Studies in American Political Development

cambridge.org/sap

Redrawing the South: County Creation as a Partisan Tool during Reconstruction

Michael Greenberger

Political Science, University of Denver, Denver, CO, USA

Thank you to Jason Roberts, Alexander Sahn, John Aldrich, and other members of the American Politics Research Group at the University of North Carolina who provided helpful feedback on this project. This project was also improved by helpful comments from Jeff Jenkins, Michael Olson, and others at the Historical Political Economy Conference at the University of Southern California, and also Susanne Schwarz, Kumar Ramanathan, and the entire Junior American Political Development Working Group.

Research Article

Cite this article: Greenberger M. Redrawing the South: County Creation as a Partisan Tool during Reconstruction. *Studies in American Political Development* 39, no. 2 (October 2025): 159–182. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X25100205

Received: 19 December 2024
Revised: 9 May 2025
Accepted: 15 May 2025

Email: michael.greenberger@du.edu

Abstract

This paper documents how administrative geography functioned as a strategic political instrument during post–Civil War Reconstruction. I document sixty-seven counties established by Republican-controlled state legislatures across the South that concentrated Republican and African American voters. Historical boundary data and election returns show that Republicans created new counties in areas where they held strong support, added legislative seats that strengthened their majorities, and expanded opportunities for African American political representation at the state and local level. This partisan model of administrative unit proliferation advances our understanding of institutional design during contested democratization. The findings contribute to research on American political development, democratization, redistricting, and administrative design politics—showing that county creation functioned not merely as administrative policy but as a tool in partisan competition with lasting consequences for American political geography.

> "Grant parish, I am happy to inform you, is established as thoroughly republican. We are standing firm and united, and anticipate, in 1872, to sweep the State for the regular republican ticket, and also to assist to re-elect the 'Grant' that granted us our rights."
>
> —Letter from H.R. Kearson to President Grant, October 6, 1871.[1]

H.R. Kearson, quoted above, was a staunch Republican. Kearson wrote this letter to President Ulysses S. Grant in response to inquiries made by President Grant and Radical Republicans into the political conditions of Louisiana in the early 1870s. In the years immediately following the Civil War, Democrats led campaigns of terrorist violence and intimidation to seize political power throughout the South. The Louisiana Constitution of 1864 had denied voting rights for freedmen, instituted anti-African American laws known as "Black Codes," and exacerbated racial tensions and violence. In response to the anti-African American measures adopted throughout the South in the immediate wake of the Civil War, Radical Republicans pushed for a more active federal role in reconstructing the South. In 1867, Louisiana came under the control of General Sheridan as part of the Fifth Military District. Direct federal control quelled racial violence and oversaw the creation of a fragile biracial democracy.[2] In 1868, Louisiana adopted its "Reconstruction Constitution" and the formal enfranchisement of African American men.

Little is known about H.R. Kearson, neither his race nor partisan affiliation are listed in the official historical biography of state legislators in Louisiana (though the letter above makes it clear he was a Republican, and *all* Census records for "Kearsons" living in Grant County indicate African American individuals). In many regards, Kearson was not unique—Republicans won majorities in most state legislatures throughout the South as federal troops oversaw the first elections in which freedmen could participate. But unlike most elected officials, Kearson represented a newly established Parish which had never before sent a representative to the capitol in Baton Rouge. Kearson was not alone in representing counties which had been established by Republicans in the first years of Reconstruction. By 1872, Louisiana had established eight new parishes since the end of the Civil War less than a decade earlier. Neighboring Mississippi

[1]Letter included in the papers of the Select Committee of the U.S House of Representatives to Investigate the State of Affairs in Louisiana (H. R. Kearson, "Letter to President Ulysses S. Grant," in *Letter. Included in the Papers of the Select Committee of the U.S House of Representatives to Investigate the State of Affairs in Louisiana* (1871, October)).

[2]Mario L. Chacón, Jeffrey L. Jensen, Sidak Yntiso, et al., "Sustaining Democracy with Force: Black Representation During Reconstruction," *Journal of Historical Political Economy* 1, no. 3 (2021): 319–351. https://doi.org/10.1561/115.00000012.

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

established ten counties, and Arkansas established six (and another eight in 1874). Every other southern state established at least three.[3]

The name of Kearson's home county, Grant, reveals instantly its politics. Grant Parish was officially established on March 4, 1869, the day of President Grant's inauguration. What's more, the seat of the new Parish was located in Colfax (named after Grant's Vice President Schuyler Colfax), a town which had formerly been known as Calhoun's Landing. In line with its transition from the politics of Calhoun to Grant, Grant Parish voted for Republicans in its first set of elections. Over 60 percent of voters supported the Republican ticket in 1872. In 1874, Grant Parish again voted Republican, this time sending William Ward, also African American and a former militia captain, to the state legislature in Baton Rouge.

Reflecting the intense partisan feeling of the era, Grant Parish was not the only new county named after President Grant. In 1870, the Republican majority in the Arkansas state legislature and the Republican Governor established Grant County, Arkansas. Lincoln Counties were established in Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana in 1870, 1872, and 1874, respectively. Across the South, Republican legislatures, often working under the protection of federal troops, established new counties that in their name paid homage to the Presidents and Generals who had led the Union against the Confederacy.[4]

The scholarly literature in both the fields of American economic and political development argue that the idea of "counties as profit maximizers" explains the development of counties.[5] According to this theory, counties are created as state actors, such as governors and state legislatures, seek efficient and effective political administration; this theory fits into broader theories of multilevel governance emphasizing how administrative arrangements can optimize economic development.[6] At the same time, local interests, typically landowners and local politicians, seek to maximize property value and political power. As states spread and developed, local interests and state actors oversaw population and geographic spread across what were originally territories and eventually states, all seeking to maximize property values.

In this formulation, county establishment may be conceptualized via several models.[7] A *demographic model*, when a population grows to the point it can demand its own county seat, a *geographic model*, when a county is too large to be efficiently traversed, a population may demand a county seat closer to a major population center, and an *economic development model*, when a county experiences economic growth, it may attempt to localize those gains by constricting its boundaries. Within the political science literature, scholars have suggested a *decentralization model*, wherein local- and state-level elites with aligned interests form new administrative units as policy control devolves from the central to the peripheral level.[8]

Building on these valuable frameworks, I propose a *partisan model* of county creation that highlights how administrative units can be created specifically to advance electoral advantage. This model does not contradict existing explanations but adds an important dimension that helps explain patterns of county creation that economic development, population growth, or administrative efficiency alone cannot account for. I argue that during periods of intense political competition, such as Reconstruction, parties in power may strategically create new administrative units to strengthen their electoral position. They do this by establishing counties in areas where they have strong support, thereby creating additional safe districts that provide guaranteed representation in state legislatures and opportunities for local party elites to hold office. Unlike gerrymandering, which redistributes existing seats, county creation in states with county-based representation actually generates new legislative seats, providing a powerful tool for partisan advantage.

While this study focuses on county creation during Reconstruction, the partisan model developed here has potential applications beyond this specific historical context. The strategic creation of administrative units for partisan advantage is most likely to occur under several conditions: (1) during periods of intense political competition and uncertainty; (2) when existing institutional rules make creating new administrative units viable; (3) when administrative units are granted political representation; and (4) when the ruling party has both the power to create new units and strong incentives to entrench its position against future threats. These conditions were present during Reconstruction but may also apply to other historical and contemporary contexts where political actors can manipulate administrative boundaries. Unlike Grossman and Lewis's[9] decentralization model, which emphasizes how aligned interests between local and state-level elites lead to unit creation as policy control devolves, the partisan model focuses specifically on electoral advantage rather than administration of devolved authority. Because the specific manifestations of this strategy will vary depending on institutional context, electoral rules, and the nature of political cleavages, there is considerable overlap between the partisan theory and the theory advanced by Grossman and Lewis.

In the existing literature, established theories have been developed and tested in both the U.S. and comparative contexts using a handful of cases in which counties were created. This article extends this work by using comprehensive geographic data on all county boundaries made available by the *Atlas of Historical County Boundaries*, digitized boundaries of all counties in American history. Using this data, I systematically chronicle all new counties created in the South during the years of Reconstruction (1868–1877). Across the South, Reconstruction Governments established new units of administration that served partisan purposes. While these new counties sometimes aligned with the patterns predicted by

[3]For context, in that same time frame, among all state in the Midwest and West, a total of ten counties were established. The Northeast established none.

[4]Not all new counties were named so obviously after Republicans. Lee counties were established in Mississippi (1868) and Arkansas (1873). Despite being named after Robert E. Lee, a traitor to the United States, both of these counties were also formed by Republicans during Reconstruction.

[5]Jon C. Sonstelie and Paul R. Portney, "Profit Maximizing Communities and the Theory of Local Public Expenditure," *Journal of Urban Economics* 5, no. 2 (1978): 263–277. https://doi.org/10.1016/0094-1190(78)90028-1; Jan K. Brueckner and Burkhard von Rabenau, "Dynamics of Land-Use for a Closed City," *Regional Science and Urban Economics* 11, no. 1(1981): 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1016/0166-0462(81)90020-X; William A. Fischel, "Politics in a Dynamic View of Land-Use Regulations: Of Interest Groups and Homevoters," *The Journal of Real Estate Finance and Economics* 31, no. 4(2005): 397–403. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11146-005-3289-x.

[6]Barry R. Weingast, "The Economic Role of Political Institutions: Market-Preserving Federalism and Economic Development," *The Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization* 11, no. 1(1995): 1–31.

[7]William A. Fischel, "Counting on Counties: How the Creation of Three Thousand Counties Shaped Local Government Across America," Available at SSRN 3798788 (2021). https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3798788.

[8]Guy Grossman and Janet I. Lewis, "Administrative Unit Proliferation," *American Political Science Review* 108, no. 1(2014): 196–217. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055413000567.

[9]Grossman and Lewis, "Administrative Unit Proliferation."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X25100205 Published online by Cambridge University Press

demographic, geographic, economic development, or decentralization models, these factors alone cannot explain the timing, location, and clustering of county creation during this period.

In this article, I focus specifically on Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi, which had particularly permissive pathways to establish new counties and where Republicans created numerous counties during their brief control of state governments.[10] I demonstrate that these counties were strategically designed to concentrate Republican and African American voters, creating new legislative seats that helped sustain Republican majorities in state legislatures and opportunities for African American officeholders at both local and state levels. While existing literature acknowledges that local politicians may seek to maximize their power through administrative boundaries, this paper makes a distinct contribution by documenting and analyzing how partisan goals specifically shaped county creation during the unique historical circumstances of Reconstruction.

The partisan model developed here provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding politically motivated administrative unit creation by identifying the conditions under which parties are likely to use geographic reorganization as a political strategy and the factors that determine the success of such efforts. This work aligns with research by Alesina, Michalopoulos, and Papaioannou,[11] showing how geographic boundaries can institutionalize political and ethnic inequality. These findings encourage the study of political geography as a tool to understand partisan competition beyond the familiar venues of redistricting, and as an important frame for understanding broad changes in American political institutions.

The creation of Reconstruction counties

In the years immediately after the war, white Southern Democrats sought to reestablish political control through campaigns of violence and intimidation against African Americans and their Republican allies. Massacres and riots targeted African Americans in Memphis and New Orleans in 1866, as well as numerous Southern communities in 1868. As Litwack[12] documents, this violence was often marked by extreme brutality directed against newly freed African Americans. Amid this violence, the trajectory of Reconstruction shifted from President Johnson's lenient approach to the more interventionist "Congressional Reconstruction." After southern states rejected the Fourteenth Amendment and violence continued unabated, Republicans in Congress—bolstered by their electoral victories in 1866—passed the Military Reconstruction Acts over President Johnson's veto in 1867.[13] This legislation divided the South into military districts and established requirements for states' readmission to the Union, including ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment and guarantees of African American male suffrage.[14]

The resulting "Reconstruction Constitutions" and accompanying elections, protected by federal troops, created conditions for Republican-led governments with significant African American participation to take control of state governments across the South.[15] By President Grant's election in 1868, these fragile Republican regimes were attempting to solidify their power while facing continued opposition from white Democrats. Republican majorities in southern state legislatures, dependent on African American voters, sought institutional arrangements that would strengthen their tenuous hold on power.[16]

This political context—where Republicans needed to entrench their position against the threat of violent Democratic "redemption"—provided the backdrop for the geographic redistricting efforts that are the focus of this study. As Republicans saw their political fortunes increasingly threatened, they turned to institutional mechanisms, including county creation, as tools for preserving their power.

While Republicans initially considered various approaches to local governance, including instituting township governments modeled after Northern states, they ultimately found counties to be more advantageous for their partisan aims. Townships were briefly implemented in Alabama, North Carolina, and Virginia,[17] and their effectiveness was limited by their financial dependence on county governments.[18] More importantly, counties offered a critical advantage: guaranteed political representation at the state level, which provided Southern Republicans with opportunities to strengthen their legislative majorities—a feature too politically valuable to ignore. As Valelly[19] documents, experiments in governance were part of the ultimately unsuccessful Republican efforts to institutionalize Black political participation in the wake of the Civil War.

The majorities held by Republicans in 1868 were tenuous, depending on African American voters being able to freely cast ballots. As the white supremacist Redeemer movement grew increasingly violent and determined to prevent African American voting and officeholding, building a stronger Republican Party with more durable majorities in the state legislature became imperative for the party's future. At the same time, African American southerners became increasingly dispirited by the unwillingness of state governments in the South to protect them from political terrorist violence, which increased with the Redeemer movements political activity.[20] African American citizens turned instead towards local government local officials to meet these needs.

Creating new counties met the needs of Republican elites in the state legislatures and the needs of African American citizens for more responsive local government. At the level of the

[10]While South Carolina also experienced a surge in county creation during Reconstruction, the State went about a total reorganization of its local governance units from districts to counties. Tennessee and Virginia, which might provide "hard" test cases, had no new counties created during this period.

