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# Racial Considerations and Social Policy in the 1930s

Economic Change and Political Opportunities

Social policy that emerged from the New Deal era continues to shape race relations and politics today. Since the 1930s, scholars have debated the net effect of the New Deal on racial inequality. On the one hand, the social policies of the 1930s are viewed as a great step toward a racially inclusive society (Myrdal 1944; Wolters 1975; Sitkoff 1978, 1985; Ezell 1975; Patterson 1986; Weiss 1983). In contrast to previous eras and political regimes, Roosevelt's New Deal reflected a qualitatively different sense of government's responsibility toward

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its citizens, including African Americans. Alternatively, New Deal era social policy is considered a crucial component in the structure of American racial stratification (Lewis 1982; Rose 1993; Quadagno 1994; Valocchi 1994; Brown 1999). The legislative record of the New Deal was consistently racialized and discriminatory. Welfare policy, in particular, actively excluded and subjugated blacks. These contrasting portrayals reflect the ambiguity of the New Deal legacy of race relations. In this historical analysis I am concerned with how and why race relations—both as cause and effect—figured into New Deal-era politics in the way they did.

During the 1930s, most Americans were opposed to extreme manifestations of fascism, but few felt urgent about the possibilities of serious progressive social change. In the midst of such ambivalence, the enduring racism of the public writ large and the rigidity of influential southern congressmen prohibited any chance of substantive civil rights legislation. So the question is how any government provisions were established that served the interests of African Americans. In particular, what led to the federal government's unprecedented generosity and intentionality in terms of aiding blacks, especially the persistently large numbers residing in the South?

Four related theoretical factors account for the extraordinary and ambivalent legacy of public policy of this period:

1. The process of industrialization occurred in a deeply racialized society.
2. The economic crisis of the 1930s altered the structure of political opportunities for advocates of civil rights and the interests of black Americans in general.
3. The economic position of black Americans changed as a result of these developments.
4. The economic differentiation in the South transformed several important political alliances into a subgroup within the Roosevelt coalition that directly affected the civil rights cause in general and relief for blacks in particular.

First and foremost, the general process of industrialization generated a kind of kinetic energy that fostered substantial and widespread social change (Wilson 1978). The decline of the southern sharecropping/tenant farming economy concomitant with the rise of urban industry (particularly in the North, but also in the South) transformed the demographic composition and political relationships of both regions (Tindall 1967; Lieberman 1980; Kirby

1983). This process altered the character, competitiveness, and value of African Americans as labor, which altered their role and influence in politics (Wilson 1978; McAdam 1982).

The agricultural system of the rural South, however, contributed to an ongoing distinctive political legacy there and on the national scene. Southern politicians involved in federal government, especially those from rural districts, maintained southern racial mores. Because of the one-party system in the South, southern congressmen rendered inordinate influence in the legislature (Quadagno 1985). However, industrialization within the South fostered a process of urban differentiation from rural areas. This structural development, which was already under way when the depression began, would subsequently lead to differing interests among southern legislators.

Another important and more specific economic factor, the Great Depression, jarred the nation and transformed its political terrain. The needs and entitlements of labor were redefined. As the new industrialized working class was growing self-conscious, it established important links to government and imposed its interests into national political discourse (Brody 1993; Griffin et al. 1986; Goldfield 1989, 1997). This occurred just as large numbers of African Americans were joining that class (see Brown and Brueggemann 1997; Brueggemann and Boswell 1998). Although the federal government never wavered from its ultimate goal of reviving and maintaining capitalism, the transition to an industrialized economy and the severe crisis of the system created a window of political opportunity in which old relationships deteriorated and new ones took shape. The particular characteristics of these changing political relationships lie at the heart of the New Deal's ambivalent legacy of social policy and race relations.

Two of the broadest changes resulting from the depression were the liberalization and the nationalization of American political culture (Schlesinger 1958, 1960; Patterson 1986).<sup>1</sup> As a direct result, various allies sympathetic to the civil rights agenda emerged. Important New Deal insiders took up the cause of racial inclusiveness (Schlesinger 1960; Frederickson 1995). In contrast, the central and decisive opponents of civil rights were southern congressmen who represented planter interests. While they maintained a decisive degree of leverage, their influence declined, partly because the differentiation of industry in southern cities from the southern agricultural economy gave rise to a new brand of southern legislator. This resulted in a rift among south-

ern elites (see Katznelson et al. 1993; Tomaskovic-Devey and Roscigno 1996, 1997), which contrasts conventional historical accounts of southern unity. These trends were never powerful enough for congressional liberals to push through civil rights legislation, but they did make room for some of the Roosevelt administration's more inclusive measures. This combination of enhanced black economic standing, the emergence of liberal New Deal reformers, and elite differentiation in the South thus created unprecedented political opportunities (see McAdam et al. 1996) for the advocates of black interests.<sup>2</sup>

Together, these four factors—industrialization, the depression, the changing role of black labor, and southern economic differentiation—facilitated the expansion of government services in particular ways that benefited black Americans, especially those in urban areas. The central theoretical mechanism encompassing these factors was thus crisis in the changing mode of production. Industrialization—which was still unfolding in the South during the 1930s but had already progressed in other regions—was crucial to redefining the role of labor. The economic crisis and related unrest was instrumental in altering conceptions of the needs of labor.

This argument is consistent with Fred Block's (1977: 23–24) explanation of the special, limited circumstances in which a capitalist state increases social services:

1. The Roosevelt government was not inhibited by the usual constraint of capitalists' "veto" power due to the collapse of business confidence (Skocpol 1980).
2. The desperation and unrest of workers, unemployed and poor people in general alarmed many Americans, stimulating fairly radical innovations in the conception of government's role (Milton 1982; Brown 1999). Electoral shifts also fostered liberalization during the reform years of the New Deal (Sitkoff 1978).
3. Moreover, various New Deal policies (outlined next) contributed not only to the political survival of state managers but also to the dramatic expansion of the federal government's power (Wallis 1985). One of the crucial aspects of this expansion, and a key to the government's ambivalence regarding the plight of poor blacks, was the aversion to alienating the southern congressmen who represented planters.

Below, I develop this argument more fully by examining the particular factors that shaped New Deal policy linked to racial issues. I begin by delin-

eating the major New Deal social policies that were favorable to the interests of blacks from those that were unfavorable. I then discuss the changing political stock of blacks linked to their changing economic position. After that I turn to the issue of southern economic differentiation and the resulting political realignment. Finally, I highlight the patterns among the New Deal programs and their connections to the economic and political factors introduced above.

## **An Ambiguous Legacy: New Deal Policy and Race**

### **New Prospects for Racial Inclusiveness**

The Roosevelt administration took unprecedented steps toward advancing the interests of black Americans (Schlesinger 1960). Eleanor Roosevelt, Harold Ickes, and Harry Hopkins were among Roosevelt's closest advisors who pressed the issues of civil rights (Kifer 1961; Kirby 1980; Louchheim 1983). At their urging, Roosevelt appointed blacks into various cabinet departments. By mid-1935, some 45 black appointments had been made in various federal agencies and departments, giving coherence and influence to the "Black Cabinet" (Schlesinger 1960: 435; Louchheim 1983: 263). These officials and more senior but sympathetic whites in Roosevelt's cabinet advocated various efforts to enhance the position of blacks.

The first major New Deal effort to address the social crisis precipitated by the depression was the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), which was established by Congress in May 1933. FERA, initially led by Harry Hopkins as the federal director, was designated \$500 million to distribute in-state and local relief programs (Zinn 1966a: xxxix). These included means-tested work relief, direct assistance, transient care, and various other efforts (Smith 1988: 63). By 1935, almost a third of all blacks, some 3.5 million people, were receiving FERA aid (Wolters 1975: 188). While substantial FERA monies were directed toward southern farmers, Fite (1984: 144) indicates that few of the poorest farmers (including black sharecroppers and tenants) were beneficiaries (see also Sterner 1943: 220–22; Kifer 1961: 211; Brinkley 1998: 65). In areas where poor farmers did receive aid, relief offices were often closed during the 2 months of cotton picking (Quadagno 1988: 131).

