelers from around the country.

Asheville today stands in contrast to the cities of the Black Belt in its demographic and economic profile. Of city residents, 43.3 percent have bachelor's degrees or higher, a figure that far outpaces both the North Carolina average (27.3 percent) and the national average (30.4 percent). In addition, a thriving tourist industry brings visitors to Buncombe County's famous Blue Ridge mountains and to cultural attractions like the Biltmore Estate. The city is also home to a variety of other industries, including health care, grocery and retail, and higher education, with the University of North Carolina at Asheville generating a well-educated workforce. In terms of the city's minority populations, only around fifteen percent of Asheville residents (and six percent of Buncombe County residents) are black, but inequality between people of different races is more muted than elsewhere in the South (though still present). The median 2010 black household income in Asheville was thirty thousand dollars per year; the same measure in Greenwood was around half that: seventeen thousand dollars. Both were lower than the corresponding white household income, but the black-white gap in Asheville was, and continues to be, narrower.

Importantly, Asheville also differs from Greenwood in its politics. In 2008, for example, Democrat Barack Obama won over most of Buncombe County's *white* voters. In fact, he won the county with fifty-seven percent of

the vote, but blacks make up only six percent of the population. Assuming that Obama won every single black vote, he still won over half of the white vote—a very high figure in the U.S. South. Of course, many of these votes surely came from the retirees and the university students who call Asheville home. But, even accounting for this mobile population, many whites whose families have lived in the Asheville area for generations supported a fairly liberal, black candidate. This is a voting pattern that is corroborated by Asheville's long-standing reputation as a relatively progressive Southern city, where, for instance, Lyndon Johnson won sixty-two percent of the vote in Buncombe County against Barry Goldwater in 1964. In comparison, Johnson only received 6.4 percent of the (overwhelmingly white) vote in Leflore County, Mississippi.

These two cities—Greenwood and Asheville—are illustrations of the broader puzzle that we explore in this book. The South has strong intraregional differences in political attitudes, a fact long noted by political scientists such as V. O. Key, who wrote about this in his seminal work, *Southern Politics in State and Nation*. Places like Asheville, Atlanta, Nashville, and Charlotte are relatively liberal in their politics. Even whites in rural areas away from the old plantation counties, like northeastern Alabama, vote for Democratic candidates with some frequency. But in Black Belt cities such as Birmingham, Greenwood, and Jackson, white voters are among the most ideologically and politically conservative in the entire country, despite these cities having large numbers of African Americans who lean in a Democratic direction. These differences in turn are reflected in national policy. As scholars such as Key have noted, the Southern Black Belt is one of the most conservative parts of the country on issues of redistribution, civil rights, and law enforcement, and politicians from these areas have been at the forefront of fighting for conservative causes at the national level and have been so for generations. Thus, a key question for understanding American public opinion specifically— and American politics more broadly—is what explains these important patterns. Why are whites in Greenwood so conservative and why are whites in Asheville comparably more liberal? Why did these differences develop? And why do these differences persist? In a time of increased polarization and divided polities, these are remarkably relevant questions.

This contemporary puzzle forms the basis for this book. However, even though this puzzle focuses on regional differences in *present-day* political beliefs, we believe that the most compelling explanation for such present-day differences lies in the *history* of these places. Specifically, we argue in this book that *political attitudes persist over time, making history a key mechanism in determining contemporary political attitudes*. Looking at regional differences across the U.S. South, we focus this argument on the "peculiar institution" that drove the South's economy and politics for

nearly 250 years: chattel slavery. We argue that Southern slavery has had a lasting local effect on Southern political attitudes and therefore on regional and national politics. Whites who live in parts of the South that were heavily reliant on slavery and the inexpensive labor that the institution provided—such as Greenwood (sixty-eight percent enslaved in 1860) and other places in the Southern Black Belt—are more conservative today, more cool toward African Americans, and less amenable to policies that many believe could promote black progress. By contrast, whites who live in places without an economic and political tradition rooted in the prevalence of slavery—places like Asheville (fifteen percent enslaved in 1860, for example)—are, by comparison, more progressive politically and on racial issues. These regional patterns have persisted historically, with attitudes being passed down over time and through generations. As we discuss below, this persistence has been reinforced both by formal institutions, such as Jim Crow laws (a process known as *institutional path dependence*), and also by informal institutions, such as family socialization and community norms (a process we call *behavioral path dependence*). Present-day regional differences, then, are the direct, downstream consequences of the slaveholding history of these areas, rather than being simply attributable exclusively to contemporary demographics or contemporary political debates.

To go back to our original question, what explains regional political differences in cities like Greenwood versus places like Asheville? Why are whites so much more conservative in the Black Belt versus other parts of the South? What we argue in this book, and what we show using empirical evidence, is that the differences in the politics of cities like these can be traced in part to one important fact: places like Greenwood were places where the local economy was rooted in slavery prior to the Civil War, but places like Asheville were not. The history of these areas, in tandem with attitudes being passed down over time via behavioral path dependence, helps drives these political differences.

1.1 HOW CAN HISTORY SHAPE POLITICAL ATTITUDES?

Many people may think that the claim that the past still somehow shapes our political attitudes is outlandish. We tend to think of our political beliefs as well reasoned and carefully considered, or, at worst, determined by what's happening around us right now. In terms of slavery and Southern white attitudes, it seems implausible that something that happened so long ago, and which has since been abolished, could possibly affect people's attitudes today. It seems remote to think that all of the things that happened between 1860 and today haven't served to diminish those sorts of influences.