[11]Alberto Alesina, Stelios Michalopoulos, and Elias Papaioannou, "Ethnic Inequality," *Journal of Political Economy* 124, no. 2(2016): 428–488. https://doi.org/10.1086/685300.

[12]Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm so Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979).

[13]Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution 1863–1877* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988); Richard M. Vallely, *The Two Reconstructions: the Struggle for Black Enfranchisement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Xi Wang, *The Trial of Democracy: Black Suffrage and Northern Republicans, 1860–1910* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

[14]Jeffery Jenkins and Justin Peck, *Congress and the First Civil Rights Era, 1861–1918* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

[15]J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-party South, 1880–1910* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

[16]Boris Heersink and Jeffery A Jenkins, *Republican Party Politics and the American South, 1865–1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[17]John Archibald Fairlie, *Local Government in Counties, Towns and Villages* (New York: Century Company, 1906).

[18]Edgar Wallace Knight, *The Influence of Reconstruction on Education in the South*. Number 60 (Teachers College, Columbia University, 1913).

[19]Richard M. Vallely, *The Two Reconstructions: the Struggle for Black Enfranchisement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[20]Nicholas Lemann, *Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War* (New York: Macmillan, 2007).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X25100205 Published online by Cambridge University Press

state legislature, creating new counties provided an opportunity for Republicans to create additional constituencies in which Republicans could safely win. At the local level, creating new majority-African American counties could create conditions under which African Americans could elect African American officeholders, who would in theory be more responsive to community needs.[21] Creating counties was a potential source of political advantage at the state and local level so long as the process by which counties could be created was not prohibitively costly.

Lawmakers' ability to use counties as a political tool depends on the rules made by states regarding county creation and political representation. States have the legal authority to create new counties, change county borders, and eliminate counties. Because counties are fundamentally creatures of the states, any limit on a state's capacity to alter counties is self-imposed, as is the decision to grant counties political representation. The rules dictating the process by which counties are established, altered, and granted political representation are, for the most part, written into states' political constitutions.

Table 1 lists southern states' constitutions by date of ratification along with information about how the constitutions dealt with county creation and county political representation. The constitutions included in this table cover the Civil War and post–Civil War periods, but Table 13 in the Appendix lists information for all southern state constitutions. As southern states sought to rejoin the Union after the Civil War and in the years of political tumult that followed, constitutional conventions (and consequently, new constitutions) became a primary means by which newly ascendant political regimes reframed state politics to their own advantage through franchise restrictions, redistricting, and other means.[22] The first pattern apparent in Table 1 is the sheer quantity of constitutions adopted by southern states during this period. Most southern states adopted separate constitutions during Presidential Reconstruction immediately following the war, during Congressional Reconstruction as Republicans seized the reins of states' governments, and again after Democratic Redeemers had retaken control of state politics.

The third column of Table 1 indicates whether state constitutions guaranteed counties representation in state legislatures. In near every single constitution governing southern states, county representation was guaranteed. Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina always guaranteed at least one representative to every county, regardless of how small a county's population may be. The three notable exceptions are the North Carolina Constitution of 1776, and all constitutions passed by Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. Their exceptionalism is instructive. In North Carolina's first constitution (the constitution passed in 1868 did guarantee county representation) and in Virginia's constitutions, representation was allocated regionally, reifying into law divisions between agricultural interests of the coastal plains and the upland country yeoman farmers. That Texas decided not to grant new counties representation is unsurprising, like most western states, Texas was still actively incorporating new territory into counties as white settlers moved farther West.

A guarantee of representation for every county in a state legislature inevitably guarantees overrepresentation to smaller population counties, which in the late-nineteenth- and early–twentieth-century South tended to be more rural and more conservative. However, creating new counties as a political tool to manufacture favorable partisan constituencies also depends on the rules limiting new county creation. The last column of Table 1 lists any restrictions on new counties imposed by constitutions on state legislatures. Because counties are creatures of the state, absent any additional regulations imposed by constitutions, legislatures are able to create and adjust county boundaries via their normal legislative processes. Only Alabama and Georgia had constitutions that imposed a super-majoritarian voting requirement to establish new counties. Other constitutions imposed minimum size requirements, dictating the minimum size that newly established counties must reach and prohibiting any geographic adjustments that reduce the size of existing counties below a threshold when establishing new counties. Many constitutions imposed no restrictions on county creation at all.

Southern states made establishing new counties easy relative to states in other regions—by connecting representation to counties, southern states also made county creation into an attractive political tool. Contrasting the constitutional regulations on county establishment and representation in the South with constitutions passed in the North illustrates why county creation did not become a tactic of political geographic manipulation outside of the South. Table 2 lists the constitutions most contemporaneous with Reconstruction for all states in New England and those that bordered the South, along with whether or not they guaranteed county representation and their requirements for establishing new counties.

Table 2 demonstrates that outside of the South, automatic representation granted to counties was exceedingly rare. Of the seventeen state constitutions representing the Northeast and States bordering the South, only five guaranteed representation to every county. However, even among states outside the South that did guarantee a representative to every county, these representational arrangements carried far less significant consequences. For example, while Massachusetts *did* allocate at least one representative to each county, the State House of Representatives had 240 members distributed proportionally by population to just fourteen counties. Maine distributed 151 members across sixteen counties. Compared to the Mississippi Constitution of 1868, which guaranteed at least one representative to all sixty-two counties in Mississippi out of a total of 108 representatives, the guarantee of a representative to each county had a far larger effect on the degree to which smaller counties were overrepresented. Indeed, every county in all of the northern states met the threshold for representation calculated by dividing the enumerated population of the state by the number of representatives—the same was far from true in the South.

The new counties that were created by southern states were outliers in the general trends of county creation in the United States. Figure 1 plots the number of new counties established in each region—Midwest, Northeast, South, and West—by decade. The plot shows the number of new counties established per every 10,0000 square miles of land in a region. This measure, new counties per 10,000 square miles, controls for unequal sizes of each region (e.g., the West is more than triple the size of the Northeast). The figure reveals that the South was, by far, the leader in new county establishments. In every single decade from the end of the Civil War in 1865–1930, the South established more counties than any other region.

[21] Megan A. Stewart and Karin E. Kitchens, "Explaining Variation in Political Leadership by Marginalized Groups: Black Office-Holding and Contraband Camps," *The Journal of Politics* 86, no. 4(2024): 000–000. https://doi.org/10.1086/729974; Trevon D. Logan, "Do Black Politicians Matter? Evidence from Reconstruction," *The Journal of Economic History* 80, no. 1(2020): 1–37. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022050719000755.

[22] Paul E. Herron, *Framing the Solid South: The State Constitutional Conventions of Secession, Reconstruction, and Redemption, 1860–1902* (JSTOR, 2017).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X25100205 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 1. Southern State Constitutions and Geographic Apportionment in State Legislators

State	Year	County Guaranteed Representative	Enumeration Criteria	Residual Representative Seats	Restriction on County Creation?
Alabama	1865	Yes	White population	Proportional to white population	None
Alabama	1867	Yes	Total population	Proportional to white population	Two-thirds majority vote, new counties > 600 square miles
Alabama	1875	Yes	Total population	Proportional to white population	Two-thirds majority vote, new counties > 600 square miles
Arkansas	1864	Yes	White men	Proportional to white men	New counties > 600 square miles, must pass representation threshold
Arkansas	1868	Yes	Unspecified	Unspecified	None
Arkansas	1874	Yes	Adult male population	Unspecified	New counties > 600 square miles, must pass representation threshold and majority of impacted counties must consent
Florida	1865	Yes	Whites + three-fifths of African Americans	Proportional to enumeration	None
Florida	1868	Yes	Registered voters	One extra rep (up to 4) per 1,000 registered voters	None
Florida	1887	Yes	Registered voters	Proportional, up to three total reps	None
Georgia	1865	Yes	"Representative population"	37 Largest counties get 2 representatives, all else get 1	Two-thirds majority vote
Georgia	1868	Yes	Unspecified	Proportional, max 3 representatives	Two-thirds majority vote and vote of county inhabitants
Louisiana	1864	Yes	Qualified electors	Unspecified	>625 square miles
Louisiana	1868	Yes	Qualified electors	Unspecified	>625 square miles
Louisiana	1879	Yes	Total population	One additional representative for 1.5× representation ratio	> 625 square miles, >7,000 inhabitants
Mississippi	1861	Yes	White population	Unspecified	>576 square miles
Mississippi	1868	Yes	Qualified electors	Proportional to qualified electors	>400 square miles
Mississippi	1890	Yes	Directly apportioned	Unspecified	None
North Carolina	1776	No	Three-fifths compromise	Unspecified	None
North Carolina	1868	Yes	Total population	Proportional to total population	None
South Carolina	1861	Yes	White population and taxation	Directly apportioned	None
South Carolina	1868	Yes	Total population	Unspecified	625 square miles
South Carolina	1896	Yes	Total population	Total population	One-third of local population must petition, at least 1/124th of the state
Tennessee	1834	No	Qualified voters	Unspecified	None
Tennessee	1875	No	Qualified voters	Qualified voters	>275 square miles, at least 400 qualified voters
Texas	1866	No	White population	White population	None
Texas	1869	No	Total population	Unspecified	>900 square miles
Virginia	1850	No	White population	Unspecified	None
Virginia	1870	No	Unspecified	Unspecified	None

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X25100205 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 2. State Constitutions and Geographic Apportionment in Northern States

State	Year	County Guaranteed Representative	Enumeration Criteria	Restriction on County Creation?
Connecticut	1818	No	Total population	None
Delaware	1897	No	Total population	None
Illinois	1870	No	Total population	>400 square miles
Indiana	1851	No	Male inhabitants	>400 square miles
Kentucky	1891	No	Total population	>400 square miles, >12,000 inhabitants
Maine	1819	Yes	Total population	None
Maryland	1867	Yes	Total population	None
Massachusetts	1780	Yes	White men	None
Michigan	1850	No	White men	>16 townships in size unless approved by majority vote in affected counties
Missouri	1875	Yes	White men	>410 square miles new and affected
New Hampshire	1792	No	Men	None
New Jersey	1844	Yes	Total population	None
New York	1894	No	Total population	Must exceed minimum population for representation
Ohio	1851	No	White men	>400 square miles
Pennsylvania	1874	Yes	Total population	>400 square miles and greater than 20,000 inhabitants
Rhode Island	1843	No	White men	None
Vermont	1777	No	White men	None

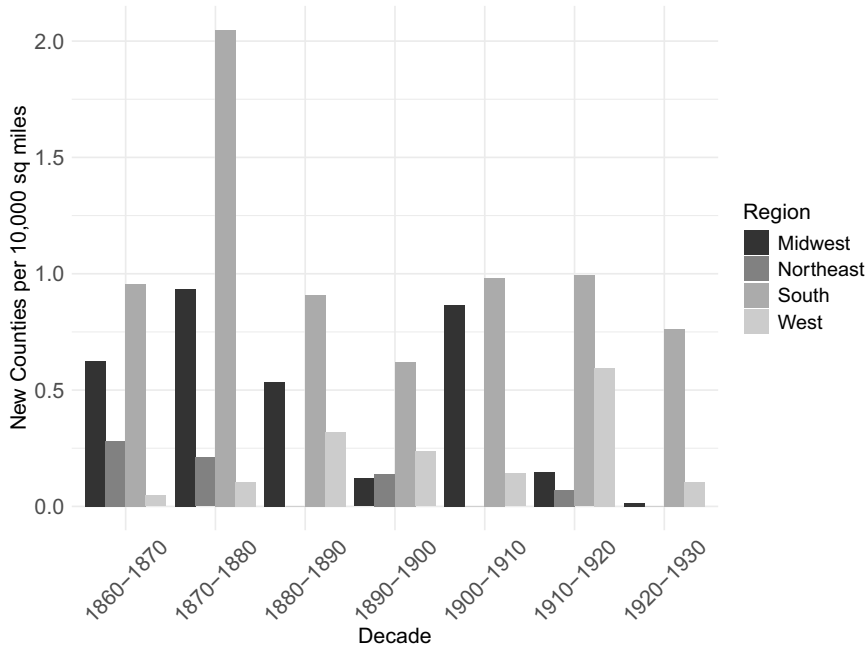


Figure 1. New Counties Established by Region by Decade.

That the South, a region with a population and economy that grew far more slowly than those of the Midwest, Northeast, and West, established more new counties than the other regions, is peculiar. While establishing counties in the South was a relatively easier process than establishing them in other regions, establishing new units of administration is costly: new courthouses, new elected officials, and new county offices to serve constituents. Yet the region with the slowest growth established more counties that the rapidly developing West and Midwest. From 1870 to 1880 alone, the South established about two counties for every 10,000 square miles. For reference, South Carolina is just over 30,000 square miles. For every amount of area equal to South Carolina, the South established new new counties in a single decade.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X25100205 Published online by Cambridge University Press

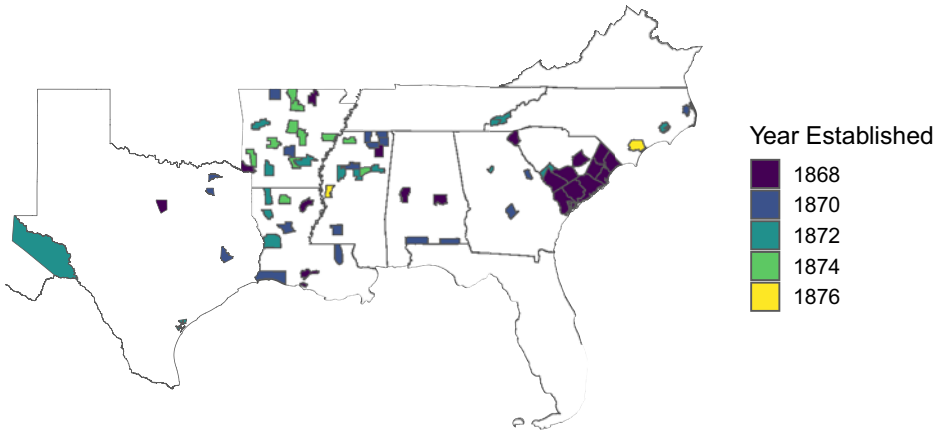


Figure 2. New Counties Established under Reconstruction Governments.