Congress established the Public Works Administration (PWA) (in Title II

of the National Industrial Recovery Act) in June 1933. The goals were to provide jobs—large numbers of blacks included—and to complete various construction projects, many to the benefit of black residents (Sitkoff 1978: 67; Wolters 1975: 186). The PWA did not significantly advance economic recovery, but it did genuinely help large numbers of needy people, including blacks (Weiss 1983: 51–52; Sitkoff 1985). The southern states received more than \$504 million in PWA aid (Tindall 1967: 474).

Roosevelt established the Civil Works Administration (CWA) in November 1933, also under the direction of Harry Hopkins, who relocated part of his FERA staff into the new program. As an emergency relief program, the CWA created (non-means tested) employment opportunities, largely in road and highway construction and maintenance. During its existence, the federally controlled CWA hired some 4 million unemployed people at wages averaging two and a half times higher than those of FERA (Patterson 1986: 57). However, Roosevelt was concerned with the cost of the CWA (some \$200 million a month, compared with \$60 million for FERA; Badger 1989: 200). Thus, in an effort to save money and ensure that relief did not become “a habit with the country,” Roosevelt terminated the CWA in early 1934, shifting some of its resources back to FERA (Patterson 1986: 59; Schlesinger 1958). Many blacks benefited from CWA during its short life (Unofficial Observer 1934; Badger 1989; Kennedy 1999: 194). Even in the rural South, blacks were hired by the CWA, although only during the first several months of its operation. But steps were taken by CWA, with Hopkins’s compliance, to ensure that CWA work did not interfere with seasonal farm work of agricultural labor (Mertz 1978: 46–47). In early 1934, the CWA began to “weed out” rural workers from its relief load (Tindall 1967: 479). Thus, in this case, the bounty of the program was substantial but selectively delivered so as not to disrupt southern tenancy.

Roosevelt set up the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in April 1935, again with the goal of creating jobs for the unemployed, and again under the trusted leadership of Hopkins. The expansive WPA, which took over some of the responsibilities of FERA (Kifer 1961; Wolters 1975; Amenta and Halfmann 2000), reached about a third of those in need during this period (Patterson 1986: 64). It did employ thousands of African Americans (Sitkoff 1978: 71), earning the praise of black publications such as *Opportunity*, *Crisis*, and the *Baltimore Afro-American* (Wolters 1975: 190, 211). As with the CWA, however, the WPA developed a policy of working around the southern farming system.

During cotton-picking season, and especially during a bumper crop, the WPA forced rural workers off relief and back into farm employment (Tindall 1967: 479–80; see also Wolters 1970: 207; Brinkley 1998: 65; Brown 1999: 85–86). Between 1933 and 1939, David Goldfield (1991: 84) reports, FERA, the PWA, and the WPA together contributed almost \$2 billion in federal monies to the South, mostly to urban areas (see also Patterson 1967: 95–96; Tindall 1967: 476; Smith 1988). Raymond Wolters (1970: 91, 1975: 188) explains that the amount of FERA and WPA benefits provided for blacks exceeded their proportion of the population (see also Sterner 1943; Sitkoff 1985; Amenta 1998). The origins and implications of the WPA are discussed in a more extensive analysis later in this essay.

In March 1933, Congress established the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) to create conservation jobs for young men to alleviate poverty. Wrought with problems such as the prejudiced director Robert Fechner and discriminatory local administration, the CCC's impact on blacks was nevertheless positive. Blacks comprised only 3% of the first 250,000 participants. Over time, however, such exclusiveness was reduced. Wolters (1975: 191; see also Sterner 1943; Kifer 1961) documents that in the 9 years of CCC's work, almost 200,000 of the 2.5 million participants were black. This, of course, did not address the result of the depression in any general sense, but it certainly did affect these individuals in important ways.

Another small-scale New Deal measure oriented toward youth was the National Youth Administration (NYA), which Roosevelt set up as part of the WPA by way of executive order in June 1935. This short-term program was designed to provide jobs to young people and needy students (Kirby 1980). By the end of its run, the NYA would provide part-time jobs to some 2 million students and to some 2.5 million young people who were not in school (Badger 1989: 207). The NYA was fairly inclusive: 10% of its initial beneficiaries were black, a figure that would increase to 20% by the early 1940s (Wolters 1975: 193). The problem of scale was still an issue, however. Like the CCC, the NYA was grossly inadequate for the need. But its net impact was definitely favorable (Sterner 1943; Kifer 1961; Kirby 1980; Sitkoff 1985).

In July 1937, Congress established the Farm Security Administration (FSA) by way of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenancy Act. As a short-term relief mechanism, the FSA provided assistance for tenants and sharecroppers in becoming small landowning farmers (Mertz 1978; Alston and Ferrie 1985b).

Its chief administrator in Washington was a liberal southerner, Will W. Alexander, who had particularly strong egalitarian views on issues of racial justice. But the establishment and running of the FSA were tied to the capitulation of southern rural politicians, which ensured that it did not interfere with planter interests. Blacks benefited from the FSA's efforts in the same proportions as whites, even in the South (Sterner 1943; Myrdal 1944; Sitkoff 1978). Alston and Ferrie (1985a) show, however, that, in practice, the FSA did not compromise the control of southern planters, and this argument is corroborated by Wolters (1975). So, while the FSA's effect on blacks was indeed favorable, its effect in the rural South was limited (Kifer 1961: 206; Wolters 1970: 65–66). The program was thus small and selective but did in fact deliver more than 20% of its benefits to blacks (Wolters 1975: 177; Sitkoff 1985).

The *Pittsburgh Courier*, a premier black newspaper, stated in January of 1936 that as a result of the New Deal,

armies of unemployed Negro workers have been kept from the near-starvation level on which they lived under President Hoover. . . . Armies of unemployed Negro workers have found work on the various PWA, CWA, WPA, CCC, FERA, and other projects. . . . Critics will point to discrimination against colored sharecroppers, against Negro skilled and unskilled labor. . . . This is all true. It would be useless to deny it even if there were any inclination to do so, which there is not. . . . But what administration within memory of man has done a better job in that direction considering the very imperfect human material with which it had to work? The answer, of course, is none. (Quoted in Wolters 1975: 211)

Harvard Sitkoff (1978) and Wolters (1975) suggest that such sentiments reflected black opinion in general. With some sense of alignment with the federal government, black Americans felt legitimate and bold in pressing for and expecting broadening civil rights (McAdam 1982: 108–10).<sup>3</sup>

Most of these programs, even those regarded as particularly favorable by blacks, had discrimination and/or segregation institutionalized into their structure, especially in the South, either by design or in practice (see Kennedy 1999: 173). They were virtually all regarded as temporary measures (Meyers 1937: 289; Amenta 1998). However, they were appropriately considered in a positive light as blacks were generally better off than had the programs not existed at all. The depression made even modest government provisions con-



sequential. Some New Deal programs did in fact have a net negative effect; these measures are discussed in the next section.

### Ongoing Barriers to Black Progress

Despite Roosevelt's real and perceived contributions to racial equality by way of appointments and executive orders, "not one civil rights law was passed while he was President" (Zinn 1966c: 325). In general, major New Deal legislation neglected the interests of blacks. Even Sitkoff (1978: 58) concedes that the "Roosevelt Administration perpetuated more of the discrimination and segregation inherited from previous decades than it ended" (see also King 1995, p. 31).

The Agricultural Adjustment Act, which was essentially an effort to facilitate farm purchasing power by establishing acreage and production control (Wolters 1975: 171), contributed to the worsening plight of the many southern black tenant farmers. Established as part of this law in May 1933, and strongly supported by southern planters (Quadagno 1988: 142), the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) largely excluded blacks and even aggravated their problems by stimulating southern white farmers' antagonism, which often resulted in evictions (Myrdal 1944; Davis 1966; Ezell 1975; Alston 1981; Kirby 1983). The federal government took no action to reconcile this inequity or to enforce racial fairness in the AAA's dealings, lest it alienate southern political allies (Wolters 1975; Fite 1984; Daniel 1994; Brinkley 1998).

Another innovative but problematic New Deal measure was the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) (established by congressional act in May 1933), which functioned as a regional coordinator of a wide range of construction projects. Championed by most southern Democrats (Kennedy 1999: 149), the TVA accomplished a number of impressive goals, often executing elaborate schemes to provide hydroelectric power, irrigation, or flood control in remote areas. However, its record on racial inclusion was dismal, "going beyond segregation to exclusion" (Wolters 1975: 197; see also Davis 1966: 321; Sitkoff 1985): "The TVA never developed a comprehensive plan to include Negroes, but instead dealt with each race problem as a special case. Negro interests were sacrificed whenever they conflicted with the claims of better-organized and more powerful white groups" (Wolters 1975: 200). The passive indifference of the federal government facilitated this pattern.

