

and small planters, in addition to the wider reputations and greater availability of time and money enjoyed by the economic elite, guaranteed men of standing a disproportionate share of the political posts. Yet their tenure existed only at the sufferance of their neighbors (social inferiors, but often political near-equals), and they failed to pay at least rhetorical tribute to white male equality at their peril.

Two factors—legal restrictions on the suffrage and the degree of party competition—have chiefly determined voter turnout levels in the South, and, of these, the former has been much more important. As Figure 3 shows, the pattern of voter participation in the 11 ex-Confederate states was quite similar to that in the other states of the Union from 1840 through the 1880s. The massive divergence that Key noted opened up only after 1892, as southern states passed laws and standardized administrative practices that disfranchised large proportions of blacks and poorer whites. Designed to have a disproportionately adverse impact on the Republican and Populist parties, the restrictive laws virtually ended party competition in most of the South, thereby further discouraging people from voting. Even though literacy tests and other restraints on the suffrage were employed in the North as well as the South, the qualifications were not applied as severely above the Mason-Dixon line. Since 1940, as blacks gradually regained the vote and as Republicans contested more and more elections in the South, participation rates in the two sections have converged. By 1980 the difference in turnout was only 8 percent.

Although the 20th-century sectional gulf in Figure 3 is the most striking, other facets of the graph also deserve attention. In this as in many cases, the choice of the denominator presents a moral problem. Few free black males and no male slaves or women of any status were allowed to vote before 1860. Had black males, slave and emancipated, instead of only adult white males, been included in the antebellum denominators, southern turnout would have been only about two-thirds as high as northern in the antebellum period. Had women been counted, both lines would have shifted downward.

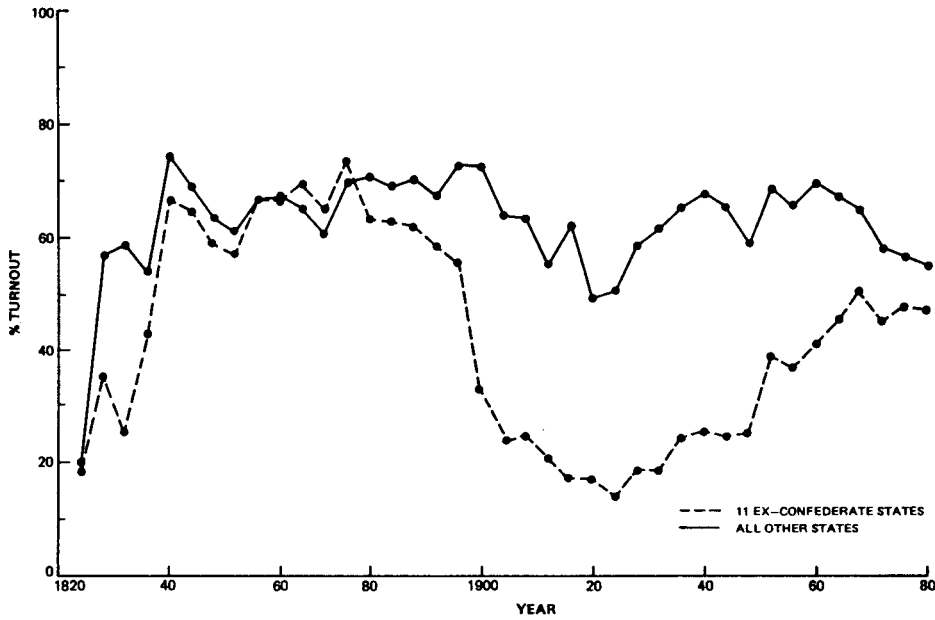
Following convention by calculating turnout on the basis of all males, regardless of race, in the denominator from 1868 to 1908, adding females in a few non-southern states in 1912 and 1916 and in all states thereafter, also hides two shifts that did *not* take place in the South. There were no overall voting declines as a result of the addition of freedmen and women to the voting polls. In 1860, 67 percent of the southern adult white males voted. In 1868, in the seven southern states that held elections, 70 percent of southern adult males, black as well as white, turned out. When compared to the political behavior of the early- or mid-19th-century British or the late-20th-century American voter of lower social status, it seems amazing that such a large portion of the poverty-stricken, largely illiterate, recently slave population should have voted. Just as impressive, they overwhelmingly opposed the wishes of their former owners and then-current landlords. And whereas northern turnout dropped by more than 10 percent with the expansion of women's suffrage, southern women appear to have

Voting

"Among the great democracies of the world," V. O. Key, Jr., noted in 1949, "the Southern states remain the chief considerable area in which an extremely small proportion of citizens vote." Yet the South has not always been the most backward, least democratic region in the Western world. Although other countries have, gradually or in sudden spurts, expanded the proportion of their citizens who enjoy and exercise the right to vote, the United States has followed a zigzag, not a linear, path. Born comparatively free, America contracted as well as expanded its suffrage thereafter. In its patterns of voting participation, as in other facets of society, the South exaggerated national trends.