By measures of preexisting population and geographic settlement, the South was in the late nineteenth century most similar to the Northeast. That is, unlike the newly opened Midwest and West, the South was for the most part, fully settled. Outside of some areas of swampland in the Lower South and frontier areas of Arkansas, most of the land in the South was developed to the same degree it was in the Northeast. In accordance with expectations set out by economic theories of county development, the Northeastern states established almost no new counties after the Civil War.

What's more, the counties the South did establish were not exclusively in the areas that saw the greatest economic development or population growth. New counties established between 1868 and 1920 are mapped in Figure 2. A few areas that saw major economic development and population settlement, like West Texas, did see new counties established. Additionally, South Florida, which became accessible to European-American settlement with the advent of swamp drainage and cooling, also saw new counties established. But the large number of counties established in Arkansas, Louisiana, Georgia, South Carolina, as well as the established counties in North Carolina and Alabama, cannot be explained by extant theories of economic and political development. Where population growth and economic development fail to completely explain the irregular pattern of new county establishments, I turn to partisan motivations.

I propose a partisan model of administrative unit proliferation in which political actors create new administrative units to advance electoral advantage. This model has several key components: First, the creation of new units is strategically targeted to areas where the party in power has strong support or where the demographic composition favors their electoral prospects. This targeting allows the ruling party to create "safe" districts that will reliably return representatives to the state legislature, thereby strengthening their legislative majority. As I will show, during Reconstruction, Republicans created counties in areas with high concentrations of African American voters who strongly supported the party.

Second, this strategy involves a careful balancing act. Creating a new Republican-majority county by drawing boundaries that concentrate Republican voters could potentially make surrounding counties more Democratic. To be effective, county creation must either: (a) extract Republican voters from counties that would remain Republican-majority even after the boundary changes, (b) create multiple Republican counties from a single county with a very large Republican majority, or (c) create Republican-majority counties in previously unorganized territories. Beyond securing state legislative seats, county creation serves organizational purposes by creating opportunities for local party elites to hold office. New county positions such as sheriff, judge, and other local officials provided career paths for loyal party members, helped build and maintain local party infrastructure, and carried significant policy control powers.[23] During Reconstruction, these positions were particularly important for African American political participation, as they provided opportunities for representation that might otherwise have been unavailable.

The effectiveness of this strategy depends on several factors: the party's ability to maintain political control at the state level (to prevent subsequent boundary changes), the strength of their support in targeted areas, and the electoral rules governing representation. If the ruling party loses state-level control, newly created counties may become less valuable as sources of partisan advantage, though they may still provide opportunities for local organization and representation. The strategic considerations behind county creation during Reconstruction can be understood as a form of constrained gerrymandering with unique characteristics. Unlike traditional redistricting, which redraws boundaries within a fixed number of districts, county creation generated new legislative seats. This distinction meant that Republicans could potentially increase their total representation without reducing it elsewhere—a significant difference and potential advantage over conventional gerrymandering.

Republican legislatures established sixty-seven new counties during Reconstruction. For reference, California, which also uses counties as the primary unit of local government administration, only has fifty-eight counties in total. Table 3 lists the number of new counties established by Republican majorities in southern state legislatures, along with the number of new counties that were majority-African American and majority-Republican. In Arkansas, Republicans oversaw the establishment of fifteen new counties in the 5 years during which they held legislative majorities. Of these fifteen new counties, three were majority-African American (in a state that was 25 percent African American in 1870) and all fifteen cast a majority of votes for Republicans in the

[23]Emily M. Farris and Mirya R. Holman, "The Power of the Badge: Sheriffs and Inequality in the United States," in *The Power of the Badge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X25100205 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 3. New Counties Established Under Reconstruction Regimes

State	Rep. Control (years)	New Counties	Af.-Am. Majority Counties	Rep. Majority Counties
Alabama	5	4	2	4
Arkansas	5	15	3	15
Florida	7	0	0	0
Georgia	3	3	0	3
Louisiana	7	9	7	9
Mississippi	8	13	7	13
North Carolina	7	5	1	5
South Carolina	9	12	10	12
Tennessee	0	0	0	0
Texas	4	6	0	3
Virginia	0	0	0	0

Table 4. Demographic and Political Characteristics of New Counties Established under Reconstruction Regimes

County Status	Prop. Af.-Am.	Total Pop.	Pop. Density	Prop. Urban	Turnout	Dem. Share
Static counties	0.35	11,286.85	1.27	0.03	66.36	0.54
Changing counties	0.38	12,681.00	1.34	0.04	63.82	0.53
New county	0.46	16,799.52	0.93	0.03	79.72	0.47

first election in which they participated. Mississippi Republicans oversaw the establishment of thirteen counties, over half of which were majority-African American, and all of which voted Republican. The same story emerges in Louisiana and South Carolina, which established twelve and nine counties each, the majority of which were majority-African American, and all of which voted Republican.

Alabama, Georgia, and North Carolina followed this same pattern of county establishment. The three southern states that did not establish new counties, Virginia, Tennessee, and Florida, all serve to further demonstrate the connection between partisanship, race, and new county creation. In Virginia and Tennessee, Republicans (or any biracial coalition for that matter) never held legislative majorities. Thus, despite being southern leaders in economic development during this period, the border states never saw the same type of geographic change. Another consideration, though untestable, is that Tennessee and Virginia did not create counties because they are the two states in which counties were not guaranteed their own representation in the legislature. In Florida, geographic constraints related to the development of swampland stunted county proliferation, though with the draining of the swamp-lands, fifteen new counties would form in the next several decades, albeit for reasons that were not explicitly motivated by partisan concerns.

Table 3 demonstrates that during Reconstruction new county creation was frequent and consistently tied to Republican partisan advantage. However, it could be the case that the new counties simply reflected the overall demographic and political realities of the state. If, for instance, Republicans completely dominated elections throughout Mississippi, winning majorities in every single county, it would be unremarkable that in all counties created the majority of votes were cast for Republicans. By the same logic, if it were the case that if a set of new counties were created with random geography and still produced majority-African American populations, than it would be impossible to conclude that the counties were drawn with racial considerations in mind.

The central question at hand is whether or not the new counties established by Republicans were specifically drawn for political reasons. Certainly, the number of new counties established is unusual from a perspective of economic development: the regions experiencing new county proliferation were not growing in population, economic productivity, and did not possess scarce or valuable natural resources. Table 4 presents a birds-eye view of the evidence that these new counties were indeed established for partisan political reasons, and that their development cannot be explained by the existing, demographic, geographic, economic, and policy devolution models alone.

Table 4 lists the important demographic and political characteristics of counties, organized by the status of those counties as *static counties, changing counties*, or *new counties. New counties* are those that have emerged prior to an election cycle. *Changing counties* are those counties that will have their borders affected by the emergence of a new county when they give up land formerly within their borders such that a new county can be established. *Static counties* are those that are neither newly established nor affected by upcoming changes. This categorization allows for comparison between new counties, counties being changed to accommodate new counties (i.e., counties from which land is being taken to create a new county), and the counties unchanged in the rest of the state.

New counties differ from static counties in several important regards. First, counties established during Reconstruction had significantly higher concentrations of African American residents than static counties. Static counties had a proportion of 0.35 residents that were African American, compared to the 0.46 is new counties. While new counties were not, on average, majority-African American, they did have on average 10 percentage points

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X25100205 Published online by Cambridge University Press

greater concentrations of African American residents. New counties also had higher concentrations of African American residents than static counties, indicating that of the counties which had land taken from them to accommodate new counties, the new counties contained land that accounted for a disproportionately high percentage of the African American residents in the changing counties (this is discussed at greater length later).

New counties also had, on average, greater total populations, but lower population densities. This comports with the findings in the developmental economics literature that suggests that new counties form when enough local citizens demand more localized services. Greater populations and lower population density indicate that new counties formed in locations where citizens did, on average, have to travel farther to reach the county seat, county courthouse, or other service provided at the seat of county government. However, there were no significant differences in the level or urbanization between static, changing, and new counties.

Turnout and the electoral success of Republican candidates also varied significantly across the range of county statuses. In static counties, turnout averaged around 66 percent during Reconstruction. The average turnout in counties slated for political change was slightly lower, averaging around just 64 percent. But in counties created during Reconstruction, turnout averaged at nearly 80 percent, well over 10 percentage points higher than turnout in static and changing counties. While this says little about the political *intent* of county creation during this period, heightened levels of turnout between changing counties and new counties is evidence that being placed into a new county either increased turnout or the voting eligible populations that were transferred out of changing counties into new counties were disproportionately likely to be voters relative to the rest of the population in the changing counties.

Democratic vote-share across static, changing, and new counties—a measure of how well Democratic candidates performed during Reconstruction—illustrates the political consequences of new county creation during Reconstruction. Democrats performed well by winning a majority of the vote-share, on average, across static and changing counties throughout the South during Reconstruction. In new counties, Democrats won only about 47 percent of the vote. While this difference is only about 6–7 percentage points lower than the share of the vote won by Democrats in static and changing counties, it is substantively large enough to move Democrats from winning to losing the average election (the mean of vote-share won by Democrats is statistically distinguishable from that won in static or changing counties as tested via a one-tailed test with $p < 0.01$.)

This descriptive overview of static, changing, and new counties is helpful for understanding the basic contours of geographic change made during Reconstruction. New counties had lower population density (that is, not formed around growing urban areas), had greater proportions of African American residents, and they experienced higher turnout and voted for Republicans. All of these descriptive findings support the theoretical expectations drawn from the literature on the proliferation of administrative units: new units formed in ways that matched the needs of local and state-level elites. However, the evidence that these new counties can be explained by existing models of development (demographic, geographic, economic, and policy devolution models) is insufficient.

Looking across the entire South during Reconstruction, too many new counties formed to cover each of them in complete detail. Figure 2 illustrates the new counties formed, colored by year (darker counties were formed in earlier years than later counties). The majority of new counties formed in this period were established in Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina.[24]

In this article, I focus in greater detail on the new counties created in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi—states that experienced Republican control and had low barriers to county creation. These new counties are shown in Figure 3, shaded from darkest to light by year of establishment. The majority of new counties established during this period were created between 1870 and 1874, with just a handful created in 1868 and one in 1876. The trend mirrors closely the fortunes of Republicans, who rose to hold state legislative majorities after Congressional Reconstruction sent federal troops to oversee elections in 1867–1868, and slowly lost power as federal troops withdrew from the South.

Geographically, new counties emerged across Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi without any obvious geographic clustering. Outside of the high concentration of counties created in the Black-Belt region of Mississippi, which is expected based on a partisan model of country creation and the alignment of Black voters with the Republican Party, the geographic distribution of new counties appears to be random. Despite the appearance of random geographic distribution, the descriptive results presented showed that new counties had higher shares of Black populations and that they were less likely to vote for Democrats, but more likely to turn out to vote overall. In the next section, I analyze the new counties created in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi and demonstrate that this was not coincidence.

The intentional design of Republican majorities

The new counties created during Reconstruction advantaged Republicans by creating additional seats in the state legislatures with African American and Republican majority constituencies. These counties would also have created more opportunities for African American voters to elect local African American officeholders. However, two key remaining questions are whether this was the *intent* behind the creation of new counties, and whether or not this strategy was as effective means of achieving these goals. To begin answering the first question, whether or not southern state legislatures intended to make new Republican-majority counties, I look at what areas were targeted for geographic change.

Creating new counties necessarily involves reshaping the borders of existing counties in states that have already incorporated all territory within their borders. Looking at which counties were affected by geographic changes to accommodate new counties provides a window into the intent of the state legislatures that reshaped the geography of the South during this period. State legislators would have had access to data on the racial makeup and political behavior of existing counties, the same data I use here to analyze which counties were modified to create space for new counties. If new counties were intentionally designed to maximize Republican advantage and create majority-African American

[24]In South Carolina, the new counties were created in part as a larger reorganization of what had formerly been known as "districts" into counties. This process was organized largely by African American Republicans, focused on the lowland majority-African American counties, and covered the entire lowland region (1935). While the South Carolina reorganization is excluded because of its lacking in geographic variation, it followed many of the patterns seen elsewhere in the South—the reorganization took place in the most Republican areas in which a majority of South Carolina's African Americans lived, and resulted in an expansion of the Republican majority in the state legislature. Du Bois (*Black Reconstruction in America 1860–1880* (Atheneum, 1935, pp. 399–401)) also argues that the transition to counties improved the efficiency of local government administration.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X25100205 Published online by Cambridge University Press

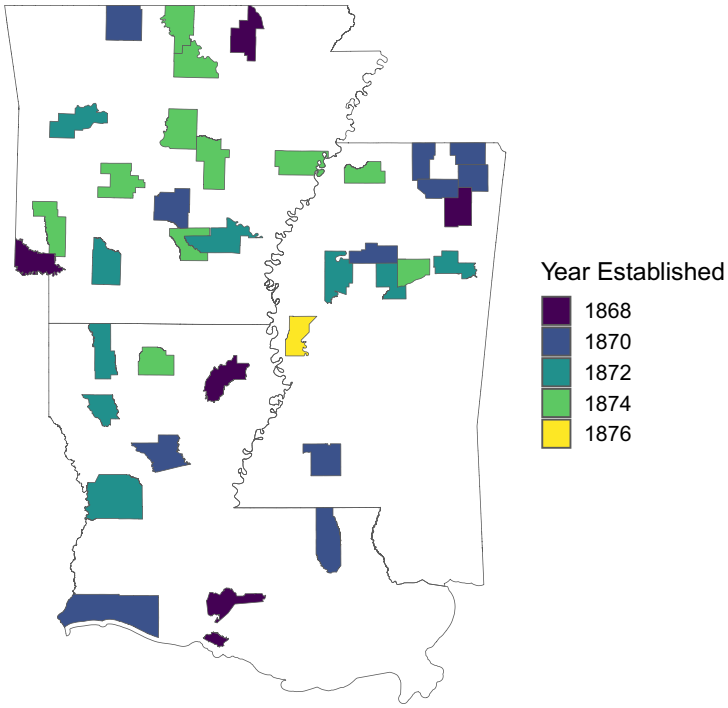


Figure 3. New Counties Established under Reconstruction Governments in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi.

