

American democracy has never shed an undemocratic assumption present at its founding: that some people are inherently entitled to more power than others.

By Jamelle Bouie

1619 Project

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If you want to understand American politics in 2019 and the strain of reactionary extremism that has taken over the Republican Party, a good place to start is 2011: the year after a backlash to Barack Obama's presidency swept Tea Party insurgents into Congress, flipping control of the House.

Congressional Republicans, led by the new Tea Party conservatives, wanted to repeal the Affordable Care Act and make other sharp cuts to the social safety net. But Democrats controlled the Senate and the White House. So House Republicans decided to take a hostage. Either the White House would agree to harsh austerity measures or Republicans would force the United States to default on its debt obligations, precipitating an economic crisis just as the country, and the world, was beginning to recover from the Great Recession.

The debt-limit standoff was a case study of a fundamental change within the Republican Party after Obama took office in 2009. Republicans would either win total victory or they would wreck the system itself. The Senate Republican leader, Mitch McConnell, used a variety of procedural tactics to effectively nullify the president's ability to nominate federal judges and fill vacancies in the executive branch. In the minority, he used the filibuster to an unprecedented degree.

Where did this destructive, sectarian style of partisan politics come from? Conventional wisdom traces its roots to the "Gingrich Revolution" of the 1990s, whose architect pioneered a hardball, insurgent style of political combat, undermining norms and dismantling congressional institutions for the sake of power. This is true enough, but the Republican Party of the Obama years didn't just recycle its Gingrich-era excesses; it also pursued a policy of total opposition, not just blocking Obama but also casting him as fundamentally illegitimate and un-American.

Obama's election reignited a fight about democratic legitimacy — about who can claim the country as their own, and who has the right to act as a citizen — that is as old as American democracy itself. And the reactionary position in this conflict, which seeks to narrow the scope of participation and arrest the power of majorities beyond the limits of the Constitution, has its own peculiar history: not just in the ideological battles of the founding but also in the institution that defined the early American republic as much as any other.

The plantations that dotted the landscape of the antebellum South produced the commodities that fueled the nation's early growth. But plantations didn't just produce goods; they produced

ideas too. Enslaved laborers developed an understanding of the society in which they lived. The people who enslaved them, likewise, constructed elaborate sets of beliefs, customs and ideologies meant to justify their positions in this economic and social hierarchy.

South Carolina was a paradigmatic slave state. By 1820 most South Carolinians were enslaved Africans. Not surprisingly, enslavers dominated the state's political class. But immense power at home could not compensate for declining power in national politics. The growth of the free Northwest threatened Southern dominance in Congress. Out of this atmosphere of fear and insecurity came a number of thinkers and politicians who set their minds to protecting South Carolina and the rest of the slaveholding South from a hostile North. Arguably the most prominent and accomplished of these planter-politicians was John C. Calhoun. Calhoun was a deep believer in the system of slavery — which he called a “positive good” that “forms the most solid and durable foundation on which to rear free and stable institutions” — and a committed advocate for the slave-owning planter class.

Calhoun popularized the concept of “nullification”: the theory that any state subject to federal law was entitled to invalidate it. Against a domineering North, he argued, “representation affords not the slightest protection.” His solution lay in the states. To Calhoun, there was no “union” per se. Instead, the United States was simply a compact among sovereigns with distinct, and often competing, sectional interests. Individual states, Calhoun thought, should be able to veto federal laws if they thought the federal government was favoring one state or section over another.

The government Calhoun envisioned would protect “liberty”: not the liberty of the citizen but the liberty of the master. This liberty, Calhoun stated, was “a reward to be earned, not a blessing to be gratuitously lavished on all alike — a reward reserved for the intelligent, the patriotic, the virtuous and deserving — and not a boon to be bestowed on a people too ignorant, degraded and vicious, to be capable either of appreciating or of enjoying it.”

Calhoun died in 1850. But parts of his legacy survived. His deep suspicion of majoritarian democracy— his view that government must protect interests, defined by their unique geographic and economic characteristics, more than people — would inform the sectional politics of the South in the 20th century, where solid blocs of Southern lawmakers worked collectively to stifle any attempt to regulate the region. Anti-lynching laws and some pro-labor legislation died at the hands of lawmakers from the “Solid South” who took advantage of Senate rules like the filibuster to effectively enact Calhoun's idea of a concurrent majority against legislation that threatened the Southern racial status quo; the spirit of nullification lived on.

Calhoun's idea that states could veto the federal government would return as well following the decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, as segregationists announced “massive resistance” to federal desegregation mandates and sympathizers defended white Southern actions with ideas and arguments that cribbed from Calhoun and recapitulated enslaver ideology for modern American politics.