This is a reasonable viewpoint—one shared by many political observers and scholars of public opinion. Slavery ended over 150 years ago, at a time when the U.S. population numbered around thirty-one million, about ten percent of what it is today. In the 1850s, roads in the United States were mostly unpaved, horses and wagons were the modal form of transportation, and railroads were just beginning to replace steamboats as the standard way to transport goods across the country. Alexander Graham Bell wouldn't make his first telephone call for another twenty-five years, and the Wright brothers wouldn't take their first flight for fifty more. Women couldn't vote, there were only thirty-three states in the United States, and Buffalo was America's tenth largest city. This younger United States had also yet to face the wave of internal and international migration that would characterize the twentieth century. Much has changed in American society and culture in the 150 years since slavery was abolished.

From the vantage point of politics and of race relations, these changes appear especially salient. The institution of slavery was itself permanently abolished, initially by the Emancipation Proclamation (1863) and more forcibly by the defeat of the South in the U.S. Civil War (1861–65). The subsequent involvement of the federal government during Reconstruction (1865–77) brought additional progress, including the enactment of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution, which together formally abolished slavery, established for all residents the right to equal protection of the laws, and guaranteed newly freed African Americans the right to vote. Although historians have questioned the extent to which these amendments were enforced (as we will discuss later in this book), slavery as a formal institution had collapsed by the 1860s, marking a significant transition point in the American racial order. Many have argued that the inclusion of African Americans into public life moved, at best, in fits and starts, but it would be misleading to say that these massive political and economic forces didn't substantially shift and shape political and social attitudes through history.[4]

Additional movements toward equality have been made in the twentieth century, further distancing the United States from its slave past. To name some milestones, the 1920s and 1930s saw the remarkable rise of African American visionaries in disparate fields, including literature (Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston), the arts (Marian Anderson, Josephine Baker), and athletics (Jesse Owens, Joe Louis, Jackie Robinson). Within politics as well, the voice of black political and intellectual leaders such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and Booker T. Washington guided the nation toward a fairer treatment of African Americans. By the 1960s, these efforts had culminated not just in the formal constitutional disavowal of state-mandated segregation (with the Supreme Court ruling in 1954 of *Brown v. Board of Education*), but also with the massive grassroots civil

rights movement. From a legal perspective, landmark pieces of legislation brought new protections for minority rights; these included not just the far-reaching Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, but also the Fair Housing Act (1968), the Equal Opportunity and Employment Commission, and the promotion of minority hiring by state and federal governments via the use of affirmative action. In terms of criminal justice, many jurisdictions have stronger sentences for hate crimes or other kinds of crimes targeted toward minority groups. And the political inclusion of African Americans has extended not just to the 2008 election of Barack Obama, the nation's first black president, but also the appointments of two Supreme Court Justices (Thurgood Marshall and Clarence Thomas), two Secretaries of State (Condoleeza Rice and Colin Powell), two Attorneys General (Eric Holder and Loretta Lynch), and numerous other high-level federal and state officials. Scholars have also demonstrated progress toward equality in white attitudes on race during this time especially in the period following the civil rights movement and especially on questions of institutionalized discrimination.[5]

The South has been no exception to this progress. A visitor from the 1860s would hardly recognize the city of Atlanta today. In the 1860s, Atlanta was a small city (pop. 9,554, about the size of Greenwood), mostly reliant on local railroads for business and trade. Today, Atlanta is a reflection of the "New South," home to a large and growing black middle and upper class—one that contributes significantly to the local economy and provides substantial cultural contributions to the city. In more recent years, Atlanta and other cities like it have lured many middle- and upper-class African Americans away from cities in the North and back to the South. For many African Americans, this "New South" is a far more welcoming environment than many parts of the racially segregated North.

HISTORICAL PERSISTENCE IN POLITICAL ATTITUDES

On the other hand, we also know that institutions and norms (and also political attitudes, as we will discuss) change remarkably slowly over time. Slavery was abolished only around 150 years ago—which represents the lifetime of two seventy-five-year-olds put together. As reminders of how close this past is to us, the last person believed to be born into slavery died only in the 1970s, while the last recognized living child of former slaves died in 2011.[6] Thousands of people alive during the early part of the twenty-first century were born during the times of sharecropping in the 1920s and 1930s. For many Americans living in the U.S. South, and also for many Americans whose grandparents and parents have migrated to other parts of the country, these connections represent a close temporal and generational

contact with slavery and its aftermath. The past that we consider here simply was not very long ago, and certainly not when compared to broader events in human history.

This historical persistence also permeates the culture of cities and regions. For example, while many things in Greenwood, Mississippi, have changed, many other things have not. In the city center, the famous local restaurant Lusco's has been a town mainstay, run by the same family since 1921. (Until desegregation in the 1970s, the restaurant was "for whites only"; other restaurants in town responded to desegregation by turning into private "supper clubs.") In terms of an even older past, just outside of the city, a visitor can still see long-staple cotton farms or stop by some of the abandoned shotgun style homes that housed thousands of African-American agricultural workers earlier in the twentieth century. Within the city, traditionally working-class and sharecropping neighborhoods remain African American neighborhoods; neighborhoods north of the city continue to be white neighborhoods. Greenwood today in many ways resembles Greenwood from the 1950s and 1960s; the town so captures the feelings of the pre-civil rights movement Deep South that it was a substitute for Jackson, Mississippi, in *The Help*, a 2011 motion picture about African-American women in domestic employment.

