

*The Disfranchisement Myth: Poor Whites and Suffrage Restriction in Alabama.*  
By Glenn Feldman (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2004) 311 pp.  
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During the campaign to restrict suffrage in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century South, upper-class Democrats from heavily African American areas urged all whites, regardless of geography, class, or past partisanship, to recall the "horrors" of Reconstruction and unite behind the "reforms," pledging that legal means to disfranchise nearly all blacks, but no whites, were possible. Feldman contends that poor whites were so strongly and irrationally racist that they believed the Democrats' empty promises, ignored their own economic and political self-interest, and committed political suicide (9-10, 23, 136). Often heavy-handedly attacking Woodward, Webb, and this reviewer as credulous propagators of "the disfranchisement Myth" that "plain" white anti-Democratic-party sympathizers opposed suffrage restriction, Feldman seeks to restore the white-consensus view of southern politics, shorn of its original racist purposes (3-11, 123).<sup>1</sup> Misrepresenting the views of the historians that he attacks, distorting or ignoring evidence to fit his thesis, and performing only the most simplistic statistical analysis of election returns, Feldman fails as badly as the disfranchisers did to obscure white disunity.

No historian has, as Feldman charges, "portray[ed] solidarity against ratification [of the 1901 constitution] among poor whites in north Alabama and the Hill Country" (115); none has argued that poor-white racism "meant nothing in real terms" (8); and all have understood, since

1 See C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge, 1951); Samuel L. Webb, *Two-Party Politics in the One-Party South: Alabama's Hill Country, 1874-1920* (Tuscaloosa, 1997); Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880-1910* (New Haven, 1974).

Woodward pioneered the argument in *Tom Watson* in 1938, that some Populists shed any signs of racial liberalism after Democrats counted them out and discouraged many of their followers from voting (77). What the historians that Feldman attacks *have* contended is that white Populists and Republicans, along with some hill-country Democrats, were much more likely to oppose disfranchising laws and constitutional amendments than Democrats from the Black Belt and upper-status Democrats everywhere were. In contrast to Feldman, who offers a static consensus view, those that he seeks to refute have emphasized the divergent and shifting class and partisan interests among whites, the importance of preconstitutional disfranchising laws—such as the Sayre Law in Alabama that Feldman almost entirely ignores—and changes and fluidity in late nineteenth-century southern white attitudes and behavior. Feldman sees an undifferentiated forest; we see clumps of trees of different species, sizes, and ages.

Feldman's equation of Populists and white Republicans with "poor whites" and any residents of majority-white counties allows him to treat any statement from anyone in a majority-white county and any election return from such an area as representing anti-Democratic sentiment (122, 146). Rather than attempting to draw a representative sample of "plain white" opinion, he quotes not only scattered Populists and former Populists but, even more often, upper-class plantation, corporate, or merely partisan Democrats, as reflective of Populist views (26-27, 77, 94-106, 112, 115, 144-45, 158). His opinion sample is not just unsystematic; it is flagrantly biased.

More than thirty years ago, I employed ecological regression analysis to estimate how Alabamians who had supported the Populists in earlier gubernatorial contests voted in the referendums for calling the 1901 constitutional convention and ratifying its handiwork. This statistical technique took into account turnout and choice differences between voters in each county. In contrast, Feldman merely groups counties into those that were majority white or majority Populist and calculates the average white-county and Populist-county percentages for each side in the referenda, downplaying the specific county-level votes. He also assumes, without any evidence whatsoever, that the ballot-box stuffing that so obviously distorted the returns from the most heavily African American counties was absent in white-majority counties, an assumption belied by percentages for disfranchisement in several counties that greatly exceeded their white percentages.

Feldman's bluster should not obscure the weakness of his evidence, research design, and qualitative and quantitative methods. The myth is that he has refuted anyone's contentions about disfranchisement.

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