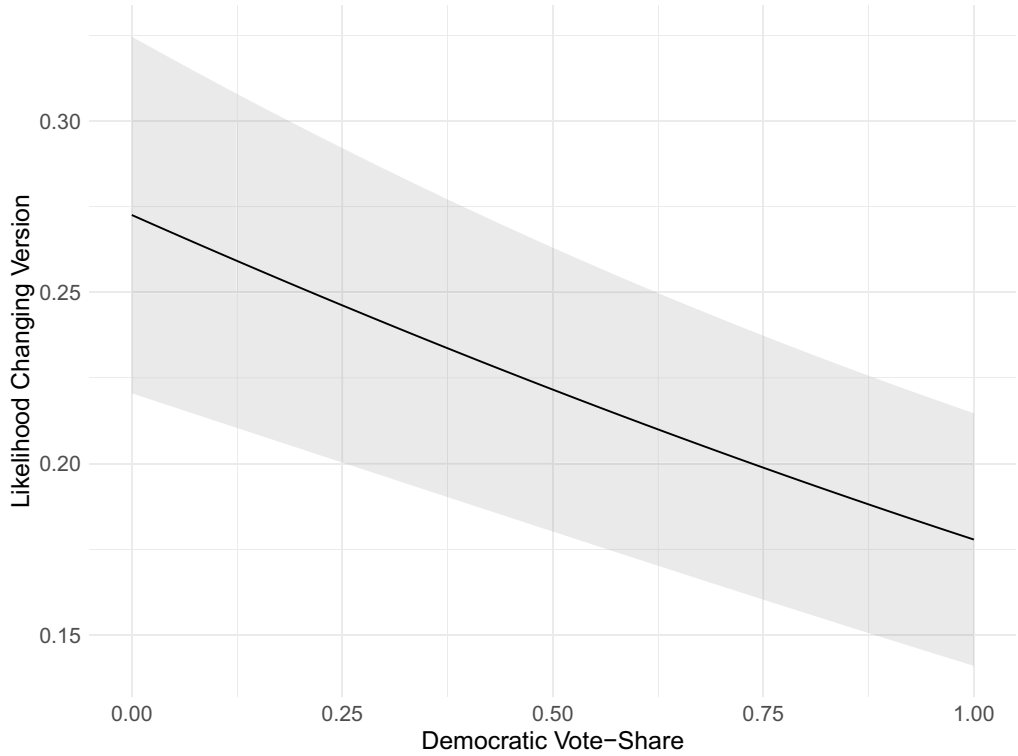


Figure 4. Democratic Two-Party Vote-Share and Likelihood of Nearby County Formation during Reconstruction.

constituencies (and thereby elect African American officeholders), the counties affected by change should not appear to have been randomly selected with regard to racial and political makeup.

To create new counties that extend Republican majorities, state legislators would need to break up existing Republican strongholds into additional administrative units. By the same logic, if county creation was a process motivated by partisanship, Republican majorities would have avoided creating new counties that would support a Democratic candidate. If Republican state legislators attempted to use county creation to maximize partisan advantage, then the data should reflect that counties with higher Republican vote-shares were more likely to be affected by geographic change

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X25100205 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to accommodate new counties than counties in which Democrats were more successful.

In order to test this theoretical expectation, I consider the likelihood of a county having its borders changed during each year of Reconstruction. I model this process by regressing whether or not a county experienced change in the *next* year on the Democratic vote-share in the previous election. The outcome, whether a county will have its borders affected to accommodate a new county, and the explanatory variable, Democratic vote-share, measure whether state legislators used a particular geographic area for a new county and the expected partisan utility from the new county creation, respectively. I use logistic regression models with fixed-effects for year and state, allowing for an analysis of what areas were most likely to be targeted for new county creation in a given state and year. Additionally, the models include controls for the existing county's total population, population density, percent living in an urban area, and turnout.

Figure 4 plots the predicted probability that a county will be slated for geographic change to accommodate a new county given the Democratic vote-share in that county's previous election. The full model results used to generate these predicted probabilities are presented in Table 9 in the Appendix. During Reconstruction in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi, the average county had a Democratic vote-share of 65.7 percent and a roughly 21 percent probability of changing its borders to accommodate a new county being established. An increase of 1 standard deviation in Democratic vote-share corresponds to an decrease of about 7 percentage points in the likelihood of a county being slated for change, down to a likelihood of 0.14. A 1 standard deviation decrease in the Democratic vote-share in a county (down to 42 percent of the vote) is associated with a 7 percentage point increase in the likelihood of being slated for change, up to a likelihood of 0.28.

Counties in which Republicans were more successful were more likely to be targeted for geographic change. Importantly, these results include controls for other factors like population density and urban population that are often associated with county development in the developmental economics literature. These results demonstrate that the process for creating new counties, which resulted in exclusively majority Republican counties, targeted Republican strongholds for geographic change. The selection of counties to be affected by the creation of a new county was not a random process. State legislators focused their limited time on creating counties that had the potential to create new Republican-majority constituencies.

The next question is whether the geographic changes accomplished their intended goals. The findings from the model presented above demonstrate that, given the counties from which land and voters were taken, the new counties had the potential to benefit Republicans. But beyond choosing the most advantageous counties to manipulate to make room for new counties, the geographic changes would also need to specifically capture the places within those counties that contained enough Republican voters to create new Republican-majority counties.

To test whether or not the counties created succeeded in their goals, I compare the political leanings and demographics of the counties that were created to the political and demographic makeup of the counties we would expect to see if the land and citizens from affected counties were taken randomly with respect to racial and political makeup. That is, if a new county was constructed using a third of the land from preexisting County A and half of the land from preexisting County B, we would expect to see a county that resembles a composite of a random third of County A and a random half of County B. If the political and racial makeup of the expected counties is less beneficial than the counties that were actually created, I interpret this as evidence that the counties intended to and successfully created administrative units advantageous to the ruling coalition.

Figure 5 plots the percent of the vote-share won by Republicans in new counties, broken down into the actual observed values (in the lighter shade) and the Republican vote-share that would be expected based on the counties from which land was drawn to create the new county. The distribution of expected Republican vote-shares in newly created counties has a mean of about 28 percent, with the majority of observation concentrated well below 50 percent, and an additional cluster of observations hovering at around 80 percent.

The actual observed levels of Republican vote-shares in new counties are significantly different than those in the expected distribution. Rather than a clear single peak at around 24 percent, the observed Republican vote-shares are distributed bimodally, with a peak mirroring that of the expected vote-shares, but with an additional large peak centered at about 64 percent. This difference is substantively very important: the expected distribution reflects a sample in which Republicans lose elections in a majority of new counties, but the observed distribution reflects what actually happened; Republicans won a majority of the vote-share in newly created counties.

Beyond Republican majorities, the theoretical expectation outlined at the beginning of this article also anticipated that politically motivated county creation would align the interests of state-level elites (i.e., Republicans in the state legislature) with local populations. Given the overwhelming support for Republicans among African Americans during this period, this would necessitate creating counties that included high concentrations of African American residents. Majority-African American counties would both be able to elect African American candidates to local office and the state legislature, and constitute Republican majorities that sent Republican representatives to the state legislature. To assess the degree to which new counties created majority or near-majority-African American constituencies, I repeat the analysis comparing observed and expected distributions of new county's African American populations.

Figure 6 plots the observed and expected levels of African American population shares in counties created during Reconstruction. The differences between the African American proportion expected based on the counties losing land to accommodate a new county and the observed data are even more stark than they were for Republican vote-shares. Given the land taken from existing counties to create new counties, most of the new counties are expected to reflect African American population concentrations seen throughout the South—with almost all counties expected to have African American populations constituting between 10 and 30 percent of a county's total population. What is observed, however, are new counties with a remarkably uniform distribution of proportion of African American residents. Rather than a peak between 10 and 30 percent, roughly half of all newly established counties were at least 40 percent African American. The observed distribution skews much more towards counties with higher concentrations of African American residents, indicating that the state legislatures crafting these counties specifically designed geographic boundaries maximizing the concentration of African American residents.

One concern with the analyses comparing observed and expected levels of Republican vote-share and African American

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X25100205 Published online by Cambridge University Press

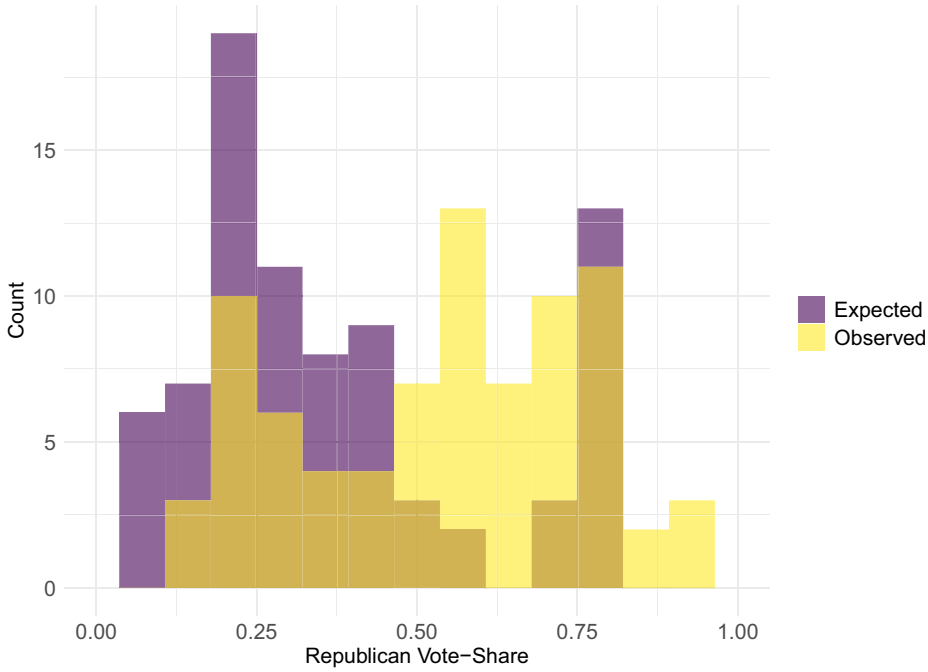


Figure 5. Expected and Observed Republican Vote-Shares in New Reconstruction Counties.

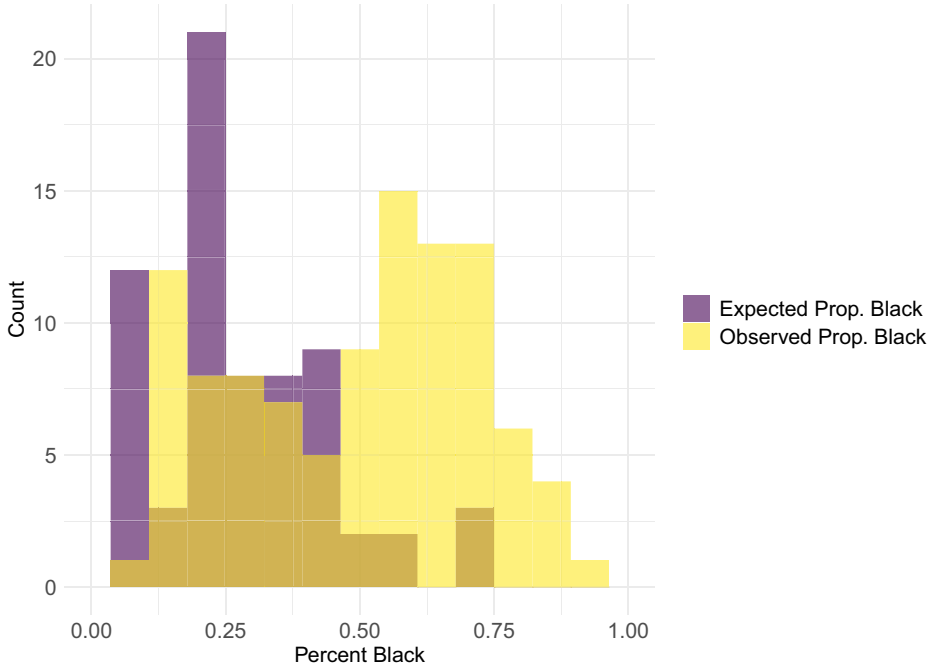


Figure 6. Expected and Observed Proportion of African American in New Counties Established during Reconstruction.

population concentration is that, because any geographic rearrangement made must choose to include and exclude certain towns and places from a new county, it is unrealistic to expect new counties to perfectly mirror the counties from which they are drawn. While it is very unlikely that both the political and demographic differences consistently observed between expected and observed counties are due to natural variation, this is a real concern. To test the plausibility of this, I conduct the same analysis using levels of turnout as a placebo test. Because there is no reason to suspect that higher or lower turnout would affect a decision to include or exclude an area from a new county (Republican vote-share would be much more important), there should not be a difference in the expected and observed turnout rates.