The first major labor legislation was passed in June 1933, but the National Industry Recovery Act (NIRA) was a conspicuously flawed law.<sup>4</sup> The NIRA was intended to stimulate economic recovery by reducing unfair competition in industry, which involved standardizing wage rates (see Wolters 1970). The lack of enforcement mechanisms afforded to the National Recovery Administration, combined with rising expectations on the part of workers, actually exacerbated strife between labor and management. Black workers were especially harmed by this conflict and the law in general (Wolters 1975: 180; Sitkoff 1985). The NIRA established a number of codes in different industries, which provided for minimum wage rates. In those industries in which wages actually did go up, a disproportionate number of black workers were laid off (Davis 1966: 318; Foner 1974). During the depression, the menial work, or “Negro jobs,” in which blacks had labored, were increasingly taken by whites who chose those previously unattractive positions over unemployment (Patterson 1969: 115; Sitkoff 1978: 35). On a regular basis, blacks were the “last hired, first fired” (Foner 1974), a pattern that was only amplified by the NIRA. Moreover, blatant discrimination on the part of employers and unions made black workers especially vulnerable (Sitkoff 1978: 37–38). That the NIRA was particularly detrimental for blacks—that their interests were neglected by New Deal legislators—as we will see later, was not accidental.

The failure of the NIRA and the ongoing industrial strife led to the Wagner Act (or the National Labor Relations Act) in July 1935. It legalized self-determined organization on the part of workers and set up the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to mediate industrial disputes and enforce the provisions of the act. While it remains the most important labor legislation in American history, the Wagner Act again excluded the interests of blacks (Myrdal 1944: 399). The legalization of closed shops in the context of historically racist unions led black leaders to oppose it (Bernstein 1969; Weiss 1983). The effort to include a significant antidiscriminatory clause, which was championed by the NAACP, was undermined by the AFL itself, thus confirming the fear of racism from organized labor (Foner 1974: 215). In large measure, the Wagner Act exacerbated racial discrimination and segregation among unions (Wolters 1970: 183–87; Quadagno 1994: 23). It left intact the ongoing tradition of racial exclusion in the AFL, which retained two to three times as many members as the CIO until they merged (Myrdal 1944: 402; Hill 1965).<sup>5</sup> William Domhoff (1990: 97) documents that Sena-

tor Wagner and other New Deal advocates of the NLRA were completely cognizant of the importance of catering to southern congressmen. Consequently, agricultural and seasonal labor were excluded from the provisions of the act.<sup>6</sup>

The National Housing Act of 1934 also had discriminatory effects (Quadagno 1994; Valocchi 1994; Goldfield 1997; Brown 1999). One of its goals was to facilitate home construction, thereby generating jobs. Toward that end, it set up the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), which distributed low-interest loans, but often turned down blacks as potential recipients.<sup>7</sup> Its underwriting manual explained that property values diminished when blacks moved into white neighborhoods (Sterner 1943: 315; Sitkoff 1978: 50; Jackson 1985: 205). The FHA's selective support of white borrowers facilitated suburbanization of metropolitan areas at the expense of the inner cities (Jackson 1985: 215–18; Badger 1989: 239), which contemporary blacks protested (Schlesinger 1960: 432; Kirby 1980: 138, 225).

Enacted in August 1935, the Social Security Act (SSA) represented the definitive welfare policy of the New Deal. This law encompassed three main provisions: federally required, state-run unemployment insurance; federally subsidized public assistance (“welfare”); and national contributory old-age insurance (“social security”). Theda Skocpol (1988: 296; see also Chambers 1986: 153; Berkowitz 1991: chap. 2) emphasizes the bifurcation in the welfare state between “social security” and “welfare.”

The first category was construed by its designers as “old-age insurance and the associated programs of survivors’ disability, and medical coverage for the elderly” (Skocpol 1988: 296). Its architects viewed this program as the legitimate obligation government has to deserving workers who have earned this benefit. In contrast, welfare was designed and portrayed as a handout to the “barely deserving poor people who may be trying to avoid honest employment—trying to get something for nothing” (Skocpol 1988: 296; see also Cohen 1986). The SSA left one-half to one-third of the fiscal obligation for public assistance to states. This, combined with administrative discretion, made welfare benefits difficult to obtain, especially in the South (Skocpol 1988: 297; Alston and Ferrie 1985a). So while social security was ensconced in legitimacy and fairness, welfare was stigmatized as mere charity. This bifurcation, Skocpol (1988) explains, was purposeful so as to discourage unemployment and not overburden the welfare state writ large.<sup>8</sup> The debasement

attached to welfare remains an enduring legacy of the New Deal (see Patterson 1986; Skocpol 1988; Brown 1999).

Contemporary blacks critiqued the SSA on several accounts. The state control of these programs would inevitably lead to discrimination in the South (Wolters 1975: 194; Quadagno 1984; Badger 1989: 231–33). Black observers maintained that the explicit exclusion of agricultural and most domestic workers from SSA provisions reflected open disdain for blacks, who were disproportionately employed in such positions.<sup>9</sup> That old-age insurance and unemployment compensation would be paid for by payroll taxes, critics noted, meant that the employers' costs would be transferred to the consumer via higher prices. These programs were effectively financed with an indirect sales tax that imposed on the most economically vulnerable, who of course were disproportionately black (Wolters 1975: 195; Brown 1999: 47).

Thus, not only were blacks generally excluded from the core social insurance programs of the New Deal, but they had to help pay for them.<sup>10</sup> This irony, Skocpol (1988) suggests, is due to the fact that the SSA would in all likelihood not have been passed without such exclusion (see also Quadagno 1988, 1994: 20; Domhoff 1990: 60). In an argument consistent with this view, Alston and Ferrie (1985a; see also Quadagno 1988) maintain that southern legislators resisted welfare expansion (specifically federal old-age and unemployment insurance, as well as several state programs) that would affect the benefits of black farm workers. In addition, their analysis emphasizes southern planters' interest in cheap, docile labor over any motivation linked to states' rights or racial custom (see also Alston and Ferrie 1985b; Kirby 1983). The origins and implications of this law are examined further in the next section.

In all of these programs (both those favorable and unfavorable to blacks), a much smaller proportion of the need was met among blacks compared to that of whites. However, the key in determining whether a program was on the whole favorable or unfavorable is the ratio of benefits for African Americans weighed against the costs of the program for them. For example, when a program actually harmed blacks (e.g., NIRA, AAA), the benefits of the program were obviously negated. When large proportions of blacks were excluded from a program, either by design (e.g., the Wagner Act) or in practice (e.g., TVA), the benefits for the group as a whole were minimal. Programs that were mostly federally funded (e.g., FERA, WPA) had lower costs for those in need than did those with substantial local funding (e.g., SSA). Locally funded programs

often entailed higher prices (Wolters 1970) or actual sales tax (Brown 1999), which in either case was tantamount to regressive taxation.

## Economic Change and Political Opportunities

### Nationalization, Liberalization, and Black Political Efficacy

Most blacks historically held little economic or political power. Few other Americans were very interested in the cause of civil rights, and southern planters in particular were highly invested in maintaining the racial status quo. However, the depression fostered a certain liberalization across the country, during which employers faced a new culpability in terms of the well-being of workers (Schlesinger 1960; Arnold 1966; Perkins 1966; Lewis 1982; Milton 1982). At the same time, a growing realization spread that government had some responsibility to its citizens for their well-being. Whereas Roosevelt had no particular plan for labor relations when he took office, the material desperation and militancy that developed in 1933 and 1934 stimulated his administration's initial agenda (Bernstein 1969; Milton 1982). Enormous demonstrations, hunger marches, and strikes demanded attention (see Brecher 1997). The same general dissatisfaction motivated unconventional voting patterns, as many looked to dissident candidates (Brinkley 1982; Amenta et al. 1994). More broadly, the turn away from the GOP gained momentum as electoral support grew for the Democratic Party in 1934 off-year elections and again in 1936, especially among blacks, among organized labor, and in urban areas in general (see Skocpol 1980; Kennedy 1999).