There is a homegrown ideology of reaction in the United States, inextricably tied to our system of slavery. And while the racial content of that ideology has attenuated over time, the basic framework remains: fear of rival political majorities; of demographic “replacement”; of a government that threatens privilege and hierarchy. The past 10 years of Republican extremism is emblematic. The Tea Party billed itself as a reaction to debt and spending, but a close look shows it was actually a reaction to an ascendant majority of black people, Latinos, Asian-Americans and liberal white people. In their survey-based study of the movement, the political scientists Christopher S. Parker and Matt A. Barreto show that Tea Party Republicans were motivated “by the fear and anxiety associated with the perception that ‘real’ Americans are losing their country.”

To stop this change and its political consequences, right-wing conservatives have embarked on a project to nullify opponents and restrict the scope of democracy. Under Scott Walker, the governor at the time, Wisconsin Republicans gave themselves a structural advantage in the State Legislature through aggressive gerrymandering. After the Democratic candidate toppled Walker in the 2018 governor’s race, the Republican majority in the Legislature rapidly moved to limit the new governor’s power and weaken other statewide offices won by Democrats.

The Republican rationale for tilting the field in their permanent favor or, failing that, nullifying the results and limiting Democrats’ power as much as possible, has a familiar ring to it. The speaker of the State Assembly, Robin Vos, made his point more explicit. “If you took Madison and Milwaukee out of the state election formula, we would have a clear majority — we would have all five constitutional officers, and we would probably have many more seats in the Legislature.” The argument is straightforward: Some voters, their voters, count. Others— the liberals, black people and other people of color who live in cities — don’t.

President Trump, of course, has repeatedly and falsely denounced Clinton’s popular-vote victory as illegitimate, the product of fraud and illegal voting. “In addition to winning the Electoral College in a landslide,” he declared on Twitter weeks after the election, “I won the popular vote if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally.” The larger implication is clear enough: A majority made up of liberals and people of color isn’t a real majority.

You could make the case that none of this has anything to do with slavery and slaveholder ideology. You could argue that it has nothing to do with race at all, that it’s simply an aggressive effort to secure conservative victories. But the tenor of an argument, the shape and nature of an opposition movement — these things matter. The goals may be color blind, but the methods of action — the attacks on the legitimacy of nonwhite political actors, the casting of rival political majorities as unrepresentative, the drive to nullify democratically elected governing coalitions — are clearly downstream of a style of extreme political combat that came to fruition in the defense of human bondage.

Questions

1. Where does Bouie believe you have to start if you want to understand recent political extremism in the U.S.?

2. Where does he believe this extremism owes its origin to?
3. What ideas of political extremism came from the plantation?
4. How did Calhoun's legacy live on according to Bouie?
5. What is the framework of ideological extremism according to Bouie?
6. How has the Republican party acted in ways to nullify its opponents?
7. Bouie says you could make the case that these modern developments have nothing to do with slavery. How would you make that case? Give a couple of examples of political extremism or hardline tactics that do not relate to race or slavery.

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# How the 'Party of Lincoln' Won Over the Once Democratic South

Democratic defectors, known as the “Dixiecrats,” started a switch to the Republican party in a movement that was later fueled by a so-called “Southern strategy.”

BECKY LITTLE

The night that Democratic [President Lyndon B. Johnson](#) signed the [Civil Rights Act](#) of 1964, his special assistant Bill Moyers was surprised to find the president looking melancholy in his bedroom. Moyers [later wrote](#) that when he asked what was wrong, Johnson replied, “I think we just delivered the South to the Republican party for a long time to come.” It may seem a crude remark to make after such a momentous occasion, but it was also an accurate prediction.

To understand some of the reasons the South went from a largely Democratic region to a primarily Republican area today, just follow the decades of debate over racial issues in the United States.



On April 11, 1968 President Lyndon Johnson signs the Civil Rights bill while seated at a table surrounded by members of Congress, Washington DC. (Credit: Warren Leffler/Underwood Archives/Getty Images)

The Republican party was originally founded in the mid-1800s to oppose immigration and the spread of slavery, says [David Goldfield](#), whose new book on American politics, *The Gifted Generation: When Government Was Good*, comes out in November.

“The Republican party was strictly a sectional party, meaning that it just did not exist in the South,” he says. “The South couldn’t care less about immigration.” But it did care about preserving slavery.

After the [Civil War](#), the Democratic party’s opposition to Republican [Reconstruction](#) legislation solidified its hold on the South.

“The Democratic party came to be more than a political party in the South—it came to be a defender of a way of life,” Goldfield says. “And that way of life was the restoration as much as possible of white supremacy ... The [Confederate statues](#) you see all around were primarily erected by Democrats.”



The Dixie Democrats seceding from the Democratic Party. The rump convention, called after the Democrats had attached President Truman’s civil rights program to the party platform, placed Governor Strom Thurmond of South Carolina and Governor Fielding L. Wright of Mississippi in nomination. (Credit: Bettmann/Getty Images)

Up until the post-World War II period, the party’s hold on the region was so entrenched that Southern politicians usually couldn’t get elected unless they were Democrats. But when [President Harry S. Truman](#), a Democratic Southerner, introduced a pro-civil rights platform at the party’s 1948 convention, a faction walked out.