These facts point us to the possibility of a historical persistence in terms of not just ambient culture, but also political attitudes, a key component of what we argue in this book. Going back further in time, for example, many of the defining cultural institutions in Greenwood can be traced to the area's deep ties to chattel slavery. At its peak shortly before the Civil War, the Southern United States had an enslaved population of four million people. This constituted nearly one-fourth of the entire population of the U.S. South. In looking at the country as a whole, one in eight Americans were enslaved. In terms of whites' interactions with the institution, this translated into more than one in four Southern families holding enslaved people as property, and, in places like Greenwood and elsewhere in the Black Belt, where up to ninety percent of people in some counties were enslaved, this number rose to almost one-half of white families. Just like other places in the Mississippi Delta, the area had a significant prevalence of slavery, with sixty-eight percent of Leflore County's population enslaved in the 1860s. Of course, the impact of slavery was not limited to the South. Many Northern cities reaped the economic fruits of enslaved labor, including in the building of roads, buildings, parks, and universities. Later on, industrial centers across the North benefited from the cheaper production of cotton, a labor-intensive and lucrative crop, and other extracted resources. But it was in the Black Belt of the American South that the institution of slavery was the most firmly and intimately embedded and where it had its furthest reach.

The impact of slavery on the Southern economy and on Southern politics hardly ended once the Civil War was over in 1865. As historians have argued, slavery created an entire way of life that was utterly and completely dependent on the provision of cheap labor, and this varied region by region, depending on slavery's prevalence. When the institution was forcibly removed by war, Southern whites who were heavily reliant on the institution of slavery looked for other ways by which to maintain and protect the social and economic order. Depending on how reliant an area was on black labor, this meant turning to both formal institutions and informal customs to reign in newly emancipated black workers and potential black voters. After all, if black workers left, there would be no one to cultivate lands, maintain infrastructure, build roads and railways, operate newly profitable mining and timber production, and provide domestic labor. And if blacks could freely vote, then the entire political system of the South—and one upon which the Black Belt was particularly reliant—would be thrown into tumult. Thus, the brief optimism of racial progressives during the period of Reconstruction succumbed to the Southern Redemption following the Compromise of 1877 and the significant withdrawal of federal involvement from Southern politics. Southern white elites consolidated and regrouped politically, forging new alliances with whites who had previously supported federal intervention. One player left out of this new power dynamic was the black freedman, who had limited independent political or economic power.

In the absence of federal government intervention, Southern politicians, a group dominated by Black Belt interests, moved the region toward a system that largely restricted participation in social, economic, and political life to whites. These efforts stopped legally short of violating the Reconstruction Amendments to the U.S. Constitution—at least as interpreted by Southern judges and by the U.S. Supreme Court.[7] Over the course of the thirty years following Reconstruction, a variety of anti-black state laws made it difficult, if not impossible, for African Americans to pull themselves out of poverty and economic dependency. These laws made it difficult for blacks to vote, hold jobs (especially as skilled laborers), travel freely, or gain access to education.[8] Vagrancy laws made it illegal to be unemployed and tended to target blacks; anti-enticement laws made it illegal for whites to try to recruit black workers from other white men's lands. Together, these laws and practices formed a network that strongly limited the ability of freed former slaves to become economically independent and to exercise their political rights. In this way, Southern politicians filled the vacuum left by emancipation with a system of segregation and subjugation known as Jim Crow.

The institutions that came out of Reconstruction are just part of the story, however. For Southern whites—particularly those living in

Black Belt areas where slavery had been the dominant system of labor—cultural institutions and informal norms reinforced differing political attitudes. Segregation, racial policing, social punishments for interracial fraternizing and interracial relationships, and—above all—racial violence worked together to reinforce the idea that blacks were somehow inferior, less deserving, and more worthy of this kind of subjugation. These non-institutional behaviors and attitudes were a necessary companion to the laws that implemented these ideas: if whites truly believed that blacks were inferior, then it would be easier to inflict economic hardship, racial violence, and the denial of political rights—and all of these things were necessary for whites to maintain their political and economic positions. This operated in tandem with informal and socially rooted organizations like the Ku Klux Klan and other social networks. The goal was the same as with the formal institutions: to keep blacks in a subjugated position, economically and politically. This arrangement also appealed to poorer whites in these areas, who derived a significant psychological benefit from white supremacy. The net effect of this reaction was that whites "dug in," creating an environment that reinforced culturally, socially, and politically the idea that blacks were racially inferior.

