

Struggle for Mastery: Disfranchisement in the South, 1888-1908. By Michael Perman (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press) 395 pp.

In substance and methodology, this book represents a retreat to an earlier era. Perman refuses to state his or others' hypotheses clearly or qualifies them out of existence; repeatedly contradicts himself; arranges information to avoid confronting inconvenient facts; eschews quantitative or explicit qualitative tests; and undermines generalizations by exaggerating small differences and glossing over large ones.

Instead of asking new questions or offering new answers to previously posed questions about disfranchisement and its effect on southern politics, Perman evades and equivocates. Was suffrage restriction in the South the result of a sequential process, involving violence and fraud, which reduced black and lower-class white political power enough to allow state legislative and eventually constitutional action? Even though the thesis was enunciated in the 1970s and refined in published works in the 1980s and 90s,¹ Perman does not recognize it. Instead, he draws a bright line between "manipulation" of anti-Democratic, particularly black voters, and their later "elimination" at some points in his book (5-6, 245, 322), while considerably blurring the boundary at others (48-69, 168, 281, 321). Were discriminatory election laws necessary to counter real threats to white Democratic supremacy? By starting his study in 1888, after many of the initial and partial restrictive devices had been adopted, emphasizing the very last, constitutional restrictions, and avoiding systematic assessments of danger to the Democrats, Perman is able – artificially and unsatisfactorily – to represent the threat as a largely symbolic product of overactive racist imaginations (25-27, 33, 97, 173, 293). Even before disfranchisement, he declares, southern blacks had "no political power" (26), a judgment that overlooks considerable black office holding and a degree of influence over white officials that

was demonstrated by its stark diminution after African-Americans lost the vote in the South.

Were lower-status whites a secondary target of restrictive measures? Sometimes he says yes (185, 221, 295-96, 317); sometimes, no (27-30, 84, 221, 316-19). Did Democratic disfranchisers have partisan, as well as racial motives? Perman covers all the options: While acknowledging the partisan effects of restrictions (63-66, 281) and sometimes, their partisan motives (7, 54-57, 141, 172, 233), at other times, he considers partisan impacts unintentional (148) or even “not exactly unintended” (328). Were the most important leaders of disfranchisement upper-class men, usually from black-majority counties? Largely ignoring the class issue, Perman roils the pattern by characterizing some leaders as “farmers”(92), “reformers” (125, 174, 201, 273, 298, 326), or the “leadership structure” (149, 323), amorphous categories that overlap with upper status and Black Belt groupings.

Were the disfranchisement schemes similar across the states? Despite the fact that all eleven of the ex-Confederate states adopted poll taxes and either literacy tests or their statutory counterparts, secret ballot laws, which Perman concedes achieved the disfranchisers’ goals “more than adequately” (314), he separates the eleven states into five distinct groups, depending, for instance, on whether they adopted equally fraudulent “grandfather” or “understanding” clauses, or whether they passed constitutional changes by referenda or constitutional conventions. Spotlighting twigs, Perman obscures the forest.

Was there general agreement among disfranchisers and a chasm between them and their black and white critics? Piling up details of minor, if sometimes lengthy squabbles in the constitutional conventions, all of which ended up with quite similar suffrage plans, Perman exaggerates conflict among Democratic leaders. And although he usually notes the massive fraud necessary to impose disfranchisement in referenda, he devotes much less attention to the

considerable black and white resistance to disfranchisement than to its accomplishment.

Was the reshaped post-suffrage restriction southern political system new or a return to the pre-Civil War arrangement? For once unequivocally taking a position, Perman calls it a “restoration.” (10, 328) But the antebellum system had vigorous party competition, not a non-party system, antebellum white males turned out at high, not low rates, and antebellum blacks were non-citizens, not second-class citizens. It is Perman’s book, not the transformed early twentieth-century political system, that returns to an earlier era – in the case of his book, one that is idiographic, pre-social scientific, and interpretatively empty.

1. Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880-1910* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1974), 243-44; Kousser, “The Undermining of the First Reconstruction: Lessons for the Second,” in Chandler Davidson, ed., *Minority Vote Dilution* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1984), 30-31; Kousser, “The Voting Rights Act and the Two Reconstructions,” in Bernard Grofman and Chandler Davidson, Eds., *Controversies in Minority Voting: The Voting Rights Act in Perspective* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1992), 145.

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