Suffrage theory of the colonial South, like that of the colonial North, mimicked Britain's. "The laws of England," the Virginia Legislature declared in 1655, "grant a voice in such election only to such as by their estates real or personal have interest enough to tie them to the endeavor of the public good." Accordingly, during most of the colonial period, only property holders could vote. Because of the much greater availability of land in the New World, however, freehold suffrage in practice enfranchised a much higher proportion of the free adult males in America than in the mother country. Substantial majorities, in Virginia as well as in Massachusetts, could and did vote. Property restrictions for officeholding, some class deference, and the common interest of large

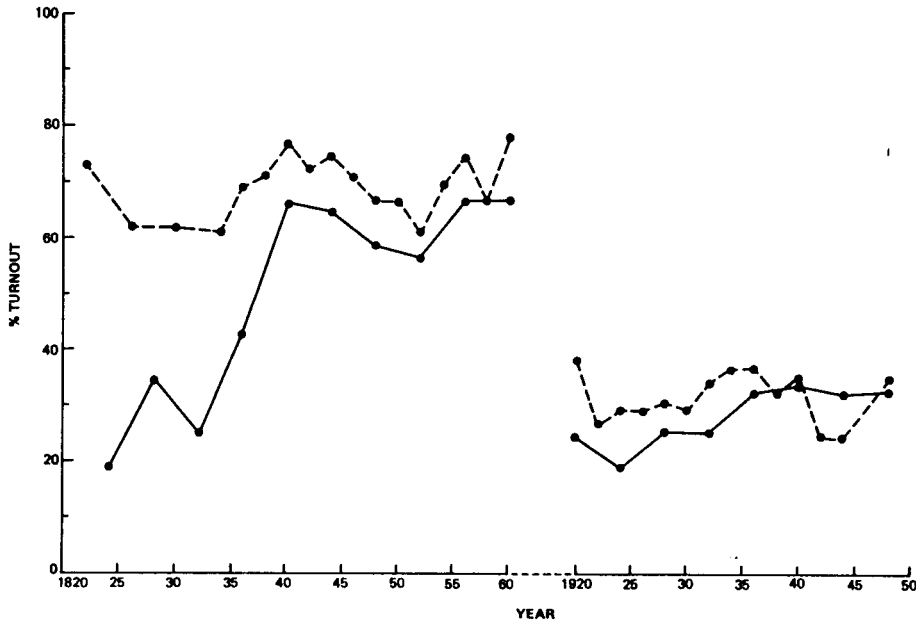
Figure 3. Voting Turnout for President, by Region



NOTE: DENOMINATORS - WHITE ADULTS MALES BEFORE 1860, ALL ADULT MALES FROM 1860 TO 1908, ALL ADULTS IN FEMALE SUFFRAGE STATES, 1912 - 1960.

Source: U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation* (1968).

Figure 4. Voting Turnout, Whites Only, in the Eleven Ex-Confederate States



NOTE: 1822-1860 FIGURES ARE FOR GENERAL ELECTION, ADULT WHITE MALES ONLY. 1920-48 GUBERNATORIAL FIGURES ARE FOR PRIMARIES AND BOTH PRESIDENTIAL AND GUBERNATORIAL TURNOUT IS FOR ADULT WHITES ONLY.

Source: U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation* (1968).

bounded off their pedestals to participate in politics in approximately the same—very low—proportion as the men.

Figure 4 lays to rest two other hoary notions. First, the left section of the graph shows that the high level of antebellum southern turnout was not merely a product of contests for the presidency or of Jacksonian democracy. Southern governors' races attracted large majorities of the adult white males long before battles for the White House did and continued to attract somewhat higher proportions of voters than presidential elections after the Old Hero retired. Second, although the Democratic primaries constituted the real elections in the first half of this century, the right portion of Figure 4 shows that turnout in those races barely exceeded that in southern presidential contests: only about one of three southern white adults generally managed to cast ballots. Competition unstructured by parties did not foster participation; blacks were not the only ones deterred by the post-Populist southern political system.

In 1938 Ralph Bunche estimated that but 4 percent of southern blacks could vote. Legal attacks on the white primary, the poll tax, and other restrictive devices, culminating in the passage of the 1965 national Voting Rights Act, in addition to the return to the South of a Republican party that was almost the negative image of its Reconstruction-era predecessor, vastly increased political activity among all groups, whites as well as blacks and Latinos. The vote brought change, real and symbolic. Public services expanded and were opened more freely to all. Black and Spanish-surnamed southern mayors and congressmen became almost common. Former race baiters kissed black babies and black homecoming queens. Yet in many rural areas and small cities, harsh discrimination persisted; and electoral structures, such as at-large provisions, which had the intent and effect of diminishing minority political power, discouraged blacks and Latinos from voting and diluted the impact of their franchises when they did turn out. The struggle to guarantee equal political opportunity in the South continues.

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See also **BLACK LIFE: Politics, Black**

Robert E. Brown and B. Katherine Brown, *Virginia, 1705–1786: Democracy or Aristocracy?* (1964); Ralph J. Bunche, *The Political Status of the Negro in the Age of FDR* (1973); V. O. Key, Jr., *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (1949); J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880–1910* (1974); Steven F. Lawson, *Black Ballots: Voting Rights in the South, 1944–1969* (1976); U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation* (1968), *The Voting Rights Act: Ten Years After* (1975), *The Voting Rights Act: Unfulfilled Goals* (1981); Chilton Williamson, *American Suffrage from Property to Democracy, 1760–1860* (1960).