As we shall see below, these reactions were particularly strong among those who had the most to lose—that is, those whites living in the Black Belt. Greenwood, for example, was the location of the 1954 kidnapping and lynching of fourteen-year-old Emmet Till, an African-American teenager who was allegedly caught whistling at a white woman; Till's body was found in the Tallahatchie River with a cotton-gin fan tied around his frame. (The white men who confessed to killing Till were acquitted by an all-white jury in nearby Tallahatchie County, Mississippi.) Although instances such as these are no longer prevalent, they have not been completely extirpated. In 2015, for example, a white supremacist shot and killed nine black churchgoers in Charleston, South Carolina. The shooter, from nearby Richland County, South Carolina (sixty percent enslaved in 1860), had written earlier that he "chose Charleston because it is the most historic city in my state, and at one time had the highest ratio of blacks to Whites [*sic*] in the country."[9]

1.2 BEHAVIORAL PATH DEPENDENCE

The story of this book speaks to larger questions about the political culture of a place. Scholars from many fields—including political science, sociology, and history (among others)—have noted a striking resilience of regional differences in political attitudes and political outcomes across nations, states, and localities. Alexis de Tocqueville famously traced the

contours of the political culture of the early United States, contrasting it with its European predecessors.[10] Many have noted the longstanding political differences between the South and the rest of the United States, starting in the earliest days of the colonies and continuing through today. But this variation poses its own puzzle: How do these political cultures develop and persist across time? While there are a variety of ways the past can influence the present, in this book we focus on channels of persistence that operate via a mechanism we call *behavioral path dependence*.

Just like path dependence in institutions, which have been widely studied,[11] we argue that ideas, norms, and behaviors can be passed down as well, and they interact with institutions, reinforcing each other over time. This type of path dependence posits that behaviors, not just institutions, become self-reinforcing; once we start down a path of development in political culture, it becomes harder and harder to extract ourselves from that path. Similar to religion and language, attitudes—including political and racial attitudes—are passed down from generation to generation, fostered and encouraged by families and social structures, such as schools and churches.[12]

While conceptually distinct from institutional path dependence (mainly in the outcomes that it seeks to explain), behavioral path dependence does not exclude institutional channels of reinforcement over time. Rather, it incorporates institutions and behavior by emphasizing the interplay between them and the reinforcement mechanisms that strengthen each one. In the Black Belt South, for instance, local governments, to the extent they could, participated and sanctioned the enforcement of anti-black laws: the localized Black Codes gave way to state-sanctioned Jim Crow laws, put into place by numerous state constitutions that were enacted at the turn of the twentieth century. In turn, as many have argued, Jim Crow laws have given way to increased incarceration rates, increased racial violence, and laws that are otherwise unfavorable to African Americans. As these institutions gained hold in the South, reversing them and fully integrating blacks into society became increasingly difficult and the institutions became more important to Southern whites. Of course, any path can be disrupted, and many of these institutions were eventually (and effectively) undermined by the civil rights movement, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. These laws were, as we discuss below, quite effective in addressing racial inequalities, particularly with regard to economic indicators and education; however, such interventions have been less effective in addressing regional persistence in political attitudes and political culture.

At its core, behavioral path dependence suggests that the political attitudes of a place or a region—such as the Black Belt—can persist across generations, nurtured by institutions, laws, families, and communities.

This idea of path dependence in politics more broadly suggests that significant historical forces, and the attendant political economic and political incentives that they produce, can create patterns that pass down through generations over time—and these patterns can outlast the original institutions and incentives. For example, looking at Greenwood, a possible explanation is that its history of slavery and its subsequent reliance on black labor has contributed to the development of more conservative political and racial attitudes among whites. We will show in this book that these attitudes have persisted over the course of the twentieth century. Thus, whites living in Greenwood and in other parts of the Southern Black Belt are more conservative today than are whites living elsewhere, even though those institutions that initially spurred on these attitudes— slavery, sharecropping, *de jure* disenfranchisement—are no longer in existence.

BEHAVIORAL PATH DEPENDENCE COMPARED TO OTHER APPROACHES

Looking across the U.S. South, path dependence in political attitudes suggests that some part of the variation in political, and specifically racial, attitudes that we see today in the U.S. South is fundamentally related to events that happened in the distant past. This is a break from what research in political science and public opinion might tell us.

Of course, the questions of how Americans formulate their political beliefs are not new. However, most of these predictions and analyses hinge on *contemporary* factors. As we discuss throughout this book, a number of studies have examined race relations—and specifically whites' attitudes on race-related issues or toward minority groups—by looking at present-day demographic characteristics, such as the share of the population that is black, how frequently blacks and whites interact, and contemporary patterns of segregation. Other inquiries focus on electoral politics. During each election cycle, teams of journalists, pundits, and scholars set out to understand why certain places politically swing the way they do and what this means for national and state electoral maps. For example, what is an area's level of unemployment? What is its average income? What is the racial, gender, and age composition of a particular city? Who won in the last election and by how much? Still other inquiries use survey data to make predictions about political outcomes. For example, we know that wealthier people tend to be more conservative, so what is a person's income? Employment or marital status? Race or gender? These sorts of present-day economic indicators and individual characteristics can tell us a lot about partisan leanings and political and racial attitudes.

Other scholars and political analysts focus on a slightly different question, which is what contemporary factors serve to change people's minds. Campaigns have spent millions of dollars and marshaled countless

volunteer hours trying to mobilize voters, predict their behavior, and assess which kinds of appeals work and which don't. Other studies have used randomized controlled trials to assess the most effective sorts of mailers, telephone solicitations, and in-person contact. The result of all of this? In terms of increasing voter turnout—perhaps the simplest change—the most powerful known interventions have managed to increase turnout by around nine percentage points. In terms of changing people's minds—a more complicated task—some powerful interventions have found impacts, but whether the impacts are long lasting remains to be seen. Indeed, the bulk of this research, which focuses on contemporary factors and contemporary interventions, implies that large changes in the political attitudes and behaviors of Americans are rare, costly, and short-lived.[13]