Indeed, as Figure 7 illustrates, the rate of turnout in expected and observed counties is nearly identical. The distribution of turnout rates in both observed and expected counties are normally distributed, with nearly identical means around 40–50 percent. On metrics unrelated to the political motivation for county creation,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X25100205 Published online by Cambridge University Press

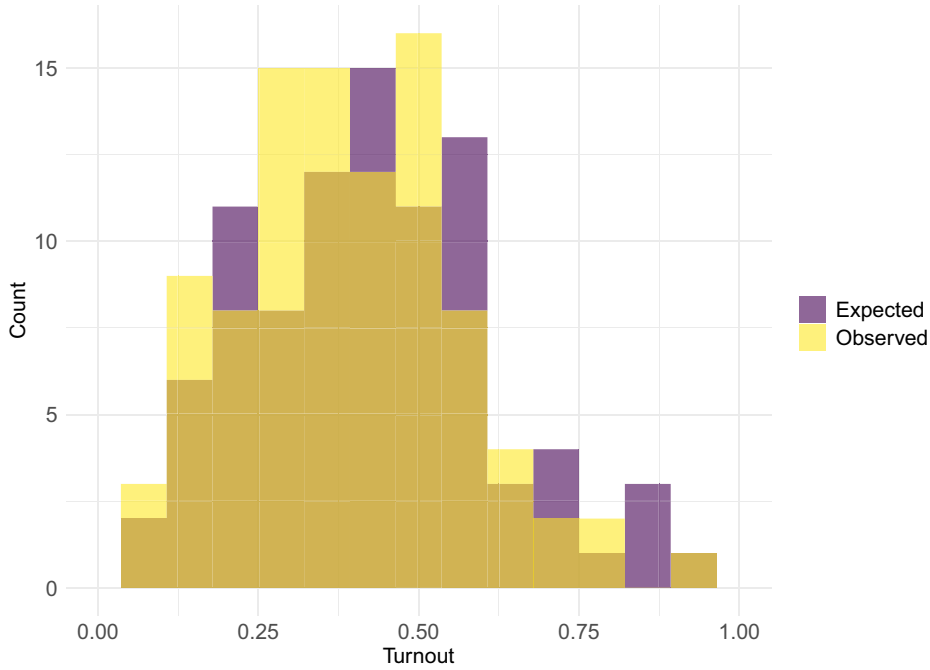


Figure 7. Expected and Observed Turnout Rates in New Counties Established during Reconstruction.

we don't see the same differences between observed and expected counties. This is further evidence that the boundaries were drawn to maximize Republican vote-share and create majority-African American counties.

Counties with high Republican vote-shares were slated to have their border adjusted to accommodate new counties. The new counties created were more likely to include Republican majorities and majority-African American constituencies than the new counties would be had they been drawn randomly. All of the new counties created subsequently showed majority vote-share support for Republicans, and a majority of the new counties created in Louisiana and Mississippi were composed of mostly African American residents (in Arkansas, three of the fifteen new counties were majority-African American, roughly equal to the overall proportion of African American residents in the state). Clearly, the establishment of new counties in the Reconstruction Era South did not follow the pattern predicted by the economic development literature. New counties reflected the desire to create political advantage at the state level, and reflect the political preferences of local populations. The question investigated in the next section is whether it worked.

African American officeholders and the survival of Southern Republicanism

If the creation of counties met the goals of state and local interests, its success as a political tactic, and its broader effect on the political development of the South, can be measured on those two levels. The two central questions then are whether new counties expanded and made Republican majorities in the State Houses more durable, and whether or not new counties provided opportunities for African American voters to elect African American elected officials.

I first take up the question of whether or not new counties provided opportunities for African American elites to win elected office, and for African American voters to elect their preferred candidates. An illustrative example of how new counties served the interests of local elites, African American local elites in particular, is the case of Lee County. Lee County was established in 1873 from parts of Crittenden, Monroe, Phillips and St. Francis counties. Crittenden was 67 percent African American, and Phillips 68 percent. Monroe County and St. Francis both had sizable African American minorities (38 and 36 percent, respectively). At the time of the 1880 census, newly established Lee County had an African American population of 9,150 residents and a white population of 4,158 (about 69 percent African American). This population profile was created without significantly endangering the African American majorities of Crittenden and Phillips County. In essence, a new African American-majority and Republican majority county was created without endangering the majorities in the affected counties.

But Lee County did not just appear. The establishment of Lee County was a years-long effort led by one man, William Hines Furbush. The historical record surrounding Furbush's life is colorful and incomplete. Born in Kentucky in 1839, Furbush moved through the Union-controlled South during the early years of the Civil War as a photographer. After marrying in Ohio in 1862, Furbush worked as a war photographer until enlisting himself at the last possible moment in 1865, just two months before Confederate General Robert E. Lee surrendered to Union General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox. After leaving the Union Army, Furbush traveled to Liberia as part of the American Colonization Society, but only lasted slightly longer in Liberia than he did in the Union Army. Upon returning to Arkansas, Furbush was elected to the state legislature as a Republican.

In the legislature, Furbush twice tried and failed to establish a new county based around the town of Marianna. After changing the proposed name of the county to Lee County, Furbush secured votes in the legislature from several white Democrats, and the bill establishing Lee County passed. After Lee County was established,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X25100205 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Republican Governor Elisha Baxter appointed Furbush to the position of county sheriff, and Lee County sent African American Republican Ferdinand Davis to the state legislature in the next election.[25] Importantly, the establishment of Lee County did not diminish the power of African American elites or Republicans when it took land and voters from Crittenden, Monroe, Phillips and St. Francis counties.

Phillips County, the county losing the greatest amount of land and residents to accommodate the creation of Lee County, never lost the ability to elect African American Republicans during the era of Congressional Reconstruction. In 1872–1873, the time of Lee County's establishment, Phillips County was represented by Joseph C. Corbin, who was eventually replaced by another African American Republican, W.L. Copeland. Crittenden, Monroe, and St. Francis counties had similar trajectories, each continuing to elect African American Republicans. The same pattern, African American legislators working with Republicans to create additional new counties emerged across the Republican controlled South. To test the extent to which this occurred systematically throughout the South during Reconstruction, I model which counties are slated for geographic change as an outcome of local African American officeholding. That is, to what extent is the presence of African American officeholders in a county associated with the creation of a new county that affects the geography of the existing counties. The models use the same specifications as the logistic models used previously in this article, and data on African American officeholders comes from Foner's roster of African American officeholders during Reconstruction.[26]

Even when controlling for racial composition of a county, Republican vote-shares, and other demographic controls (full model results are presented in Table 10), the presence of African American officeholders is very strongly associated with a county having its borders adjusted to accommodate a new county. Figure 8 charts the predicted probability of a county changing its borders within the next 2 years according to the number of African American officeholders currently serving in that county. At zero African American officeholders, a county has below a 25 percent chance of being slated for geographic change. That likelihood rises to about 27 percent in cases where a county has one African American officeholder, which is roughly the mean number of African American officeholders per county during this period. Increasing by a standard deviation of 2.6 officeholders results in a predicted probability of a county being a changing version of over 40 percent. In instances in which counties with more than ten African American officeholders existed, those had a roughly 75 percent chance of being affected by a new county being established. While this level of African American officeholding was rare (there were fourteen counties in which this occurred), the relationship is telling: in cases where African American elites were able to obtain significant political power, they were very likely to exercise that power to create additional units of local government.

African American officeholders worked with state legislatures to guarantee new county creation. In the case of Lee County, Arkansas, additional African American officeholders were also elected when William Furbush was appointed (and then reelected) sheriff, and a African American Republican was elected to represent the county in the state legislature. Similarly, in the Grant County created in Louisiana (and described earlier in this article), Williams Ward, an African American Republican, was subsequently elected to the state legislature. Indeed, not only did the presence of African American officeholders increase the likelihood of county creation in a given location, but looking at the subsequent elections in newly created counties, more African American officeholders were created as a consequence of this county creation.

To understand how new counties catalyzed increased African American officeholding, I repeat the comparison of expected and observed county composition, this time looking at African American officeholding rather than Republican vote-share or African American population. As Figure 9 shows, the effect of new county creation is positive, though the differences in the observed and expected data are much smaller than they were for observed and expected levels of Republican vote-share and African American population concentration.

The creation of new counties certainly did not *decrease* rates of African American officeholding, though substantively, it appears that new county creation did not lead to significantly higher rates of African American officeholding. However, because rates of African American officeholding in new counties were not diminished in either the new or preexisitng counties, forming new, majority-African American counties has a net effect of increasing the total number of African American elected officials. It is also important to consider the context in which African American officeholders may have sought election in new counties. Namely, aspiring officeholders had little time between the creation of a new county (which mostly took place between 1870 and 1874) and the end of federal occupation in the late 1870s, which was instrumental for African American officeholding in the deep south during Reconstruction. If building a base of support and electoral organizational capacity in a new county takes time, it's no surprise that African American candidates for office only saw moderate success in officeholding in new counties.

African American voters were also critical to ensuring that new counties remained durable sources of support for Republicans. So far, Republican success has been measured as independent of African American voters, and only in the election immediately proceeding the creation of a new county. To better understand how African American voters did or did not affect the durability of new county's' support for Republicans over time, I model Republican vote-share in a county for every year of Reconstruction, using an interaction between the proportion of a county that is African American and whether or not the county was established after the Civil War as the independent variables of interest. Obviously, new counties did not measurable support for Republicans before they existed, so this analysis only captures the degree to which new counties supported Republicans, depending on their status as new counties and proportion African American, relative to other counties within their state and within the same election year.

Figure 10 plots point estimates of Republican vote-share broken down by whether or not a county is new and the proportion of African American residents in the county. In general, new counties voted for Republicans at higher rates, but there are important differences in how this effect broke down across demographic lines. In the fifth highest quintile proportion African American counties—meaning those in the top-20 percent ranked by proportion of African American residents—Republican vote-share is

[25] Furbush's story eventually takes a dark turn. After Redeemer Democrats retook political power in Arkansas, Furbush was stabbed in the back (literally) by an African American Republican after he began working with Democrats. After leaving for Colorado, Furbush's wife and daughter died, and Furbush only narrowly escaped the death penalty after murdering the constable in the town of Bonanza, Colorado. Furbush eventually died in a disabled veterans home in Indiana.

[26] Eric Foner, et al., *Freedom's Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders during Reconstruction* (USA: Oxford University Press, 1993).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X25100205 Published online by Cambridge University Press

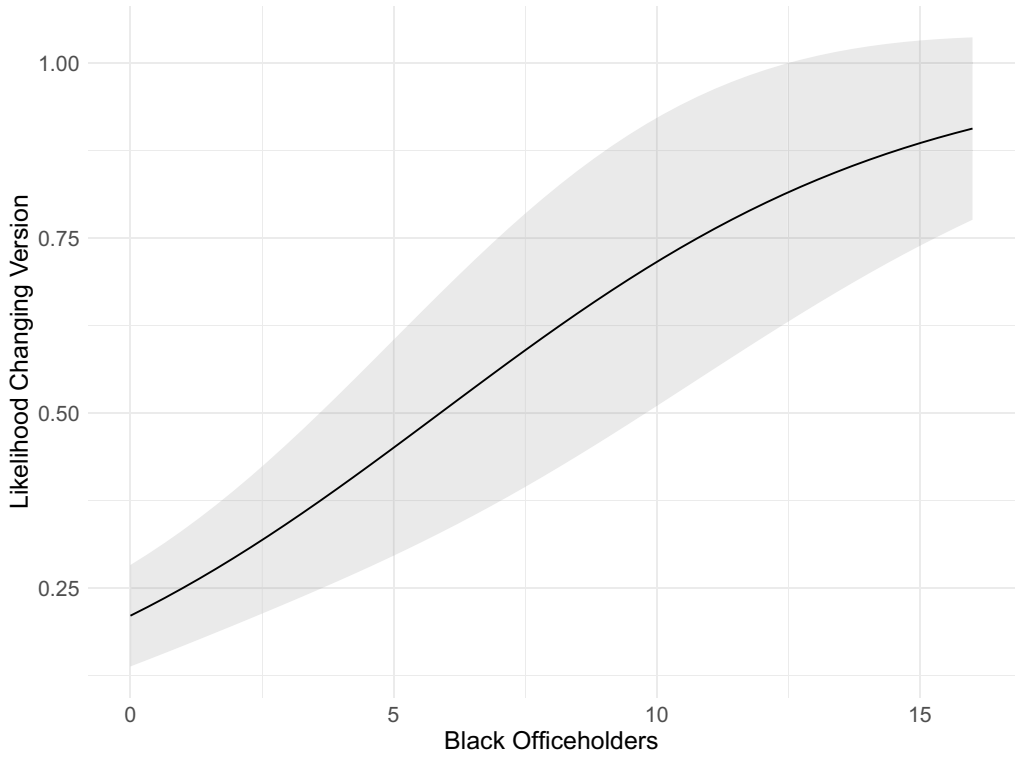


Figure 8. Local African American Officeholders and Geographic Change.