Racial considerations were hardly central to the Roosevelt administration's agenda. However, as black Americans were among those most devastated by the depression, agricultural laborers and proletarians alike, their plight was to some extent linked to that of other working people.<sup>11</sup> A sort of nationalization coincided with this liberalization, during which Americans in different regions became increasingly aware of their interconnectedness (Sitkoff 1978; Odum 1948; McAdam 1982; Patterson 1986). The regional conflict between northerners and southerners, which was exacerbated by the depression, generated not only tension and competition but also awareness, accountability, and, to some extent, even a sense of mutual destiny (Sitkoff 1978).

**Table 1** Population changes and proportion of blacks in urban and rural areas

Year	Population in U.S. (No.)	Black Population (No.)	Blacks in U.S. (%)		Blacks in South (%)	
			Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
1890	62,947,714	7,488,676	20	80	15	85
1900	75,994,575	8,833,994	23	77	17	83
1910	91,972,266	9,827,763	27	73	21	79
1920	105,710,620	10,463,131	34	66	25	75
1930	122,775,046	11,891,143	44	56	32	68

Sources: Wilson 1978: 71; U.S. Bureau of the Census 1933b.

Enhanced by this nationalization, several processes facilitated the increasing political value of blacks. John Ezell (1975: 152; see also Alston 1981) reports that the total number of wage earners in the South climbed from some 209,000 to almost 600,000 between 1890 and 1900. The move from an agricultural labor market to an industrial one elevated the value of black labor, which was reflected in the relative growth of black income (Mandle 1974; McAdam 1982: 97).<sup>12</sup> After World War I and throughout the 1920s, huge waves of blacks had migrated from the rural South to urban areas, especially in the North but also in the South (Odum 1948; Lieberman 1980; Fligstein 1981; Brown 1998a, 1998b; Goldfield 1997). As William Wilson (1978: 71) shows, 20% of all blacks in 1890 lived in urban areas, compared with 44% in 1930. Within the South, the comparable figures were 15% and 32% (see Table 1). The growth of the urban black population in the South during the early decades of the twentieth century is often overlooked (see Table 2). However dramatic the early waves of migration out of the region were, 79% of African Americans still lived in the South in 1930 (Brown 1998b: 73; see also Sterner 1943; Mandle 1974). Migration then slowed significantly during the depression (Wilson 1978: 66). There were more blacks in urban areas in the South than there were blacks outside of the region (including northern cities).

Sitkoff (1978: 90; see also Quadagno 1994: 25; Odum 1948: 247–49) suggests that by the mid- to late 1930s, African Americans were developing more “urban attitudes, traits, and values. Blacks in the city became less patient and more political, less docile and more demanding, less religious and more rebellious.” Many had never voted before the 1930s (Wolters 1975: 206), but then the black vote in northern states became significant, constituting the criti-

**Table 2** Increase in black population (%) in selected cities, North and South

Cities	1910–1920	1920–1930
<b>Northern</b>		
Chicago	148.2	113.7
Cincinnati	53.2	59.0
Cleveland	307.8	108.7
Columbus	74.1	47.8
Detroit	611.3	194.0
Indianapolis	59.0	26.8
Newark	79.2	129.0
New York	66.3	114.9
Philadelphia	58.9	63.6
Pittsburgh	47.2	45.7
<b>Southern</b>		
Atlanta	21.0	43.4
Baltimore	27.0	31.2
Birmingham	34.3	41.1
Jacksonville	41.7	16.1
Louisville	-1.1	18.1
Memphis	16.7	57.8
New Orleans	13.1	28.4
Richmond	15.6	-1.9
St.Louis	58.9	34.0
Washington	16.4	20.1

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce 1935, presented in Brown 1998b: 73.

cal balance of power in some elections. For the first time, elected politicians began paying attention. Despite the opposition of many black leaders, most black Americans voted for Hoover in 1932. However, they began to defect from the GOP in 1934 off-year elections and came out in strong support of FDR in 1936. In the midst of rising expectations, Roosevelt carried 76% of the northern black vote (Sitkoff 1978: 95). In addition, black organizations such as the Urban League, the National Negro Congress, and the NAACP channeled the unrest of black citizens into focused political leverage (Kirby 1980; Weiss 1983; Goings 1990; Hamilton 1994; Bates 1997).

However, the lack of any substantial civil rights law during the era, most notably demonstrated by the failure of anti-lynching legislation, reflects the limitations of this increasing influence. Neither civil rights advocates nor

blacks in general set the parameters of debates, but they did register on the political scale. Although the expansion of black political clout nationally foreshadowed more concrete changes that would follow in subsequent decades, it was only important in the 1930s in the broader context of reconfiguring political alliances. Again, the key to this process was the movement of blacks into industrial work, which is discussed further in the next section. This was particularly important in the South since blacks there remained disenfranchised throughout the depression decade (Myrdal 1944: 475).

### Southern Economic Differentiation

The presidential election of 1932 signified a momentous realignment in American politics. Holding the GOP and business responsible for the depression, and recognizing the need for more active government, American voters turned to the Democratic Party. Roosevelt garnered the support of numerous parties, but especially from organized labor, industrial sectors, and urban areas (Cooper and Brady 1985; Brady 1985). Because the South had been a one-party region, southern congressmen accrued inordinate seniority and thus maintained control of various important committees (Quadagno 1985; Mann 1996; Alston and Ferrie 1999). To maximize political influence and to secure as much federal favor as possible, generally speaking, southern congressmen enthusiastically joined Roosevelt's coalition (see Grantham 1988; Tindall 1967).

As the Great Depression ravaged the country, resuscitating the economy became the definitive agenda of Roosevelt's administration. It would remain the primary and overriding goal of FDR, at least until World War II. To pass a series of bold laws that would stabilize prices and wages, and to preserve and extend his administration's influence, Roosevelt had to maintain the careful balance of his coalition. This meant sustaining the alliance with southern Democrats. Because race was a deeply motivating factor among southern congressmen, any law that compromised southern images of race relations would weaken his coalition and therefore his main presidential agenda (Wolters 1975; Skocpol 1988; Quadagno 1994).

Over the course of Roosevelt's presidency, the centrality and loyalty of the southerners to FDR's coalition fluctuated. They were crucial to his election in 1932. As Roosevelt's influence in the Democratic Party spread, however, his



dependence on southerners declined, making them less critical to his reelection in 1936 (Levine 1988: 149; Kennedy 1999).<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, their leverage in Congress due to seniority remained sufficient to significantly shape legislation throughout the era.

If racial considerations had distinguished southern Democrats from other congressmen before the 1930s, a widening rift developed between rural and urban southerners during and after this era (Key 1949; Smith 1988). As one contemporary analyst observed, Roosevelt found “both his staunchest supporters and his strongest opponents within the ranks of his own party south of the Mason-Dixon line” (quoted in Tindall 1967: 631–32). The most conservative Democrats came from rural southern areas with large proportions of blacks who provided cheap labor for the tenancy farming system. The resolute stand of many southerners in Congress against any civil rights measures was based on the system of southern apartheid that served the labor-intensive agrarian economy. However, a growing division among southerners made the story more complex than this. The rise of industry in the South increasingly differentiated urban areas from the traditional tenancy farming system of rural areas. Thus, contrasting political views regarding labor, government, and matters of race developed within the region.

During the 1920s cotton farming itself began mechanizing. Sharecropping declined after 1930, tenancy farming after 1935 (Kirby 1983: 269–71; Alston 1981; Alston and Ferrie 1993: 863; Myrdal 1944: 253–60). As Jack Kirby (1983) explains, wherever the bigger, mechanized “neoplantations” emerged, “cotton culture” diminished, as did the regional hegemony of planters (see also Kennedy 1999). The southern economy in general was affected more severely by the depression than was the rest of the country. Agriculture in particular was devastated. Those hit hardest were tenants, sharecroppers, and farm laborers (Fite 1984; Kennedy 1999: 192). However, compared to that of industry in general, the position of southern industry improved because its decline was relatively less intense (Tindall 1967: 360; Myrdal 1944: 288). Moreover, the historical spirit of the New South resurfaced with new vigor during the depression decade (see Brownell 1975).