These studies are important. However, they miss an important aspect of political reality—the hugely powerful legacies of past institutions. For that reason, we are not surprised by either the lack of findings or, if there are findings, results that are substantively small or fade quickly. Mailers, phone calls, or volunteer canvassers would not significantly alter the effects of a century and a half of history in places like Greenwood, Mississippi, or Asheville, North Carolina. And they certainly would not attenuate history's role in shaping attitudes on long-standing questions involving race relations, affirmative action, or voting rights. We think, as we will illustrate later in this book, that important interventions throughout the twentieth century—including the mass mobilization of tens of thousands of African Americans during the course of the civil rights movement— have had powerful effects on attenuating institutional outcomes and the expression of racial hostility over time. We also think that contemporary demographics are one possible legacy of these historical forces. However, at the root of our argument is the idea that behavioral path dependence means that patterns of attitudes change quite slowly. Counties like Leflore County, Mississippi, are places with 150 years of white dominance over a subjugated African American population—a relationship that had its roots in the political economy of antebellum slavery and its aftermath. These forces have spurred on certain kinds of political attitudes. In other words, contemporary factors can only take us so far in explaining the gulf in political attitudes that exists between the Southern Black Belts and other parts of the South and, by extension, other parts of the country.

1.3 THE ARGUMENT OF THIS BOOK

In this book, we argue that the unique political, economic, and social history of the South has created a set of divergent political cultures that persist in some form through to the present due to the path dependence of

political attitudes. There are three crucial components to our argument.
First, in looking at the U.S. South, we document that Southern whites
who live in areas where slaveholding was more prevalent are today more
conservative, more cool to African Americans, and more likely to oppose
race-related policies that many feel could potentially help blacks. That is,
we demonstrate a direct connection between a long-abolished economic
institution and contemporary political attitudes. That this connection has
lasted over 150 years presents a puzzle for when and how the attitudes
within the South diverged along these lines and why they have persisted
until today.

This leads to the *second* component of our argument, which is that
these attitudes grew out of the historical incentives to subjugate African
Americans—incentives that strengthened through the antebellum period
and morphed in the postbellum period into significant institutional and
social customs designed to keep blacks in socially, politically, and econom-
ically marginalized positions. As W.E.B. Du Bois noted, "Emancipation
left the planters poor, with no method of earning a living, except by
exploiting black labor on their only remaining capital—their land."[14]
Slavery, emancipation, and their aftermath left a lasting mark on the South,
but one that we argue was not uniform across the former slave states. In
Black Belt locations such as Greenwood, the white business and political
elite were greatly affected by the abolition of slavery and took great pains
to ensure that their economic enterprise could continue and their political
power could be maintained. The era of Jim Crow that followed was state
sanctioned but also depended on local enforcement to achieve its ends.
We believe these historical forces, both their relative presence and absence,
shape the racial order of the South, as well as the way that Southerners
thought and continue to think about race, politics, and policy. Differences
in these historical forces led to a widening gap between the Black Belt and
the rest of the South in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The *third* component of our argument is that these divergent historical
attitudes have been passed down over generations to create, in part, the con-
temporary political cultures we detect today. In other words, Americans'
political attitudes are in part a direct consequence of generations of ideas
that have been collectively passed down over time, via institutions such as
schools and churches and also directly from parents and grandparents—
that is, via behavioral path dependence. As we shall see, however, some
outcomes have attenuated over time with interventions such as the Civil
Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, but the gulf in political attitudes
among whites living in the South continues to exist today.

Our hope is, therefore, that we push our collective understanding of
what shapes and forms contemporary political opinion and contemporary
political behavior further, beyond contemporary factors. In doing so,

we hope to show that our political attitudes today are intimately inter-twined with, and shaped by, those political attitudes of our parents and grandparents, nurtured by historical institutions and by intergenerational socialization. That is, deep political predispositions and social attitudes are in part the product of historical forces that subsequently create and drive the intergenerational transmission of attitudes, norms, and preferences. For that reason, we think that looking at the history of places like Greenwood, Mississippi, is very important in trying to understand why whites in these sorts of Black Belt cities are not only more conservative than whites living elsewhere in the South, but they are also some of the most conservative people in the entire country.

Ultimately, our argument in this book concerns the core idea that the formation of public opinion more broadly can have historical roots. In turn, attitudes can persist over time and across multiple generations via be-havioral path dependence. History shapes contemporary political culture.

1.4 HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

A brief roadmap will orient the reader to our book's organization. We start in chapter 2 by presenting an overview of the key theoretical concept underlying our analysis, namely that of behavioral path dependence. This chapter aims to situate this theory within the broader literatures of historical institutionalism, American political development, political behavior, and studies of Southern politics originating in Key's seminal book *Southern Politics*. We lay the groundwork for the rest of the book by examining how nonpolitical customs and norms could be transmitted over time and by considering other examples of this kind of transmission outside of American politics, including some important recent studies in comparative politics and in political economy. Although previous studies have alluded to the fact that attitudes can persist over time, ours is the first to fully develop this concept within the context of behavioral path dependence and political attitudes.