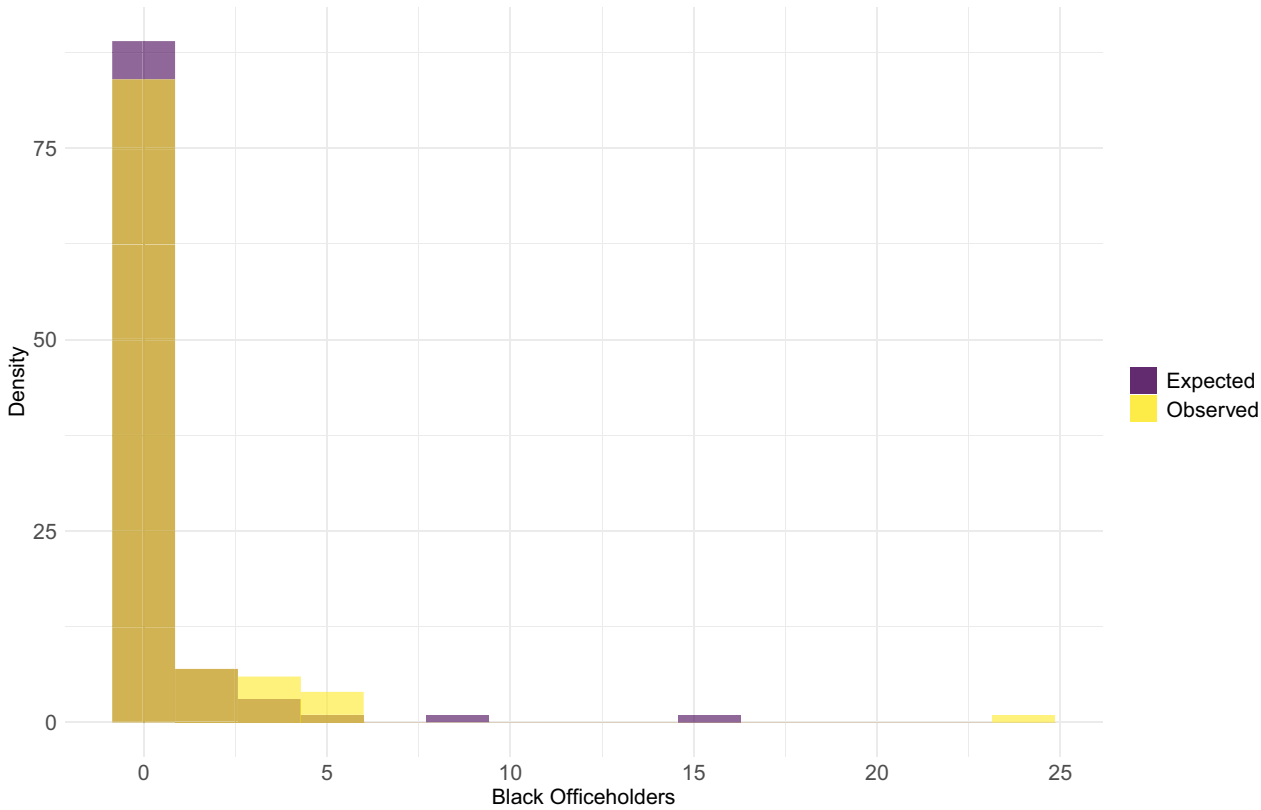


Figure 9. Expected and Observed Rates of African American Officeholding in New Counties during Reconstruction.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X25100205 Published online by Cambridge University Press

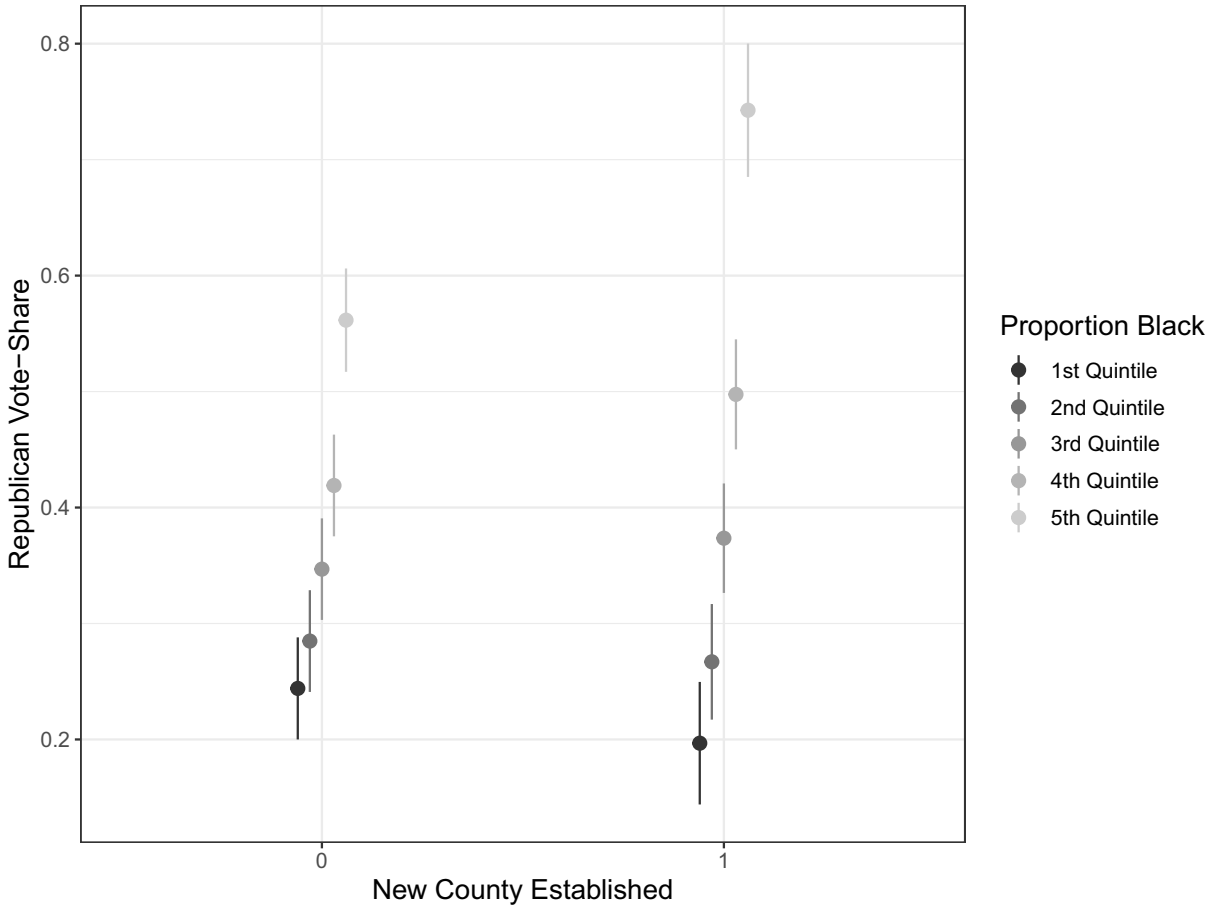


Figure 10. New Counties, African American Voters, and the Durability of Republican Support.

highest among both new and preexisting counties. However, looking at the fourth and fifth quintiles, new counties had higher republican vote-shares. At lower proportions of African American residents, this difference between new and preexisting counties disappears. What this means is that new counties, which all produced Republican majorities immediately after formation, only proved to be durable if they were composed of higher proportions of African American residents. Additionally, we also see that while counties with large African American populations were more likely to vote Republican throughout Reconstruction overall, their ability to contribute to Republican candidates was most magnified in newly created counties. The strategy of creating new administrative units did succeed insofar as it was able to create advantage for Republicans and African American voters.

But was this strategy actually consequential? This final and perhaps most important question related to the Reconstruction period depends on whether the new counties enabled Republicans to be elected to the state legislature, and whether or not these particular legislators made a difference in obtaining and securing legislative majorities for Republicans. While legislators certainly mattered beyond their ability to contribute to Republicans' majority status, because Reconstruction effectively ended with the fall of Southern Republicans, that is the question I take up here. To answer this question, I look at how many legislators represented newly created counties, and whether these legislators were decisive in establishing majority status for the party.

Table 5 lists the number of new counties created during Reconstruction and the number of new counties that still supported Republicans at the conclusion of Reconstructions height in 1877. As federal troops finished withdrawing from their position overseeing the reconstruction of a democratic south, violent intimidation of Republican voters—and African American voters in particular—led the Republican Party in the South to collapse as a viable political organization.[27] This broad trend is captured in the relatively low rate at which newly created counties still supported Republicans. Of the 15 new counties created in Arkansas from 1868 to 1874, only two still had a majority of votes cast in favor of Republicans in the 1888 election. In Louisiana, new counties fared better, where two-thirds of the new Reconstruction counties still supported Republicans. In Mississippi, a quarter of newly counties still supported Republicans.

Most of the variation between new counties level of Republican support across states has more to do with the general trends within those states rather than the new counties themselves. In Louisiana, the state in which newly created counties still supported Republicans at the highest rate, federal troops still occupied much of the state. Over a thousand troops were still stationed in New Orleans as of 1877, and hundreds of troops and cavalry were based in Baton Rouge, St. Martinville, Pineville, Monroe,

[27]Foner, *Reconstruction*; Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*; Michael Greenberger, "Undoing Reconstruction: Racial Threat and the Process of Redemption, 1870–1920," *Social Science Quarterly* (2022). https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.13149.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X25100205 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 5. New Counties and Republican Support in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi during Reconstruction

	1868	1870	1872	1874	Total New	New Counties Supporting Republicans in 1878
Arkansas	2	2	3	8	15	2
Louisiana	2	3	3	1	9	6
Mississippi	1	6	3	2	12	3

Table 6. Composition of Reconstruction Era House of Representatives in Arkansas

	% Static County Democrats	% Static County Republicans	% New County Democrats	% New County Republicans	Total Representatives Accounted*
1870	58.3	39.4	0.0	2.3	87
1872	61.9	30.4	1.1	3.3	89
1874	53.8	26.9	1.9	7.1	107

*Not all representatives ever made it to the state legislature due to sickness, death, or other personal issues.

Table 7. Composition of Reconstruction Era House of Representatives in Louisiana

	% Static County Democrats	% Static County Republicans	% New County Democrats	% New County Republicans	Total Representatives Accounted
1870	18.5	77.6	0.0	3.9	101
1872	39.4	54.9	1.8	3.9	114
1874	17.7	71.7	2.8	8.4	117

Table 8. Composition of Reconstruction Era House of Representatives in Mississippi

	% Static County Democrats	% Static County Republicans	% New County Democrats	% New County Republicans	Total Representatives Accounted
1870	17.3	76.9	0.0	6.7	104
1872	17.3	64.0	0.0	9.1	110
1874	31.6	49.1	0.0	10.6	113

and Lake Charles. Over a hundred troops were in Mississippi, mostly in Jackson but also in the north of Mississippi. In Arkansas, only seventy-six troops were present, all stationed in Little Rock. The tactic of administrative unit proliferation ultimately failed to prevent democratic backsliding and the ascent of the Redeemer Democrats: by 1878, Republicans had lost majorities in every state; but by going through each of Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi's political trajectory during Reconstruction, I find evidence that these new counties did in some cases provide meaningful partisan advantage to Republicans.

In March 1871, the Arkansas established a new county, which they named Sarber County, after passing a bill introduced by a Republican from Yell County, John Sarber. The creation of the county was contested by Democrats and other former Confederates—Sarber was a Union veteran, an abolitionist, and a carpetbagger. Sarber himself protested against giving the new county his name, but other Republicans in the Arkansas General Assembly insisted, and Republican Governor Ozra Hadley agreed. In 1872, John Sarber was elected to the Arkansas House of Representatives, representing Sarber County as a Republican. In 1873, President Ulysses S. Grant nominated Sarber to become a U.S. Marshall. Sarber's career as a U.S Marshall ended quickly, in 1874, Democrats successfully pressured Sarber to resign after they took control of the state government. By 1875, Sarber County was no more: Democrats had renamed it after James Logan, a southern slaveholder who moved to and died in Arkansas in the mid-nineteenth century.

The rise and fall of Sarber County mirrors the ascendance and decline of other Republican-majority counties in Arkansas and across the South. In 1869, Republican Governor Powell Clayton signed into a law a bill introduced by Republicans in the General Assembly establishing a Grant County in Arkansas (its county seat was named after General Sheridan). Lincoln County was established in 1871, and was, unsurprisingly, a source of Republican votes and support. But by 1877, none of these counties elected Republicans. To understand systematically whether new county creation forestalled the ascendance of Redeemer Democrats, Tables 6–8 list the composition of state legislatures during Reconstruction organized by partisanship and whether members represented newly established counties. The tables focus on state representatives, rather than state senators. Although all southern states used counties as units in the construction of senate districts, not every county was guaranteed its own senator (though this did often occur in practice). For this reason, I exclude senators from the following analysis. The limited success county creation had on buttressing Republican majorities in the state legislatures was made even weaker by its relatively smaller effect on state senates compared to state houses.

Table 6 presents the percent of representatives who were Democrats and Republicans broken down by their counties

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X25100205 Published online by Cambridge University Press

designation as a new or static county. Any county that was created during Reconstruction is categorized as a new county, and the rest are categorized as static. In 1870, Arkansas had established two new counties, both of which elected Republicans as their representatives to the state legislature. In 1872, Arkansas had established two additional counties, four total. Both of the newest counties voted for Republicans, but one of the original counties had elected a member who caucused with the Democrats (although was officially not a member of either party). By 1874, seven new counties had been created, and five supported Republicans.

What emerges clearly from this table is that Republicans never held a clear majority in the Arkansas House of Representatives. Obviously, then, the creation of new counties could not have created a larger or more durable Republican majority in the House of Representatives. However, elections to Arkansas's House of Representatives were anomalous for the period, and drawing conclusions for the entirety of the South based off of Arkansas's trajectory would be misleading. In 1871, Reconstruction Governor Clayton Powell was elected to the U.S. Senate and handed off the governorship to his Republican ally, A. O. Hadley. What followed were years of corruption that involved elections so fraudulent that Congress dismissed Arkansas's electoral college votes in the 1872 elections.

Unlike in other states (in which electoral fraud was still present), congressional and state legislative elections saw competition between Democrats and a Republican Party that had splintered into the regular Republicans, often called "Minstrels" and the liberal or Reform Republicans, often called "Brindletails".[28] As a consequence, in competitions within the state, Republicans split their vote between candidates vying for the same competition. Republicans held on to the governorship, but lower offices, the state house in particular, saw Democrats perform especially well.

Election during Reconstruction was often highly contentious and violent in Louisiana. After Republicans won the governorship federal troops stationed in Louisiana were forced to enforce the result of the election. Just months later in the recently created Grant County, the Colfax Massacre took place when Ku Klux Klan members and other white Redeemer Democrats violently opposed the democratically elected local Republican officeholders. Despite the contentiousness, the Republican Party did not splinter the same way it did in Arkansas, and the Party was able to maintain legislative majorities for longer.