These defectors, known as the “Dixiecrats,” held a separate convention in Birmingham, Alabama. There, they nominated South Carolina Governor [Strom Thurmond](#), a staunch opposer of civil rights, to run for president on their “States’ Rights” ticket. Although Thurmond lost the election to Truman, he still won [over a million popular votes](#).

It “was the first time since before the Civil War that the South was not solidly Democratic,” Goldfield says. “And that began the erosion of the southern influence in the Democratic party.”

After that, the majority of the South still continued to vote Democratic because it thought of the Republican party as the party of Abraham Lincoln and Reconstruction. The big break didn’t come until President Johnson, another Southern Democrat, signed the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the [Voting Rights Act](#) in 1965.





Governor Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, was nominated as States' Right candidate at the rump convention held in Birmingham on by southern recalcitrants. The Southerners took this drastic action after the Democratic convention added President Truman's civil rights program of its party platform. (Credit: Bettmann/Getty Images)

Though some Democrats had switched to the Republican party prior to this, “the defections became a flood” after Johnson signed these acts, Goldfield says. “And so the political parties began to reconstitute themselves.”

The change wasn't total or immediate. During the late 1960s and early '70s, white Southerners were still transitioning away from the Democratic party (newly enfranchised black Southerners voted and continue to vote Democratic). And even as Republican [Richard Nixon](#) employed a “Southern strategy” that appealed to the racism of Southern white voters, former Alabama Governor [George Wallace](#) (who'd wanted [“segregation now, segregation tomorrow, and segregation forever”](#)) ran as a Democrat in the 1972 presidential primaries.

By the time [Ronald Reagan](#) became president in 1980, the Republican party's hold on white Southerners was firm. Today, the Republican party remains the party of the South. It's an ironic outcome considering that a century ago, white Southerners would've never considered voting for the party of Lincoln.

## Questions

1. What issues was the original Republican Party founded on?
2. Why did the Republican Party originally not have much strength in the South?
3. What event precipitated southern Democrats shift to the Republican Party?

4. When did that shift become complete?

A Review of the 1619 Project Curriculum  
December 15, 2020  
Lucas Morel, Ph.D.

In addition to Hannah-Jones's essay, 17 other essays of the 1619 Project argue for a connection between American slavery and modern-day practices and institutions. One titled "Undemocratic Democracy," by New York Times columnist Jamelle Bouie, deserves special mention. Bouie's partisanship is both blatant and subtle as he paints today's Republican Party as a direct descendant of America's racist past. That is quite the feat, given that the godfather of the "positive good" theory of American slavery, John C. Calhoun, was a member of the *Democratic* Party.

Bouie attempts to trace the "reactionary extremism" of today's Republican Party back to "the defense of human bondage" articulated by Calhoun in the 1830s. Remarkably, Bouie manages to explain reactionary politics in the South, from secession over Abraham Lincoln becoming President to "solid blocs of Southern lawmakers" and "reactionary white leaders" resisting federal regulation of their region up until the 1965 Voting Rights Act, all without mentioning it was the Democratic Party in control of those southern states.

Bouie thinks that Republicans today are somehow the heirs of an institution that owes its defense and longevity in American history almost entirely to the historical Democratic Party. He argues that "a homegrown ideology of reaction in the United States, inextricably tied to our system of slavery," has outlived some but not all of its racist origins and concludes that today's Republican opposition to Democratic policies "are clearly downstream of a style of extreme political combat that came to fruition in the defense of human bondage." Bouie identifies only one contemporary political party as the heir of 19th-century racist politics—namely, the Republican Party.

By omitting the reactionary politics of the historical Democratic Party—for example, the "Massive Resistance" to school desegregation in the 1950s—the only evidence presented in the essay implicates the Republican Party.

Given that the essay claims that extreme partisanship is the problem, and one he claims can be traced back to an early defense of racial slavery, it is ironic that the author displays his own partisanship to make his case.

This explicitly partisan essay has no place in a history or social studies curriculum unless it is identified as an editorial and presented with an essay that offers an opposing argument. What student would admit to his classmates that his parents, or he himself, identifies as a Republican without fear of being branded a racist?

## Questions

1. What is one big omission from Bouie's piece on political extremism according to Morel? If southern Democrats left the Democratic Party and joined the Republican Party in the 1960s and 70s, does this omission matter? Explain your answer.
2. How does Morel think Bouie's essay should be presented to students?
3. The dominant political party in power at various times of our history has tried to expand its power at the expense of the other party. Is there anything inherently wrong with this strategy? If so, should practices like gerrymandering be made more neutral?