Southern industry had burgeoned throughout the early twentieth century (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1928, 1933a; Wright 1986). Between 1919 and 1929, manufacturing in the South grew faster than it did before or after (Odum 1936, 1948). Following the worst years of the depression, this trend

gained momentum again.<sup>14</sup> From the turn of the century, growth in industry contributed to urbanization of the region (Matherly 1935: 18; Goldfield 1982: 142; Fite 1984). Howard Odum (1936) documents that the trends of a decreasing rural population and an increasing urban population were more extreme than in the nation in general. From 1910 to 1940, the number of southerners living in urban areas climbed from 6 to 15 million (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1947; see also 1942). Southern cities manifested conventional urban problems, which traditional southern government was ill-equipped to address (Smith 1988). Issues of health, unemployment, education, job training, poverty, housing, and infrastructure all presented challenges unfamiliar to rural southerners (Goldfield 1982: 150). Urban planning, although not completely new to the South, began in earnest during the 1930s (Odum 1948; Brownell 1975; Smith 1988).

Cities in the South did retain a certain southern character. They were fewer in number and smaller in size. In addition, they were persistently racialized and had lower per capita incomes than the other regions (Brownell 1975; Goldfield 1982, 1991). Certainly an enduring affinity with agricultural interests was more present than elsewhere. However, as the economies of a number of southern cities grew and shifted focus from agricultural commerce toward industry (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1928, 1933a), they developed economic and civic institutions that were increasingly decoupled from rural life. A distinctive urban consciousness evolved (Key 1949; Brownell 1975; Goldfield 1982). Advocates of the New South and southern liberals had long been invested in modernizing the region (Tindall 1967; Sosna 1977; Scher 1992). Then, as industrialization and urbanization spread, they were joined by commercial and civic leaders who were interested in maintaining the value of real estate and a viable setting for business (Smith 1988: 146–47, 185; Carleton 1951: 225). As urban commerce grew increasingly differentiated from the traditional agrarian economy, southern cities became less directly dependent on the caste system, at least compared to the surrounding rural areas (Smith 1988; Brownell 1975).

According to V. O. Key (1949: 673) and others (Wallis 1985; Brownell 1975; Smith 1988; Brinkley 1998), blacks found more access to institutional life, more tolerance and changing racial mores in southern urban areas. In contrast to the more personal paternalism of the tenant farming system, the rational organization of the city made for greater civic freedom for blacks.

The key to this was the different expectations and heightened value of black workers in industrial production (see McAdam 1982). This is not to say that southern industrial employers ignored race; segregation and discrimination persisted in southern cities (Wright 1986). Blacks were able to get the going wage in industrial markets in less skilled jobs but not in highly skilled positions (Wilson 1978; Wright 1986). Industrial wages were lower in the South than in the North, partly because of the ongoing dominance of the agricultural economy and its effects on regional labor markets, but they were still moderately higher than agricultural wages (Irish 1940). The key difference, however, was the flexibility of industrial firms in comparison to plantations. The industrial system could handle labor turnover and shortages in ways plantations couldn't. Thus, control of industrial workers, black or white, was less dependent on rigid personal authority (Alston 1981; Alston and Ferrie 1989, 1993).<sup>15</sup> The diminishing need for control, in the case of black workers, curtailed the traditions of violence and threats endemic to southern race relations (McAdam 1982: 89; Alston and Ferrie 1989).

### Shifting Political Alliances

During this transformation, southern legislators representing planter interests condemned the New Deal emphasis on civil rights or any symbolism that jeopardized southern apartheid. In fact, most southern criticism of New Deal programs was manifest in the southern mantra on race (Sitkoff 1978: 106). Many of the southern assaults against the federal government took on a fascist tone, often criticizing blacks, Jews, organized labor, and communists in one shot, while at the same time invoking the likes of Franco, Mussolini, and Hitler (Sitkoff 1978: 121). However, this increasingly extreme posture further energized southern liberalism (Schlesinger 1960: 599). Many lamented the growing image of their region as backward and resented the identification with Hitlerism. Southern liberals emphasized economic issues, both in terms of reducing the degradation of widespread poverty, among blacks and whites, and more broadly of modernizing the region's economy (Sitkoff 1978: 123–24). These liberals explicitly critiqued the prevalence of racism in the region precisely because it interfered with the growth of industry.

The ostensible focal point for this breach in southern solidarity was the issue of relief (Key 1949: 377; Tindall 1967: 612–17; Mertz 1978: 54–56). How-

ever, that southern legislators fought aggressively to secure ample federal aid demonstrates that there was more to it. The real issue was labor control (see Katznelson et al. 1993; Alston and Ferrie 1989, 1993, 1999). Southern landed elites resisted federal welfare because it would force them to surrender control and distribution of local benefits (Ezell 1975; Kirby 1983; Alston and Ferrie 1985a, 1999; Alston 1986; Kennedy 1999). “Ever since federal relief . . . came in you can’t hire a nigger to do anything for you,” exclaimed one North Carolina landlord (quoted in Tindall 1967: 478).

This fault line in the historically one-party South was exacerbated in the 1930s. The economic crisis made the issue of relief urgent and dramatized the different class interests (and cultures) of workers and owners alike, as well as urban and rural peoples (Tindall 1967; Alston and Ferrie 1985b). While planters accepted federal aid (Irish 1942; Quadagno 1988), they resisted any state or federal program that would directly assist laborers and undermine the conventional racialized paternalism of the region (Alston and Ferrie 1985a, 1985b; Alston 1986; Quadagno 1985; Domhoff 1990).

Due to a less direct or personal relationship with employees and the circumstances of the economic crisis, industrial employers were more likely to solicit or at least tolerate government aid for relief (Wallis 1985; Trout 1985; Smith 1988; Quadagno 1988). Those interested in corporate expansion were invested in the stability and order of the city, which also facilitated various public provisions (Irish 1940; Brownell 1975). Since this concern was directly linked to the economic crisis, such measures were considered short-term responses rather than a major, long-term agenda.

The political influence of a distinctly urban, industrial sector in the South was only incipient during the 1930s. As Key wrote in 1949 (674): “The southern urban dweller has scarcely begun to speak politically.” In the context of significant tectonic shifts in the broader political terrain, however, that voice was decidedly audible. In an analysis of voting roll calls in the House of Representatives (during selected years between 1933 and 1945), Key (1949: 378–79) argues that the South more than any other region had the most cohesive bloc of congressional representatives. Indeed, the most solidifying issue around which they cohered was race, as was demonstrated by the absence of any explicit civil rights law during the era. However, there was not complete unity about policies indirectly related to race. In roll calls that divided southern Democrats, Key’s analysis shows, southern representatives from states

with the highest proportions of urban populations most often voted with non-southern Democrats. Likewise, representatives from urban districts were the most likely to vote with non-southern Democrats (see also Flinn and Wolman 1966).

Conversely, Patterson (1967; see also Key 1949: 379) shows that rural southerners were more likely to defect from administration-sponsored legislation than were urban representatives. During those years, 365 Representatives sat in the House, including 120 congressmen from the Confederate states. Of the 77 most conservative Democratic representatives, almost half were from the South, which accounted for twice as many as any other region. Of these 38 conservative southerners, only 3 were from urban areas. During the same years, southerners occupied 22 of the 76 seats in the Senate. Of the 35 most conservative anti-administration Democrats, 10 of them were from southern states. None of these were from states with urban areas.<sup>16</sup>

## Two Images of the New Deal

### Social Policy and Race

Tindall (1967) portrays a complicated adjudication among southerners in their selective advocacy for New Deal programs, which preserved a certain degree of solidarity. The enduring unity, in spite of the developing structural differentiation in the region's economy, contributed to dichotomous outcomes in terms of the effect of social policies on blacks. On the one hand, a series of provisions were established that aided blacks and advanced the cause of civil rights; these measures include the FERA, PWA, CWA, WPA, and NYA. Without exception, they were short-term relief measures (see Meyers 1937) that served the expanding constituencies of industrialized urban areas, including in the South, and worked around planter interests. On the other hand, various New Deal policies set back the interests of black Americans; these measures include the AAA, TVA, NIRA, NHA, NLRA, and SSA. In general, these measures were long-term in design and advanced the interests of the southern planter class.<sup>17</sup> In the context of economic crisis, this arrangement reflected the crossroads where the past encountered the future as it allowed for both modes of production of the region to function. That is, the weakening but persistently dominant planter class and the nascent southern industrial capi-

talist class (in conjunction with other constituents in the New Deal coalition) were able to facilitate the establishment of these divergent but not mutually exclusive policy agendas. However, the leverage of rural congressmen allowed their agenda to remain primary. Industrialists pursued their interests within the parameters of those of planters. It is possible that the growing tensions among southern legislators were negotiated and integrated into legislation before votes were taken.<sup>18</sup> In conjunction with the priorities of other constituents within the New Deal coalition, these two sets of policies reflect the interests of all southern elites, with an emphasis on the interests of industrialists in the favorable policies and on the interests of planters in unfavorable ones.

