

in brief...

The long shadow of slavery

The politics and economy of the antebellum American South were dominated by those who practiced forced enslavement. Research by **Luna Bellani**, **Anselm Hager** and **Stephan Maurer**, which examines a database of Texas legislators from 1860 to 1900, reveals that the power of slave-owners continued long after the Civil War.

The economy of the American South before the Civil War was largely dependent on enslaved people who cultivated cotton and other cash crops. It is well known that the then legally permissible practice of immoral forced enslavement has had long-lasting economic, political and social consequences, which are clearly visible today.

For example, in regions shaped by slavery, white people continue to express colder feelings towards black people (Acharya et al, 2016), and turnout of black voters is lower in elections (Acharya et al, 2015). The dominant elite in the South before the Civil War were the wealthy landowners who held people in slavery – the so-called ‘planter class’. Their influence in politics before the war can best be illustrated by highlighting that of the 15 presidents before Abraham Lincoln, eight held people as slaves while in office.

Lincoln’s emancipation proclamation in 1863, the thirteenth amendment of the US constitution in 1865 and the Union victory in the Civil War finally brought the end of slavery in North America. Despite abolishing slavery, the Civil War did not, in fact, end the influence of the former enslavers.

Recent research shows that nearly half of the richest 5% of property owners in the South in 1870 were already among the richest 10% in 1860 (Dupont and Rosenbloom, 2018). Former enslavers kept control over their land, and as a result also stayed politically influential. This persistence of ‘de facto power’ in turn allowed them to block economic reforms, disenfranchise black voters and restrict the mobility of workers (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2008).

But just how politically influential were the antebellum slave-owners after the Civil War? In a new study, we set out to answer this question.

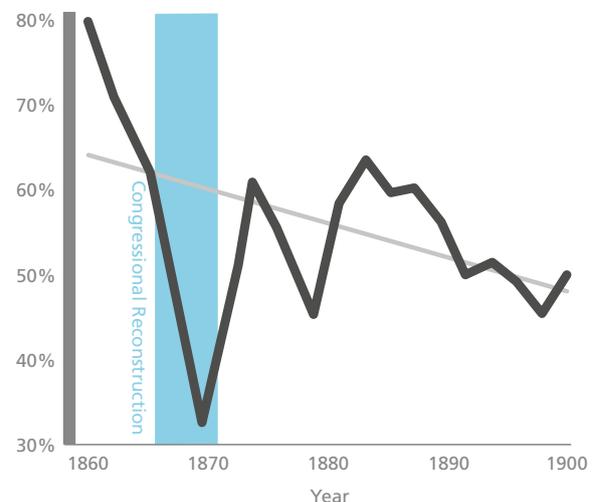
Slave-owning families dominated the politics of the American South long after the Civil War

Using Texas as a case study, we created a database of all members of the Texan Senate and House of Representatives from 1860 to 1900, which we then linked to historical census records prior to their election. We then followed these legislators and (if need be) their ancestors until the 1860 census (the last one to record the incidence of slavery and the identity of enslavers). Doing so allows us to calculate the share of legislators from 1860 to 1900 who came from a family that held people as slaves.

Figure 1 shows the share of lawmakers who were enslavers over time. During the Civil War, the vast majority of Texan legislators came from a family that had held people as property. This number dropped significantly during the era known as Congressional Reconstruction (up to the 1870 election). But by 1874, the share was already back to around 60% and it remained at this level for the following decades. Even by 1900, around half of all legislators still came from slave-owning families.

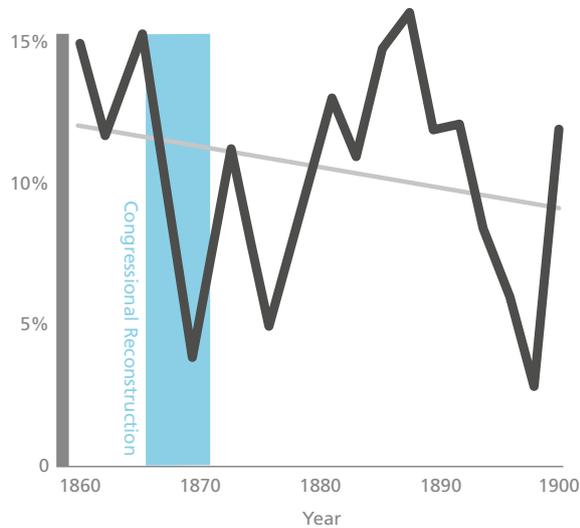
Figure 2 shows the same data, but focusing on the wealthiest of the wealthiest, the planter class (defined as

Figure 1:
Share of Texan legislators 1860-1900 that came from families that had held people as slaves in 1860



Source: Authors’ analysis of ‘Texas Legislators: Past & Present’

Figure 2:
Share of Texan legislators 1860-1900
that came from families that had held 20
or more people as slaves in 1860



Source: Authors' analysis of 'Texas Legislators: Past & Present'

In 1900, about half of all
Texan lawmakers came
from families that had
held people in slavery

people who held 20 or more people as slaves). In 1860, only around 3% of all Texan families belonged to this group. Yet before the Civil War, more than 10% of all legislators came from the planter class.

Again there is a sharp drop during Congressional Reconstruction, followed by a swift rebound and an even more stable pattern. By 1900, the share of former planters in the legislature is essentially at the same level as in 1860.

How does the slave-owning background of legislators affect politics? Examining the characteristics of these legislators, we find that those that had held people as property had different occupations prior to getting elected, being more likely to work in agriculture.

Politically, legislators from enslaving families were also more likely to be conservative (leaning toward the Democrats). This is consistent with the fact that the Democratic Party in the South after the Civil War represented the interests of the landed elite, and indicates that former enslavers, on average, were more conservative than other legislators.

Importantly, these differences along party membership and occupation also hold after statistically controlling for legislators' 1860 wealth levels. Thus, the differences we find are not simply due to the fact that enslavers were richer.

This article summarises 'The Long Shadow of Slavery: The Persistence of Slave Owners in Southern Law-making' by Luna Bellani, Anselm Hager and Stephan Maurer, CEP Discussion Paper No. 1714 (<https://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1714.pdf>).

Luna Bellani is at the University of Konstanz. **Anselm Hager** is at Humboldt-Universität in Berlin. **Stephan Maurer** of the University of Konstanz is a research associate in CEP's growth and labour markets programmes.

Further reading

Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson (2008) 'The Persistence and Change of Institutions in the Americas', *Southern Economic Journal* 75(2): 282-99.

Avidit Acharya, Matthew Blackwell and Maya Sen (2015) 'A Culture of Disenfranchisement: How America Slavery Continues to Affect Voting Behavior', mimeo.

Avidit Acharya, Matthew Blackwell and Maya Sen (2016) 'The Political Legacy of American Slavery', *Journal of Politics* 78(3): 621-41.

Brandon Dupont and Joshua Rosenbloom (2018) 'The Economic Origins of the Postwar Southern Elite', *Explorations in Economic History* 68: 119-31.