As shown in Table 7, Republicans held majorities in the lower house of Louisiana's legislature until 1874. In 1870, Republicans held a dominant majority. Although they didnt require them for their majority status, 3.9 percent (four total) of Republicans' members in the lower house represented newly established parishes. But after the next election cycle, new county Republicans became more important. Including only representatives from counties existing before Reconstruction and the creation of additional units, Republicans held a very slight majority over Democrats. Here, new counties mattered. Without new counties, Republicans held a narrow majority of seats, including counties, the majority became larger and more workable. In an era where state legislators were more likely to miss votes for reasons such as longer travel between district and capitol or the higher incidence of serious illness, having a larger majority was even more important.

New parishes made governing possible for Republicans in Louisiana, led by pro-Reconstruction Republican William Kellogg and his Lieutenant Governor, Caesar Carpenter Antoine, an African American Republican. But in the lead-up to the 1874 elections, former Confederate officers aligned themselves with Democrats to organize the "white league," which often referred to itself as the "white man's party," a political group established to use terrorist violence to defeat the biracial Republican Party. The white league overthrew the democratically elected government in New Orleans, but Republican rule was restored after President Grant ordered troops stationed in the city to restore duly elected officials.[29]

After the 1874 elections, Republicans managed to expand their majority. Republican control was based in large part on the over thirty representatives now apportioned to New Orleans. Given the presence of federal troops directly in New Orleans, these elections were among those least likely to include intimidation or fraudulent tactics employed by the White League in the more peripheral regions of Louisiana. Republicans also expanded their majority as a consequence of new county establishment, doubling the percent of representatives in the lower chamber representing new counties.

New counties aided Republican majorities in Louisiana, but in no state were they used to greater advantage than Mississippi. In 1870, Mississippi had created seven new counties, and the seats apportioned to these counties were swept by Republicans. In 1870 and 1872, with ex-Confederates still barred from the vote, Republicans won majorities handily. However, as in other southern states, by 1874 the Democratic Party was making a political comeback. In the 1874 elections, new counties provided Republicans with a majority. While Republicans held a plurality of seats even without new county creation, the 10.6 percent of representatives hailing from new counties extended the majority of Republicans as they faced the most perilous period of Reconstruction.

Discussion and conclusion

In under a decade, Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Texas established sixty-seven new counties, forever altering the geographic and political landscape of the American South. The pattern of county creation in the South during this period does not fit neatly into the existing models of county development. The economic development model suggests that new counties form when local elites seek to capitalize on and political protect the development of valuable resources. In the Reconstruction South, no new industries or economic growth emerged that could be used to explain county development through this model. The population model also fails: while the population of the South grew, it does not explain where in the South new counties were established. The classic political model is also inadequate, new county creation did not follow a pattern that would be set forth by state and local elites seeking to most effectively administer new resources. Instead, the partisan-political model is most useful.

One alternative explanation might be that the South was simply 'catching up' to the administrative density of Northern states after the Civil War. Under this hypothesis, the proliferation of counties represents a delayed adjustment to economic and demographic

[28]James H. Atkinson, "The Arkansas Gubernatorial Campaign and Election of 1872," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 1, no. 4(1942): 307–321. https://doi.org/10.2307/40037515.

[29]Jerry Purvis Sanson, "White Man's Failure: The Rapides Parish 1874 Election," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 31, no. 1(1990): 39–58.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X25100205 Published online by Cambridge University Press

patterns that would have occurred earlier without the distinct institutional development of the South. This explanation aligns with Beramendi and Jensen's (2019) observation that the South's institutional path created a different administrative landscape than the North's. However, this explanation fails to account for the specific timing and geographic distribution of new counties. If this were merely a process of administrative catchup, we would expect county creation to proceed at a steady pace throughout the late nineteenth century. Instead, county creation accelerated dramatically during the brief window of Republican control (1868–1874) and focused disproportionately on areas with high Republican and African American populations. Additionally, county creation slowed significantly after Democrats regained control, suggesting that political motivations, rather than administrative rationalization, were driving the process. Further, the density of counties in the South surpassed that of the North, suggesting that even if the South was catching-up, some other set of factors led them to continue creating counties even after the optimal number of administrative units had been reached.

Another alternative explanation is that the economic transformation of the South from a slave system to free-labor system created new demands from local elites for administrative reorganization. Wright[30] argues that abolition fundamentally transformed property relations in the South, creating for the first time a landlord class with incentives similar to those in the North. This transformation could theoretically drive administrative reorganization as new economic elites sought to secure their interests through local government structures. However, this new class of elites was not in power during the period of Radical Reconstruction when Republicans created new counties. Further, if economic transformation were the primary driver of county creation, we would expect new counties to emerge in areas with the most significant economic reorganization. Instead, as I demonstrate, new counties were systematically established in areas with high concentrations of African American voters and Republican support, suggesting that partisan considerations were paramount even if economic changes created a context in which administrative reorganization was already occurring. The legacy of slavery on economic development certainly played a part in stifling antebellum county creation, but the postwar economic reorganization cannot completely explain the partisan nature of county creation that ensued in subsequent decades.

While the South did not experience industrialization on the scale of the North during this period, significant economic transformations were occurring that reshaped the region's productive landscape. The post-emancipation reorganization of agriculture led to the intensification of cotton production, the decline of rice cultivation, and the emergence of extractive industries like lumber and nascent oil and gas development. These changes altered property relations and created new economic interests. However, these transformations alone cannot explain the specific pattern of county creation observed, as new counties did not consistently emerge in areas experiencing the greatest economic change or development. Nor can economic development explain why new counties emerged in a pattern so conducive with partisan goals. Population levels remained relatively stable. Republicans sought to centralize power at the state level, not devolve it to local governments (in general, Republicans, and African American officeholders in particular, favored more expansive fiscal policies).[31]

New counties emerged in areas that had disproportionately large Black American populations. The single biggest correlate of whether a county would be established in an area was how well Republicans performed in a certain area. In counties where Republicans performed the worst, failing to field candidates against Democrats or fielding candidates who garnered almost no votes, counties only had about a 17 percent chance of being affected, geographically, by the emergence of a new county. At the very other end of the spectrum, where Republicans performed best, that chance nearly doubled and rose to almost 30 percent. Partisan-political motivations predict the geography of new county creation well, and the most intense period of county creation 1870–1874, reflects the most precarious and intense moment of Reconstruction, when Republicans clung to power against the rising tide of Redeemers and their white supremacist movements.

The counties that Reconstruction Republicans created emerged in geographies friendly to their aims. In their establishment, the new counties created constituencies that supported Republicans for local and state offices. When looking at the counties that were created, not only did they draw land from counties in which Republican vote-shares were disproportionately high, but the counties that emerged from those counties had higher than expected Republican vote-shares. That is, even given the high Republican vote-shares of the counties from which they drew residents and land, the emerging constituencies were even more supportive of Republicans than would be expected if the land and residents were drawn randomly from the affected counties. The same is true for the percent of residents who were Black Americans in the new counties. The counties that Reconstruction Republicans established tended to have greater proportions of Black Americans than the rest of the South, and tended to vote more for Republicans than the rest of the South. Of course, these two trends were not independent.

The partisan model also helps explain why county creation continued in the South after Reconstruction ended, albeit at a slower pace. As Democrats consolidated power through redemption, they faced different but still politically consequential geographic challenges. Internal factions within the Democratic Party (particularly between planter elites and populist-leaning white farmers) created incentives for strategic county creation that could advantage certain Democratic factions. Additionally, the establishment of Jim Crow segregation and disfranchisement created new incentives to adjust county boundaries to further entrench white supremacy. While the specific partisan dynamics changed, the strategic manipulation of administrative geography remained a tool for political advantage. In contrast, Northern states with more stable political alignments and different institutional traditions showed much less administrative unit proliferation during the same period. This suggests that the partisan model applies not only to two-party competition but also to intra-party factional conflicts in single-party dominant systems.

The clearest direct effect of county establishment was the creation of additional offices which elites could compete for. The presence of African American officeholders was both a predictor of county creation—counties with African American officeholders were more likely to be affected geographically by the establishment

[30] Gavin Wright, *Slavery and American Economic Development. Walter Lynwood Fleming Lectures in Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006).

[31] Logan, "Do Black Politicians Matter?".

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X25100205 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of a new county—and an outcome. New counties elected more African American officeholders than would be expected given the counties from which the new county drew land and voters. Counties created also supported Republicans at very high rates in the elections immediately following their creation. In counties, with higher proportions of African American residents, they were more likely to support Republicans over the whole course of Reconstruction, as seen in Figure 10.

At the state-level, new counties contributed to varying degrees toward Republican majorities in the lower houses of state legislatures. In Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi, new counties contributed to the Republican majorities held across the South in 1870–1872. In Arkansas, even though new county Republicans composed roughly 12 percent of the entire legislature, it was not enough to overcome the broader challenges the Republican Party faced. Still, these new counties are important for understanding the context in which legislators met and shaped the politics of the South, especially given the relationship between the eventual disfranchisement in these counties and the policy positions of those legislators.[32] In Mississippi and Louisiana, new county Republicans contributed to majorities, providing extra support to what otherwise would have been narrow majorities. New counties supported Republican majorities, but they were an insufficient tactic. Ultimately, electoral fraud, voter intimidation, and insurrection led the Democratic Party to victory throughout the South after Reconstruction's end.

Looking across the dramatic changes brought about by secession, Civil War, Reconstruction, Redemption, and the rise of Jim Crow and one-party South, it is not self-evident that the creation of new counties during Reconstruction is of significance. After all, the proliferation of administrative units was not enough to stem the tide of Redemption. But for Between the American founding and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the creation of new counties supported the brief moment of democracy that existed in the South during Reconstruction. These new counties, the African American officeholders they helped elect, and the African American voters they gave greater political efficacy to, were, in effect, a glimmer of democratic will in an otherwise authoritarian period of Southern American history that lasted nearly 200 years. New counties contributed to "the most progressive moment" in American history[33] before the Civil Rights Movement.

The new counties created during Reconstruction failed to provide durable support for Republicans. But changes to core institutions have consequences. New counties proliferated as a strategy to empower local-elites, African American and Republican elites in the case of Reconstruction. While this specific strategy failed, they left the South with sixty-seven more counties than they started with. The number of counties increased by 15 percent in Arkansas, 18 percent in Louisiana, and 11 percent in Mississippi. When African American voters could access the ballot box, these counties provided substantial advantage to these voters in their ability to be represented in the state legislature. When African American voters lost the right to vote through the course of Redemption, the minority of whites living in these counties found themselves dramatically overrepresented. Indeed, these regions within the South would go on to form the backbone of the authoritarian enclaves that existed well into the twentieth century;[34] and the Congressmen who represented them would form the core of the Solid South in Congress and exert tremendous influence on national.[35] Even though the original intent was lost, geography continues to matter as administrative boundary drawing has been shown to have persistent effects on development and governance.[36]

This research reveals that county creation in the Reconstruction South was driven by partisan motivations, and not exclusively an outcome of incentives provided by economic development or administrative efficiency. The establishment of sixty-seven new counties between 1868 and 1877 represented a significant reshaping of the region's political geography, designed to consolidate Republican power and create opportunities for African American representation. New counties were more likely to be established in areas with strong Republican support and high concentrations of African American voters. These counties consistently showed higher levels of Republican voting and African American officeholding than would be expected from random division of existing counties. While this strategy provided short-term benefits to Republicans and African American voters, its long-term success was limited as Reconstruction policies were rolled back. The flexibility of administrative units to serve different political agendas resembles what[37] identifies in Southern carceral systems, where institutions initially created for practical governance purposes became entrenched tools of racial domination once Democrats regained power. In both cases, policy innovations introduced during Reconstruction underwent significant ideological redeployment but retained their fundamental structures, demonstrating how institutional design shapes political development even as political control changes hands

This work on the political geography of Reconstruction and Redemption builds on other scholarship stressing the importance of geography as both a factor shaping policy and as an outcome of policies across U.S. history.[38] Research has emerged documenting the connection between race, geography, and the provision of housing in the United States.[39] Other work shows how specifically geographic policies have consequences for the provisions of public services[40] and how the provision of geographically particular public services affects partisan politics and local

[32]Olson, Michael P. ""Restoration" and representation: Legislative consequences of Black disfranchisement in the American South, 1879–1916." *American Journal of Political Science* 69, no. 2 (2025): 387–405.

[33]Douglas R. Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction: The Brief, Violent History of America's Most Progressive Era* (USA: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014).

[34]Robert Mickey, *Paths Out of Dixie* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[35]Ira Katznelson, David Bateman, and John Lapinski, *Southern Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

[36]Stelios Michalopoulos and Elias Papaioannou, "Pre-colonial ethnic institutions and contemporary african development," *Econometrica* 81, no. 1(2013): 113–152.

[37]Susanne Schwarz, "'The Spawn of Slavery'? Race, State Capacity, and the Development of Carceral Institutions in the Postbellum South," *Studies in American Political Development* 37, no. 2(2013): 181–198. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X22000281.

[38]Frances McCall Rosenbluth and Margaret Weir, *Who Gets What?: The New Politics of Insecurity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Desmond King and Margaret Weir, "Redistribution and the Politics of Spatial Inequality in America," in *Who Gets What?: The New Politics of Insecurity, Chapter 8*, ed. Frances McCall Rosenbluth, and Margaret Weir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[39]Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2017); Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 2019).