Two interesting cases that resist such easy categorization also support this argument. First, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) provided short-term relief via jobs for young men in conservation programs. Its effect on black Americans was mixed. Local administration of CCC programs in the South was extremely discriminatory and generally excluded large proportions of black candidates who were eligible according to federal provisions (Wolters 1975; Weiss 1983). However minuscule the effect of this program in relation to the need or the intention of the federal policy, it was nevertheless positive for the few black participants. That it was favorable to some blacks and not opposed by most rural southern legislators does not negate the general pattern because of the degree of discrimination and segregation that was practiced (see Kirby 1980; Lewis 1982).

The second exceptional case was the Farm Security Administration (FSA). As a short-term relief measure designed to help farmers, the FSA was generally administered in a fashion favorable to African Americans (Wolters 1970). However, as Wolters (1975: 176) explains, its enactment was directly dependent on a compromise, which southern legislators representing planters demanded (see also Alston and Ferrie 1985b). This bargain, in conjunction with ongoing pressure from southern politicians throughout the decade, ensured significant local control of southern FSA programs, which resulted in minimal assistance to rural black labor (Wolters 1975; Alston and Ferrie 1985b, 1999). Moreover, the accommodation of the FSA to planter interests supports the larger economic argument behind the political motives. The stark contrast in leadership of these two exceptional programs (a racist headed the CCC and a progressive led the FSA) supports the point regarding minimal influence of those in charge.<sup>19</sup>

Although the goal of recovery motivated all of these programs, the underlying dynamics behind the establishment of each one is unique. Given the centrality of the government's response to the economic crisis, this analysis focuses on the common forces that imposed constraining parameters among all of the laws. Assessing the particular motives and choices of individual political actors in any systematic way is extremely difficult—too many variables figured into the choice to vote for this or that bill (Bensel 1984: 26–27; Alston and Ferrie 1985a: 106). However, we can examine the mechanisms that linked macrostructural forces to the probabilities of particular outcomes. Investigating in more depth the dynamics behind the formation of two policies—one favorable to blacks and one unfavorable—may reveal the contours of these parameters. With this in mind, the Works Projects Administration and the Social Security Act are further examined here.<sup>20</sup>

### Works Progress Administration

The Works Progress Administration, a fairly representative New Deal relief program, benefited many blacks in the North and in cities. Although its genesis was not terribly complicated, the WPA “absorbed the greatest amount of both public spending and public attention” (Amenta 1998: 81). Established by executive order in April 1935, the WPA was explicitly designed as a temporary relief measure in response to the economic crisis. Its operation and funding were managed in Washington. The intention was to provide jobs for able-bodied unemployed people in projects that were proposed by state and local authorities and which did not interfere with private business. The WPA was “sustained through a series of appropriations acts that invariably included the word ‘emergency’ in them” (Amenta 1998: 85).

States were motivated to propose WPA projects and cooperate with federal administration because of substantial federal financing of the projects.<sup>21</sup> However, relief work that interfered with local economies diminished this incentive, as was the case in some southern areas. Amenta (1998: 221, 324) suggests that southerners were ill at ease with the WPA throughout its existence. Although there was less variation than in state-administered programs (e.g., Aid to Dependent Children), southern states were generally at the bottom in terms of WPA wages (Amenta 1998: 164–69; Amenta and Halfmann 2000).<sup>22</sup> However, by southern standards, a great deal of federal relief money did flow

into the region's WPA programs and, more extraordinarily, into the hands of blacks employed in WPA jobs.

In the South, as Douglas Smith (1988: 87) documents, by "the time the WPA ended in 1943, agency spending ranged from \$126 million in Louisiana to almost \$200 million in Alabama, with Birmingham receiving nearly \$42 million." The federal supervision of projects facilitated unprecedented inclusion of black beneficiaries. In 14 of 22 large southern and border state cities in 1941, blacks were employed in WPA jobs in proportions exceeding their share of the population (see Amenta 1998: 158). In his study of Atlanta, Birmingham, Memphis, and New Orleans, Smith (1988: 95) indicates that city sponsors of WPA projects contributed average proportions (31%) of costs that exceeded the national average of municipal contributions (25%). Overall, blacks constituted some 14% of WPA employees in 1939, whereas non-whites comprised about 11% of the U.S. labor force in 1940 (see Amenta 1998: 158; Wolters 1970: 206). The disproportionately high rates of black unemployment offset some of the benefits, but in terms of government's response to the economic crisis, blacks were much better off as a result of the WPA (Sitkoff 1978).

The Roosevelt administration generally kept tight control over WPA administration. However, one setting where it clearly acquiesced to local interests was plantation districts. Southern rural workers did benefit from some WPA work, but only on a limited basis as the projects were generally put on hold during harvest to ensure that planters had sufficient labor (Tindall 1967: 479–80; Wolters 1970: 205–7; Brinkley 1998: 65). Wolters (1970: 205) finds a sharp distinction between the availability of WPA jobs for blacks in southern counties with at least one city of over 10,000 versus availability in counties without any. On the whole, the effect of WPA programs in the rural South was marginal, especially in comparison to other settings (Kirby 1983: 263). Brown (1999: 78; see also Sterner 1943; Kifer 1961) shows that blacks, who endured higher unemployment rates, were generally more likely than whites to receive some kind of relief except in the rural South (see Table 3).

Again, we see a distinction between rural and urban southern interests. The support of WPA projects in southern cities should not be mistaken for long-term commitment. The WPA's legitimacy was based on the extraordinary economic crisis, which necessitated extraordinary measures. The Roosevelt administration was clear about its short-term orientation with respect to relief (Brown 1999: 53–55). As suggested, the funding Roosevelt secured



**Table 3** Relief rates for families by race and region, 1933–1940 (percentages of families on relief)

Location	Cash Relief, 1933		Cash Relief, 1935		Work Relief, 1940	
	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black
Urban U.S.	10.0	30.9	13.5	36.4	3.5	8.2
Urban Northeast	9.5	35.8	14.2	53.7	3.1	9.1
Urban North Central	10.9	42.1	13.5	51.3	4.0	14.3
Urban South	10.0	25.6	11.4	25.5	3.3	6.0
Rural South	12.3	10.8	12.3	7.3	5.2	2.6

Source: Brown 1999: 78.

for the WPA from Congress was contingent on this limited legitimacy, which ended with the depression (see Badger 1989: 242). In terms of southern economic differentiation, the point is not that urban industrialists contrasted planters by advocating the interests of their employees.<sup>23</sup> Rather, they regarded economic relief during the crisis in a different light because it served their economic interests.

### Social Security Act

The more complicated legislative process behind the SSA centered around Roosevelt's Committee on Economic Security (CES), led by Edwin Witte, which was charged with drafting the bill (see Swenson 1997; Amenta 1998). In the context of pursuing economic recovery, stabilization of industry in particular, Witte's initial primary concern was unemployment (L. Gordon 1994: 255; C. Gordon 1994). Old-age insurance became important later, and public assistance (i.e., Aid to Dependent Children) was considered a low priority throughout. But it was these latter two components of the bill that were particularly contentious in terms of racial considerations. The CES consulted various business interests and welfare reformers in drafting the original legislation.

As the bill made its way through congressional deliberations, its destiny and shape were frequently in the hands of southerners. This included one of its introducers in the House, Robert L. Doughton, an experienced Democrat from a rural North Carolina district and chair of the powerful Ways and

Means Committee (L. Gordon 1994: 266). After the bill moved through the House, it was sent to the Senate Finance Committee, which was dominated by southerners, including its chair, Pat Harrison, a key Senate leader from rural Mississippi (Alston and Ferrie 1985a: 112; Lieberman 1994: 167).