The rest of the book is then organized into three parts. Part I develops the main analysis documenting path dependence of political attitudes among white Southerners. Specifically, we examine the contemporary effects of American slavery, showing the predictive power of slavery on contemporary Southern white political attitudes. This forms the core part of the empirical puzzle that we explore in later sections of the book. Part II then brings the narrative back in time to the antebellum, Civil War, Reconstruction, and post-Reconstruction periods. Here, we argue that the relationship we see between slavery and present-day political attitudes might have its roots in the economic and political incentives growing

out of slavery and, importantly, its collapse. Part III then takes up how path dependent forces shaped the trajectory of political attitudes at the local level, across generations. In this part we highlight what we call the "mechanisms of reproduction," which drive behavioral path dependence. These include both intergenerational socialization and mechanisms of institutional reinforcement. Finally, we also explore how the legacy of slavery is not uniform across outcomes—some effects of slavery persist, while others have been significantly attenuated by the federal interventions of the twentieth century.

PART I: THE CONTEMPORARY EFFECTS OF SLAVERY

Part I establishes our main evidence for behavioral path dependence in political and racial attitudes in the American South, relying on several data-driven analyses to show that the South's slave past predicts regional behavioral outcomes today.[15] The goal of Part I is to show, using data and examples, that *historical patterns predict contemporary attitudes*.

Chapter 3 presents the core empirical evidence for the possibility of path dependence in political attitudes. We show that Southern counties that had higher shares of slave populations in the time period before the Civil War are today areas where whites are (1) more likely to be conservative in terms of their partisan self-identification and (2) more likely to oppose policies that many believe could benefit African Americans, such as affirmative action. These are also areas of the U.S. South where various measures show that (3) whites have the coolest views toward blacks as a group. Figure 1.1 previews the data and findings from this chapter and shows measures of white political preferences disaggregated by region of the country: non-South (which includes the Midwest, Northeast, and West Coast), formerly low-slave Southern counties, and formerly high-slave Southern counties.[16] The figure shows that, across all measures, non-Southerners are more liberal—they are more likely to identify as Democrats, to support affirmative action, and to say that slavery has hurt the ability of blacks to work their way out of the lower class. Within the South, formerly low-slave areas are more likely to express these views as well. *It is within formerly high-slave areas that whites are the most likely to oppose the Democratic party, oppose affirmative action, and express sentiments that could be construed as racially resentful.* We present these and other results in chapter 3. And, as we show, although these results may be surprising, they hold up even in the face of a battery of statistical tests.

Chapter 4 addresses questions that many skeptical readers will have, which is whether these results aren't simply being driven by contemporary factors such as present-day demographics. First, we address the important counter-arguments that these findings are simply being driven
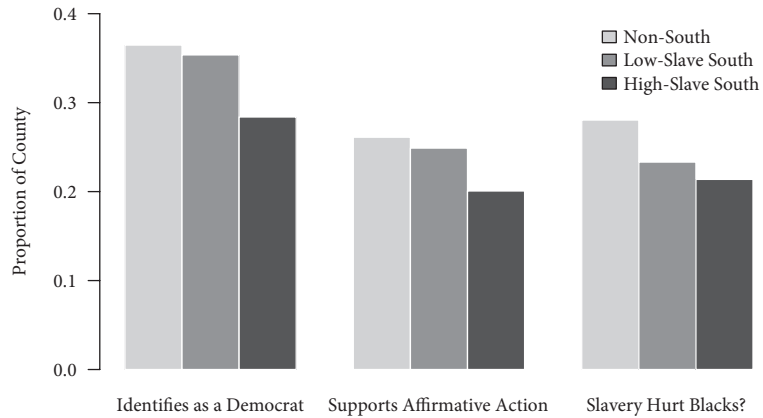
Figure 1.1. White attitudes on race-related issues. Low-slave refers to counties in the U.S. South that had fewer than 25% of the county population enslaved; high-slave refers to counties that had more than 25% of the population enslaved.

by contemporary black concentrations or population mobility over time. We are motivated in these questions by the seminal work of V. O. Key, who noted that one of slavery's legacies was in the high shares of African Americans living in this part of the country today. A voluminous literature following Key has made the point that white populations, being threatened by large numbers of African Americans, develop more conservative views and stronger antiminority attitudes—a mechanism that the literature refers to as "racial threat." As we show in chapter 4, however, this explanation does not fully explain the distinctiveness of the Black Belt. Once we account for the prevalence of slavery in the Southern Black Belt, the effects of contemporary black populations on white political and racial attitudes disappear. This is an important point, and, because it contradicts a significant literature in American politics, we discuss it at length. We also consider whether our findings are being driven by substantial population sorting over time, leading to demographic changes in the Black Belt. Although the evidence on this point is thinner, we nonetheless find that this explanation does not appear to be fully driving our results. Instead, we argue that the forces at play do not originate in contemporary demographics, but, rather, in the historical economic incentives for oppression and antiblack policies, which, via behavioral path dependence, continue to shape attitudes today.

PART II: THE ORIGINS OF THE U.S. RACIAL ORDER
IN ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL INCENTIVES

Part II addresses the questions left open by the empirical findings in part I. If our findings that whites who live in former parts of the slaveholding South are more racially conservative aren't explained by demographic factors, then what explains this pattern? We argue in this part of the book that the answer lies in the complicated historical institution of slavery itself: that is, the economic and political system of slavery and its collapse led whites living in areas most dependent on slavery to be more conservative, and more cool or hostile toward African Americans.