[40]Jessica Trounstine, "Segregation and Inequality in Public Goods," *American Journal of Political Science* 60, no. 3(2016): 709–725. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12227; Jessica Trounstine, "The Geography of Inequality: How Land Use Regulation Produces Segregation," *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 2(2020): 443–455. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055419000844.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X25100205 Published online by Cambridge University Press

governance.[41] These findings contribute to a growing understanding of American political development as a process marked by the simultaneous expansion and contraction of democratic rights.[42]

Scholars should also understand the importance of administrative geography as a tool of partisan competition and question assumptions of counties as stable, apolitical units. In doing so, our understanding of how geographic units—even when considered to be apolitical in their construction—structure partisan conflict is complicated.[43] The findings also provide new insights into the complexities of Reconstruction, illustrating both efforts to create space for African American political participation and the fragility of these efforts. The partisan model of administrative unit proliferation developed here may have broader applicability beyond the Reconstruction South, suggesting a need for further research into the role of local administrative structures in processes of democratization and democratic backsliding.

In conclusion, the creation of new counties in the Reconstruction South represents a significant but often overlooked aspect of this period, serving as a powerful reminder of the deep interconnections between geography, institutions, and political power in the American political development. This episode underscores the importance of considering administrative boundaries not just as neutral demarcations, but as potential instruments of political strategy and change.

Appendix

Table 9 presents logistic regression results examining the determinants of county border changes during Reconstruction. The model takes the form: $logit(P(Y_{it} = 1)) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{1it} + \beta_2 X_{2it} + \beta_3 X_{3it} + \beta_4 X_{4it} + \gamma_s + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{it}$ where Y_{it} is a binary indicator for whether county i experienced border changes in year t, and X_{kit} represents the following covariates:

X_1: Proportion African American population
X_2: Log of total population (Model 1); population density (Model 2)
X_3: Democratic vote-share
X_4: Proportion urban population
γ_s: State fixed effects
δ_t: Year fixed effects
ε_{it}: The error term

The inclusion of state fixed effects (γ_s) controls for time-invariant characteristics unique to each state, while year fixed effects (δ_t) account for temporal shocks common across all counties in a given year. Two model specifications are presented. The key coefficient β_3 is negative and statistically significant in both models (−0.511, $p < 0.1$ and −0.549, $p < 0.05$), indicating that higher Democratic vote-share is associated with a lower probability of county border changes. The demographic variables X_1, X_2, and X_4 do not show statistically significant relationships with the dependent variable.

Table 10 presents logistic regression results examining how African American officeholding affected the likelihood of county border changes during Reconstruction. The model takes the form: $logit(P(Y_{it} = 1)) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 AA_{it} + \beta_2 Pop_{it} + \beta_3 Dem_{it} + \beta_4 OH_{it} + \beta_5 Urb_{it} + \gamma_{st} + \varepsilon_{it}$ where Y_{it} is a binary indicator for whether county i experienced border changes in year t, and: AA_{it}: Proportion African American population Pop_{it}: Log of total population Dem_{it}: Democratic vote-share OH_{it}: Number of African American officeholders (local-level in Model 1, county-level in Model 2) Urb_{it}: Proportion urban population γ_{st} represents state-year fixed effects ε_{it} represents the error term

The inclusion of state-year fixed effects (γ_{st}) controls for any state-specific shocks or trends that might affect county border changes in a given year. The key coefficients are on African American officeholders, which are positive and highly significant in both specifications (0.225 and 0.214, $p < 0.01$ for local

Table 9. Demographics, Politics, and Locations Selected for New Counties

	Dependent Variable: County Changed	
	(1)	(2)
Proportion African American	−0.076	−0.080
	(0.082)	(0.081)
Log(Total Population)	0.067	
	(0.085)	
Population Density		0.063
		(0.084)
Democratic Vote-Share	−0.511*	−0.549**
	(0.272)	(0.274)
Proportion Urban	0.018	0.024
	(0.067)	(0.067)
Constant	−2.169***	−2.081***
	(0.373)	(0.388)
Observations	3,260	3,141
Log Likelihood	−973.677	−952.039
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,961.353	1,918.078
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	2,003.980	1,960.444

Note: *$p < 0.1$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$.

Table 10. African American Officeholding and Locations Selected for New Counties

	Dependent Variable: County Changed	
	(1)	(2)
Proportion African American	−0.095	−0.110
	(0.082)	(0.083)
Log(Total Population)	0.064	0.065
	(0.085)	(0.085)
Democratic Vote-Share	−0.488*	−0.456*
	(0.272)	(0.272)
Local African American Officeholders	0.225***	
	(0.073)	
County African American Officeholders		0.214***
		(0.065)
Proportion Urban	−0.048	−0.025
	(0.074)	(0.070)
Constant	−2.225***	−2.254***
	(0.373)	(0.370)
Observations	3,260	3,260
Log Likelihood	−969.478	−968.608
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,954.955	1,953.215
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	2,003.671	2,001.931

Note: *$p < 0.1$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$.

[41] Clayton Nall, "The Political Consequences of Spatial Policies: How Interstate Highways Facilitated Geographic Polarization," *The Journal of Politics* 77, no. 2(2015): 394–406. https://doi.org/10.1086/679597; Clayton Nall, *The Road to Inequality: How the Federal Highway Program Polarized America and Undermined Cities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[42] David A. Bateman, *Disenfranchising Democracy: Constructing the Electorate in the United States, the United Kingdom, and France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[43] Jonathan A. Rodden, *Why Cities Lose: The Deep Roots of the Urban-rural Political Divide* (Basic Books, 2019).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X25100205 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 11. Congressional Representation in New Counties

	Dependent variable: Republican Representation
New County Established	−0.047
	(0.029)
Proportion African American	0.342***
	(0.013)
New County × Proportion African American	0.246***
	(0.062)
Constant	0.191***
	(0.042)
Observations	5,573
Log Likelihood	364.153
Akaike Inf. Crit.	−716.306
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	−676.551

Note: *$p < 0.1$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$

Table 12. Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) for Key Model Variables

Variable	VIF	$VIF^{(1/2*df)}$
Proportion African American	1.79	1.34
Log(Total Population)	2.46	1.57
Democratic Vote-Share (Lagged)	1.28	1.13
Proportion Urban	1.75	1.32
Population Density	1.75	1.32
State (Factor)	3.21	1.05
Year (Factor)	1.68	1.01

Note: VIF values measure the degree to which multicollinearity increases the variance of coefficient estimates. Values under 5 generally indicate acceptable levels of multicollinearity. The final column adjusts for degrees of freedom in categorical variables.

and county officeholders respectively). Democratic vote-share shows a negative relationship with border changes (−0.488 and −0.456, $p < 0.1$), while other demographic variables are not statistically significant.

Table 11 presents linear regression results examining how new county creation and African American population share affected Republican representation during Reconstruction. The model takes the form: $Y_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 NC_{it} + \beta_2 AA_{it} + \beta_3 (NC_{it} \times AA_{it}) + \gamma_{st} + \varepsilon_{it}$, where Y_{it} is the probability of Republican representation for county i in year t, and: NC_{it}: Binary indicator for new county status AA_{it}: Proportion African American population $NC_{it} \times AA_{it}$: Interaction between new county status and African American population share γ_{st} represents state-year fixed effects ε_{it} represents the error term The inclusion of state-year fixed effects (γ_{st}) controls for any state-specific shocks or trends that might affect Republican representation in a given year. The interaction term coefficient β_3 is positive and highly significant (0.246, $p < 0.01$), indicating that new counties with higher proportions of African American residents were substantially more likely to elect Republican representatives. The main effect of African American population share (β_2) is also positive and significant (0.342, $p < 0.01$), while the main effect of new county status (β_1) is negative but not statistically significant at conventional levels. The model analyzes 5,573 county-year observations.

Figure 11 presents the collinearity among the variables included in the models. The correlation between proportion African American and democratic vote-share is modest ($R = 0.164$), suggesting these variables capture distinct dimensions rather than being proxies for each other. The strongest correlations are between population and population density ($R = 0.754$) and between urban percentage and total population ($R = 0.613$).

The VIF analysis (Table 12) and correlation structure demonstrate that while these variables are related, they maintain sufficient independence to allow for reliable estimation of their individual effects on county creation. VIFs less than 5 are generally considered acceptable for generalized linear models.[44]

[44]John Fox, *Applied Regression Analysis and Generalized Linear Models*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2016).

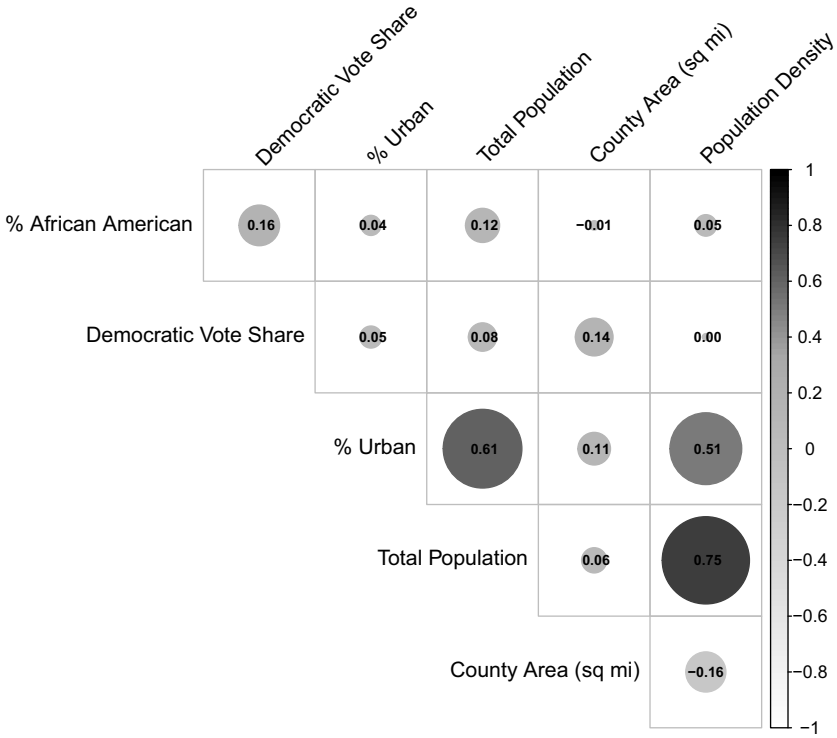


Figure 11. Collinearity among Modeling Variables.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X25100205 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 13. State Constitutions and Geographic Apportionment in State Legislators

State	Year	County Guaranteed Representative	Enumeration Criteria	Residual Representative Seats	Restriction on County Creation?
Alabama	1819	Yes	White population	Proportional to white population	None
Alabama	1865	Yes	White population	Proportional to white population	None
Alabama	1867	Yes	Total population	Proportional to white population	Two-thirds majority vote, new counties >600 square miles
Alabama	1875	Yes	Total population	Proportional to white population	Two-thirds majority vote, new counties >600 square miles
Alabama	1901	Yes	Total population	Proportional to white population	Two-thirds majority vote, new counties >600 square miles,
Must pass representation threshold					
Arkansas	1836	No	White population	Proportional to white population	New counties >900 square miles, must pass representation threshold
Arkansas	1864	Yes	White men	Proportional to white men	New counties >600 square miles, must pass representation threshold
Arkansas	1868	Yes	Unspecified	Unspecified	None
Arkansas	1874	Yes	Adult male population	Unspecified	New counties >600 square miles, must pass representation threshold and majority of impacted counties must consent
Florida	1861	Yes	Whites + three-fifths of African Americans	Proportional to enumeration	New counties must exceed ratio of representation
Florida	1865	Yes	Whites + three-fifths of African Americans	Proportional to enumeration	None
Florida	1868	Yes	Registered voters	One extra rep (up to 4) per 1,000 registered voters	None
Florida	1887	Yes	Registered voters	proportional, up to three total reps	None
Georgia	1865	Yes	"Rrepresentative population"	37 Largest counties get 2 representatives, all else get 1	Two-thirds majority vote
Georgia	1868	Yes	Unspecified	Proportional, max 3 representatives	Two-thirds majority vote and vote of county inhabitants
Louisiana	1864	Yes	Qualified electors	Unspecified	>625 square miles
Louisiana	1868	Yes	Qualified electors	Unspecified	>625 square miles
Louisiana	1879	Yes	Total population	One additional representative for 1.5× representation ratio	>625 square miles, > 7,000 inhabitants
Louisiana	1898	Yes	Total population	One additional representative for 1.5× representation ratio	>625 square miles, >7,000 inhabitants
Louisiana	1913	Yes	Total population	One additional representative for 1.5× representation ratio	>625 square miles, >7,000 inhabitants
Louisiana	1921	Yes	Total population	One additional for 2× representative number	>625 square miles, >7,000 inhabitants

(*Continued*)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X25100205 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 13. (*Continued.*)

State	Year	County Guaranteed Representative	Enumeration Criteria	Residual Representative Seats	Restriction on County Creation?
Mississippi	1832	Yes	White population	Unspecified	>576 square miles
Mississippi	1861	Yes	White population	Unspecified	>576 square miles
Mississippi	1868	Yes	Qualified electors	Proportional to qualified electors	>400 square miles
Mississippi	1890	Yes	Directly apportioned	Unspecified	None
North Carolina	1776	No	Three-fifths compromise	Unspecified	None
North Carolina	1868	Yes	Total population	Proportional to total population	None
South Carolina	1861	Yes	White population and taxation	Directly apportioned	None
South Carolina	1868	Yes	Total population	Unspecified	625 square miles
South Carolina	1896	Yes	Total population	Total population	One-third of local population must petition, at least 1/124th of the state
Tennessee	1834	No	Qualified voters	Unspecified	None
Tennessee	1875	No	Qualified voters	Qualified voters	>275 square miles, at least 400 qualified voters
Texas	1866	No	White population	White population	None
Texas	1869	No	Total population	Unspecified	>900 square miles
Texas	1876	No	Total population	Unspecified	None
Virginia	1830	No	White population	Unspecified	None
Virginia	1850	No	White population	Unspecified	None
Virginia	1870	No	Unspecified	Unspecified	None
Virginia	1902	No	Unspecified	Unspecified	None

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X25100205 Published online by Cambridge University Press