The CES originally sought to include agricultural workers in the Old-Age Insurance (OAI) program. However, a number of congressmen—predominantly from the South—wanted this occupational category (along with domestics, another position in which blacks were clustered) excluded. After this revision to the bill, Congress accepted federal administrative control of OAI. Gareth Davies and Martha Derthick (1997; see also Lieberman 1994) argue that various factors other than simple racism motivated this exclusion. In particular, they identify excessively difficult logistic problems in administering programs to agricultural and domestic workers. However, this does not negate the motives southern planters had to block direct relief to black farm workers (see Alston and Ferrie 1985a, 1985b; Alston 1986). Moreover, Alston and Ferrie (1985b, 1989; 1993, 1999) reveal that many of the administrative difficulties were subsequently overcome, suggesting an issue of political will rather than logistical feasibility. Contributory financing and exclusion of certain occupations facilitated acceptance of federal control. Robert Liebermann (1994, 1995) shows that federal administration and the subsequent inclusion of agricultural workers allowed many blacks to benefit from OAI over the long run, but in the short term the unequal provision of benefits exacerbated racial stratification.

Unemployment Insurance (UI) was also a mixed bag (Sterner 1943; Lieberman 1994, 1995; Brown 1999). Swenson (1997; see also C. Gordon 1994) argues that big business helped guide UI to passage in the interest of stabilization and competitive advantage over smaller firms. This measure also excluded agricultural and domestic workers, which was more easily facilitated by those who fought for such exclusion in OAI. However, some administrative control was afforded to local authorities through complicated eligibility criteria.<sup>24</sup> Just as NAACP leaders feared, UI excluded many blacks during the depression because they were already unemployed.<sup>25</sup>

The Children's Bureau, in consultation with CES, drafted the original legislation for Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) (see L. Gordon 1994). One of its priorities was federal supervision of state administration. Under the rubric of states' rights, however, some southerners vehemently opposed such

oversight (see Lieberman 1994: 151–54, 1995: 166–83). Roosevelt and Witte, as well as other top advisors, were willing to sacrifice substantial components of the legislation if necessary to ensure passage of the bill as a whole (L. Gordon 1994). Although many southern congressmen considered federal matching of state financing (one of the provisions early on) to be discriminatory toward poorer states, they were even more hostile to federal administration (Davies and Derthick 1997). In the end, sharing the costs was deemed less objectionable than surrendering control. The final version entailed decentralized administration and roughly half of the costs allotted to states (Skocpol 1988; Lieberman 1994).

All of this suggests that southern congressmen had motive and opportunity for structuring legislation in ways that did not afford benefits directly to rural blacks (see C. Gordon 1994: 277–78). The effects of the Social Security Act, which was finally passed in August 1935, also give some indication of the interests of those who shaped it. That OAI and UI later afforded blacks concrete benefits (Lieberman 1995) in part reflects the declining importance of agricultural labor in subsequent decades (see Kirby 1983; Fite 1984: 154). Alston and Ferrie (1989, 1993, 1999) document just this trend in an analysis that focuses on the links between plantations, paternalism, and welfare. In multivariate analyses, Lieberman (1994: 267) finds that in southern counties with high percentages of blacks fewer eligible families received ADC benefits than eligible families in either southern counties with larger proportions of whites or northern counties with comparably high proportions of blacks.<sup>26</sup> This may imply that discriminatory southern administrators were motivated by some purely racial motive. However, Lieberman (1994: 280–84) also finds that southern cities were not particularly different from northern cities in terms of the racial impact of ADC administration. This indicates that urban white southerners had differing motives and attitudes with respect to race. Whatever gains urban blacks in the South enjoyed, though, were offset by the costs imposed on them by way of higher prices, which employers used to compensate for payroll taxes that financed this and the other SSA programs.<sup>27</sup>

Regardless of the different racial politics in southern cities, planters remained the dominant southern influence in Congress. Again, this is not to suggest that other factors did not drive the legislative agenda of welfare reform. Rather, it highlights the importance and distinctiveness of southern congressmen who represented planters in shaping the legislation that came

before them. The mechanism behind such interests was the centrality of agricultural labor's dependency on planters, which social welfare risked compromising. This meant that social policies that benefited blacks elsewhere, including the northern and southern cities, were less problematic. The other piece of this puzzle is that those southern counties with high proportions of blacks were generally the counties with high rates of sharecropping, the Cotton Belt (see Mandle 1974; Alston and Ferrie 1993). That rural white working people were less likely to encounter stingy ADC administrators was based on their lower concentration in sharecropping. Moreover, as Alston and Ferrie (1999) show, many whites who were sharecroppers and tenants were excluded from SSA programs along with blacks.

To reiterate, in the context of overwhelming need, the widespread exclusion of blacks from the SSA programs, and the unequal benefits for those few black recipients, in conjunction with funding through payroll taxes, were the bases of the overall negative impact of the law on blacks. The motives of planters and their congressional representatives were less directly based on race than they were on class interests of maintaining control of agricultural labor. The indirect implications, and often the rhetoric around such interests, however, were intensely racialized. The class interests of industrialists also shaped the limitations of social policy as evidenced by the lasting stigma attached to welfare (see L. Gordon 1994; Swenson 1997; Brown 1999). The long-term social welfare system was designed to coexist with full employment (Patterson 1986; Skocpol 1988). The short-term relief measures of the depression were thus more generous and more inclusive, which did not interfere with the supply of labor in urban industrial sectors since unemployment was so high.

## Conclusion

This analysis shows that four factors account for the ambiguous effects of New Deal era social policy on blacks. Two economic factors, industrialization and the depression, altered two sets of political factors—the changing political value of black workers and the emergence of an urban, industrial political bloc of southerners. That no long-term, concrete civil rights legislation was passed and racial stratification persisted throughout this era and that the Roosevelt administration was nevertheless embraced by the vast majority of black Americans demonstrates the intransigence of racial norms in American

society. However, the industrialization of American society unsettled various political relationships between different classes, class segments, and the state. It enhanced the political leverage of blacks as their overall economic position changed and as relevant allies emerged and adversaries were weakened. That is, many blacks left the sharecropping/tenancy system, which was buttressed by southern apartheid, for industrial work in cities. The economic differentiation of the South not only compromised the hegemony of the planter class but also facilitated a limited and temporary partnership within the Roosevelt coalition, which was comprised of civil rights advocates and urban industrialists who supported relief.

When the United States faced a major economic crisis, its government clamored to reestablish order. The Roosevelt administration's immediate objective was economic recovery, which was part of the larger goal of stabilizing free enterprise capitalism. To be sure, the cause of civil rights never interfered with the primacy of this agenda (Brinkley 1998). During crises, like the depression, as Block (1977: 25–26) argues, state managers “grope toward effective action as best they can within existing political constraints and with available economic theories.”

In considering expansion of public services, the main factors state managers had to weigh were (1) the potential damage to business confidence, (2) the risks of escalating class antagonism that could compromise their control, and (3) the possibilities for expansion of their power (see Block 1977: 23–24). A conjuncture of all three factors motivated the various New Deal policies outlined in this essay. The lull in business confidence due to the Great Depression (especially during the early years) diminished the first criterion. The general unrest among workers (employed and unemployed) portended intensifying class struggle unless steps were taken (Goldfield 1989, 1997). Shifting attitudes among the electorate also encouraged government's response. Thus, the opportunity for extended federal reach appeared.

One of the main constituencies whose needs were at the center of these considerations was the pool of workers who would provide the labor and consumer base for the growing industrial economy and who were clustered in urban areas. Despite the abysmal record of organized labor's treatment of blacks, the well-being of many blacks was tied to that of other industrial workers. Brown (1999: 76; see also Kirby 1980; Goldfield 1997) argues that liberal New Dealers intended that the particular vulnerabilities of blacks would

be alleviated by policies oriented toward all who suffered from the economic crisis. It was precisely the transition of blacks into the industrial workforce and their new relationship with employers that was central to what modest benefits they did receive from New Deal social provisions. Without the development of southern industry, which was clustered in cities, numerous blacks would have been excluded from such provisions. As it was, the persistent leverage of southern planters constrained New Deal reformers and ensured that large proportions of black agricultural workers were excluded from social services.<sup>28</sup>

The passage of numerous unprecedented welfare and labor laws reflects the nationalization and liberalization of American political culture that the economic crisis precipitated. That these laws were essentially corrective reforms demonstrates the limited structural change that actually took place. However, these broad trends did loosen the ground for the seeds of the subsequent civil rights movement, which were planted during the 1930s. Of course, the liberalization and nationalization of American society, the rise of southern liberalism, and the progressive efforts of the New Deal administration — and even the heightened political stature of black Americans — did not signify anything close to the end of racism. Nor were these developments sufficient for passage of civil rights legislation. Instead, these forces produced common ground for a subgroup within the Roosevelt coalition, which pulled the administration toward social policy that was moderately favorable and thus historically dramatic in terms of the interests of blacks.