How is it that slavery has led to whites who were reliant on it to become more racially conservative? And when did these differences come to light? Chapter 5 examines the historical progression of political differences between the slaveholding Black Belt and other parts of the South. Slavery affected much of antebellum politics, leading to some cleavages between the Black Belt and nonslaveholding areas in the antebellum period, but these differences were mostly rooted in economics, rather than the question of slavery. In elections that focused on Southern rights and the future of slavery, low-slave areas were just as likely to support the institution as high-slave areas. Similarly, on race and the treatment of enslaved people, we are unable to distinguish meaningful differences between high- and low-slave areas. If anything, it appears that whites living in low-slave areas saw slaveholding as a means of economic upward mobility. It is not until the Civil War and its aftermath that we can detect meaningful partisan differences between former slaveholding and nonslaveholding areas. Slavery had a massive impact on Southern society and politics in the antebellum period, but the political geography we find today only begins to develop in the years leading up to the Civil War and immediately after, suggesting the important role that the threat of the collapse of slavery played in exacerbating and fomenting regional differences in politics and over the treatment of African Americans.

This addresses *when* the political geography of slavery solidified into the patterns we see today. But *how* did these differences come about? Chapter 6 tackles these questions conceptually by looking more closely at the end of slavery through the periods of Reconstruction and, later, Redemption. We argue that emancipation was a critical juncture in the development of Southern politics and for race relations in particular. Emancipation, and all that came with it, altered the incentives faced by Southern white elites, especially those living in former high-slave areas to promote the (1) economic and (2) political suppression of blacks. Indeed, Southern whites—and particularly Southern Black Belt elites—had created a business economy that was reliant on labor-intensive agriculture (such

as cotton farming) and extraction. The success of these industries was predicated on the generous provision of inexpensive and renewable labor. For these elites, the end of slavery meant the end of this steady supply of workers, threatening their income sources and economic status. As negotiation replaced coercion in the owner-laborer relationship, owners sought to find new ways to reestablish their control over their mostly black labor force.

With the passage of the Reconstruction Amendments, newly freed blacks could and did vote, creating a panic among whites who lived in areas where blacks outnumbered them. Rather than accede to a free black vote, whites in these areas often turned to voter suppression and ballot stuffing, using the numbers of blacks living in these areas as a way to accumulate greater political power. These economic and political incentives led Southern whites to engage in widespread racial suppression and intimidation, not just via legal means (e.g., Black Codes) but also via extensive localized racial violence and intimidation. In chapter 6, we show that there were more lynchings, more instances of convict leasing, and more votes to disenfranchise blacks in high-slave areas. These interventions worked in tandem with a more conservative racial culture, one that emphasized social segregation in homes, schools, churches, and businesses. This broader racial order, steeped in white supremacy, offered poor whites in the Black Belt a concrete advantage over the local black population and led to their strong support for the system.

PART III: THE MECHANISMS OF PATH DEPENDENCE

Part III turns the question toward examining the forces that have led to path dependence in political attitudes. How can we explain the fact that economic and political incentives dating back 150 years continue to affect political attitudes in the present-day period? Part III attempts to draw the line between point A (slavery) and point B (today) by looking at the mechanisms that drive behavioral path dependence, as well as important interventions that occurred both before and after the civil rights movement.

Chapter 7 traces the path of persistence by discussing two primary mechanisms by which behavioral path dependence takes place: (1) intergenerational socialization, and (2) institutional reinforcement. As evidence for intergenerational socialization, the chapter demonstrates that the racial attitudes of children in the post-1965 era are positively correlated with the racial attitudes of their parents, and that the effect of slavery is weaker in the subsample of whites who currently live in the South but did not grow up there. As evidence for institutional and environmental reinforcement,

it shows that parts of the South that mechanized their agriculture earlier (therefore more quickly reducing their reliance on cheap labor to fuel the cotton economy) are areas where slavery's effects on whites' political attitudes today are weakest. It also shows that slavery's effects are amplified in places that saw greater violence (as measured by lynchings) and moderated in areas where black concentrations are higher and in areas where school desegregation took place, both suggesting that social interactions between white and black residents could serve to either reinforce or attenuate the effect of slavery.

These findings set the stage for chapter 8, which tackles the regional differences within the South during and after the civil rights movement, including the important interventions of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. These interventions, as the chapter documents, were massively impactful and suggest an optimistic view about what our findings mean for American politics today: that these changes can come from within the United States and affect both behavioral and institutional outcomes. The civil rights movement helped change the way that millions of people think about race and race relations, while the Civil Rights Act of 1964 helped secure the protection of laws for millions of African Americans, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 made it possible for millions of blacks to exercise their rights under the Fifteenth Amendment for the first time. In spite of the persistent legacy of slavery that we find in attitudes, it appears as though these interventions attenuated the effects of slavery in other areas, particularly in differences in local white and black populations in terms of education, income, and voting. This raises the fundamental conceptual question of why some legacies of slavery persist, but others do not. We argue that the concentrated efforts of federal interventions and black protest groups in high-slave areas led to an accelerated pace of change in these areas that reduced the mid-twentieth-century gaps between high- and low-slave areas.

We conclude in chapter 9 by considering these questions in the broader context of national politics. We argue here that America's slave history has affected our politics on a broader level, making the United States in part more conservative on racial issues, including redistribution, welfare, and law and order. We also consider what our findings mean for the future of policy interventions. Our conclusion is not without optimism: our history has shown that there are effective modes of intervention, particularly when it comes to economic inequality and educational disparities. Effective interventions might have an important role to play in the attenuation of path dependent attitudes. However, our results also suggest the importance of vigilance: in the absence of interventions—both institutional and cultural—there is a possibility of retrenchment.