## Notes

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- 1 See Tarrow (1994: 184–85) for elaboration on the links between political culture and political opportunities.
- 2 The idea of changing structures of political opportunities (see also McAdam 1982; McAdam et al. 1988; Tarrow 1994) is intentionally used in this particular way and should be distinguished from more generic and vague applications. That is, a particular combination of strengthening allies (e.g., liberal New Dealers, white liberal southerners), weakening opponents (e.g., southern planters), enhanced organization

- (e.g., the NAACP, access to government in the North), changing economic standing (e.g., black proletarianization in the South), and changing consciousness (e.g., urban politicization), as identified by McAdam et al. (1996), created special circumstances that facilitated movement activity.
- 3 Roosevelt's political efficacy can be seen in the shifting loyalties of black voters, who had mostly supported Hoover in 1932 but got behind FDR in 1936 and thereafter (Sitkoff 1978).
  - 4 The NIRA, which established the National Recovery Administration, usually refers to Title I of the National Industrial Recovery Act, as opposed to the Public Works Administration, which was established by way of Title II of the same act.
  - 5 In particular circumstances in certain industries (e.g., bituminous coal, auto), the Wagner Act benefited black workers (see Brueggemann and Boswell 1998; Brueggemann 2000), but that was not typical. However, the Wagner Act did not drive the progress CIO unions made in interracial labor organizing (Kennedy 1999: 307).
  - 6 That most industrial workers (though not blacks) gained from the collective bargaining facilitated by the Wagner Act surely enhanced the relative control planters had over their workers compared to industrial capitalists, which suggests that this law not only accommodated but actually served the interests of planters.
  - 7 Such exclusion only enhanced the dependence of sharecroppers and tenants on planters for housing. Rural housing in the South was by far the worst in the country (Sterner 1943; Myrdal 1944), which was facilitated by the role of cheap labor. That the FHA largely excluded blacks was beneficial to planters in that it contributed to dependence in rural areas and diminished the lure to urban areas.
  - 8 However, because full employment was not realized during the 1950s and 1960s, as the New Dealers had expected, the welfare state had to bear more expenses than originally intended (Cohen 1986).
  - 9 Some 60% of all black employees worked in these occupational categories (Quadagno 1984: 643).
  - 10 Perhaps a case could be made for the SSA that, like the CCC, its impact, however mixed or marginal, was on the whole good for blacks. Still, that the majority of blacks were not eligible but had to help foot the bill via higher prices in conjunction with the widespread contemporary black criticism of the SSA suggests that its net impact was indeed negative. And there is little ambiguity about the extreme degree of discrimination in the implementation of the SSA (see Sterner 1943; Lieberman 1994, 1995; Amenta 1998). That southern planters generally endorsed the SSA constitutes further evidence for this interpretation (Quadagno 1988; Domhoff 1990).
  - 11 It was in this context that labor legislation, most notably the Wagner Act, was enacted. Though this law harmed the interests of blacks to some extent, the impetus to enhance the material condition of workers, for many of Roosevelt's advisors, encompassed that of blacks (Sitkoff 1978; Brown 1999). While it also neglected the interests of blacks, the Social Security Act represents further evidence of liberalization.
  - 12 See Rory McVeigh (1999) and Donald Tomaskovic-Devey and Vincent Roscigno

- (1996, 1997) on changes in economic valuation of labor and implications for political and cultural empowerment among class and racial groups.
- 13 The New Deal coalition grew stronger in the 1934 and 1936 elections. Out of the 432 House seats, 310 of which they already held, the Democrats picked up 9 new ones in 1934 and 12 more in 1936. And of the 96 Senate seats, 60 already occupied by Democrats, FDR's party gained 9 more slots in 1934 and 7 in 1936, all of which were non-southern (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1975; Grantham 1988). At the same time, reapportionment (determined by census figures from 1930; Wallis 1985) altered the composition of the Democratic congressmen. By 1933, then, 35 new urban members joined the legislative branch, some of whom were southern.
  - 14 George Tindall reports (1967: 457) that of the \$477 million spent in 1937 on new industrial plants, \$135 million was spent in the South. In 1936 the chemical industry alone spent more than \$33 million in plant construction in the South, more than twice what it invested in eastern states (ibid.: 463). *Business Week* exaggerated in 1936 that the "depression is forgotten in the South. The industrial expansion is on again, full swing, and things are booming" and reiterated in 1937 that the South led the nation in terms of investment in new modernized plants (ibid.: 457–58).
  - 15 That southern industrialists had a more flexible view of labor control is not to suggest that they embraced labor unions. In resisting collective bargaining they maintained considerable common ground with planters.
  - 16 Katznelson et al. (1993) emphasize related sources of unity and disunity among southern congressmen, clarifying that the conventional portrayal of southern solidarity is overstated. According to their analysis of roll calls between 1933 and 1950, the key point of division was labor issues. In general, southern congressmen were less cohesive on labor questions than were either Republicans or northern Democrats. During the New Deal era, however, "southern Democrats were inclined to support the administration's major labor-related initiatives, albeit with reservations and only after they secured protection for their regional interests" (ibid.: 289), which included inhibiting interference with labor control in agriculture.
  - 17 Perhaps Title I of the NIRA did not actually *advance* planter interests but accommodated them. The much flawed law was guided to passage in the Senate by Finance Committee Chair Pat Harrison of Mississippi. But, in its short lifespan the NIRA had little bearing on agricultural matters.
  - 18 Most of the acts discussed here passed in Congress by three to one margins or better. The Wagner Act had such substantial backing that it passed by a voice vote. See the *Congressional Record* for the margins of the various roll calls.
  - 19 Although individual leaders surely had an impact on the relative inclusiveness of the various programs and departments they headed, they had little effect on the overall pattern described here. Liberal, white northeasters, like Robert Wagner, capitulated with planter interests linked to legislation such as the NLRA and the SSA. Conversely, a racist southerner like Robert Fechner, who headed the CCC, could not stand in the way of beneficial effects of relief programs.



- 20 These two policies were both very much linked to relief and represent typical aspects of other New Deal laws. In addition, a rich body of research literature on both measures allows for more extended analysis.
- 21 The equation that generated the proportion of federal support was complicated and allowed for significant variation across states. However, in all cases, the federal government paid for the vast majority of the costs (Amenta 1998: 164).
- 22 Amenta (1998) attributes such variation to a series of factors, including the strength of state welfare systems, progressive taxation, patronage, and social movement efforts.
- 23 Certainly southern employers in urban and rural settings had common ground on issues of right to work laws and collective bargaining.
- 24 Some federal leverage was retained through a complex system of federal taxation. A large measure of discretion was left to states in offering benefits, but substantial financial incentives for complying with national standards were built in (Lieberman 1994: 329–32). Aside from such incentives, UI was generally financed through payroll taxes, which was the key to its harmful effects on blacks as the result was higher prices (Wolters 1970: 195; Brown 1999).
- 25 In subsequent decades it benefited a modest number of blacks who became unemployed later. Lieberman (1994: 352) shows that in the 1950s UI benefits were distributed on an increasingly egalitarian basis, especially compared to ADC. The timing of this favorable trend is consistent with my general argument (see Alston and Ferrie 1993, 1999).
- 26 Lieberman's (1944: 263) analysis uses ADC payments as reported by state welfare offices for 1940, 1950, and 1960. Sterner (1943) also documents the discrimination manifest in SSA welfare programs, especially ADC.
- 27 This contrasts the short-term relief measures like FERA and the WPA, which were largely funded by the federal government. As more blacks moved north after World War II, the proportion of black ADC recipients grew. Compared to the prewar years, blacks enjoyed a better ratio of benefits to costs (see Lieberman 1994: 285).
- 28 See Peter Swenson (1997) for a related analysis with different emphases. In particular, Swenson places causal primacy on political actors' strategic anticipation of capitalists' priorities. Nevertheless, he recognizes the leverage of business interests in relation to specific circumstances (e.g., certain economic conditions, labor militancy, electoral shifts).

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