Our ultimate conclusion, however, is straightforward: history plays a deep and important role in how we understand contemporary political attitudes and, by extension, contemporary politics.

1.5 OUR METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This book relies on data analysis and quantitative methods. We use data from a variety of public opinion surveys, including the Cooperative Congressional Election Survey (CCES) and the American National Election Studies (ANES). We also use other kinds of economic indicators and demographic statistics, including from the U.S. Census, the United Nations, and other outlets. Because we attempt to analyze large quantities of data, we often turn to regression analyses and other kinds of statistical modeling, including matching, instrumental variables analyses, and other kinds of correlations and corrections. Sometimes, we look at very long-term patterns, such as basic relationships between things that happened in 1860 and the political culture of today; other times, we look within decades to tell a story about a particular time period. We also note that significant advances in data collection and survey techniques mean that these sorts of approaches were far from feasible even as little as twenty years ago. For example, some of the surveys we leverage here—including the Cooperative Congressional Election Survey—survey tens of thousands of people via online sampling, a strategy that results in far greater geographic coverage and thus enables our inquiry. Inevitably, there are times when no quantitative data of sufficient quality exist to generate a quantitative answer to a particular question. In these cases, we draw upon a broad set of work in political science, history, economics, and sociology.

Throughout, we have attempted to translate our quantitative analyses into straightforward substantive interpretations. It is our view that quantitative analyses add little unless they can be interpreted in meaningful, substantive ways. We therefore opt in favor of graphical representations and other, more intuitive ways of presenting this kind of information, leaving the more technical material to our other published work.

In terms of historical exposition, we attempt to keep our discussion brief and focused on the goals of our book. Volumes could be and have been written about the history of these time periods and contexts; indeed, we draw on this work to help us connect the dots along the behavioral paths that we study. But our contribution to the story of the South is a theoretical and empirical analysis of how political culture comes to be in a particular place. In the spirit of other political scientists who have studied path dependence, this story is dynamic and so will require historical context, but we attempt to keep the focus on the general processes at work.

We hope that by understanding these processes, we can begin to predict how behavioral path dependence will operate beyond the American South. In short, history informs our story, but it is not the story itself.

The story of this book is largely a story of place. Our key theoretical concept, behavioral path dependence, describes how social and political behaviors are passed down from one generation to the next through parent-child socialization and socialization within communities, schools, churches, and other kinds of local networks.[17] As well, these behaviors are reinforced and moderated by local institutions and shocks.

This suggests that the right unit of analysis in detecting behavioral path dependence is the local *community*. If behavioral path dependence operates locally at the level of the community, it is natural to take small communities as the unit of analysis in seeking quantitative evidence for behavioral path dependence. Where a person lives is often a good predictor of his or her heritage even though we know that people move over the course of their lives. For instance, those who currently live in an area that was once home to a large number of cotton plantations are more likely to have familial or communal ancestors that participated in slavery in some capacity than are those who currently reside in areas with very little slavery before the Civil War. Prior studies of behavioral path dependence, which we discuss in detail in the next chapter, have also followed the practice of using the local community as the unit of analysis.

In our study, we therefore use the county as our main unit of analysis. This follows a long line of research in Southern politics, dating back at least to V. O. Key, who showed an impressive variation in attitudes and voting patterns across counties within each of the Southern states. Local communities are often smaller than counties and occasionally cross over county boundaries, but, for our purposes of measurement, counties provide a reasonable approximation to estimate how political attitudes may vary with the influence of slavery. We supplement our county-level analyses with analyses at the individual and family levels.

1.6 CONCLUSION

We conclude this introduction by highlighting what we believe to be the core contributions of this book. The first is that we show that *political attitudes are in part path dependent*, making history an important component to the study of politics. Here, we show that America's history with slavery, emancipation, and Reconstruction has fundamentally influenced white Southerners' political attitudes. This history, as we show, has made whites who hail from areas where slavery was more prevalent more conservative—particularly on racial issues—than they otherwise would

have been. History matters and shapes our politics, beliefs, and attitudes. And it does so via the important channels of institutional path dependence and behavior path dependence.

Second, we show that *Americans' attitudes on race can, in part, trace their origins to the economic and political incentives borne out of the mass enslavement of African Americans*, and that this varies regionally depending on the historical prevalence of slavery. We use data and other quantitative techniques to show that Southern whites—particularly those in the Southern Black Belt—had huge incentives to use informal institutions and localized customs to try as much as possible to recreate the system of institutionalized subjugation that slavery had once provided. We show that, once slavery ended, other institutions—some formal and some informal—arose to take its place. However, although we use the example of slavery and black-white relationships here, we believe that economic and political incentives matter significantly in structuring race relations, not just in the United States, but across other societies as well.

Third, we show that *not all legacies of slavery are the same*. As our analyses illustrate, important legislation like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, along with the societal change instigated and moved forward by the civil rights movement and subsequent leadership from African Americans and other groups, have been successful in reducing systematic inequalities between black and white Southerners. Furthermore, these interventions have significantly attenuated differences between high-slave and low-slave parts of the South. However, these institutional and cultural interventions have done little to attenuate the differences in political attitudes across these same parts of the South. Even as all Americans, including Southerners, have moved away from overt racism, the present-day relationship between racial and political conservatism and slavery remains similar to that seen in the middle of the twentieth century.