HOW THE LEGACY OF SLAVERY, RACE, AND PARTISANSHIP INFLUENCE THE INTRODUCTION OF GUN RIGHTS LEGISLATION IN THE U.S. SOUTH
AN HONORS THESIS
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Abstract:

Using a database of all legislative activities in state legislatures from 2011 to 2015, I scope on the 2,312 bills introduced relating to gun rights. In this thesis I develop a theory of gun rights legislation, rooted in white supremacy that stems from slavery and its collapse. As a result, I fill a gap in scholarship on gun legislation that analyzes how the legacy of slavery and its ties with the racial and political identity of a legislator influences the probability of that legislator introducing gun rights bills. I expect that state legislators from the South who are White, Republican, and reside in once high-enslaved-population-districts introduce gun rights bills more than any other group in America. I expect a positive relationship between the share of the enslaved population in a district and the likelihood that a White legislator introduces gun rights legislation. Utilizing the 1860 US Census (depicting the percentage of the population enslaved in South), a legislator-level data set including the race and partisanship of the lawmakers, I establish multi-leveled models to test this hypothesis against various control variables, including those based on NRA grade, # of gun sellers in a district, the % of rural in a district, violent crime, and median income.
Acknowledgements/Preface:

This thesis unfolded as a result of a paper I wrote towards the end of my sophomore year in my Scope and Methods class. The paper investigated how and why the Black community’s experiences with gun violence in America influences their support of gun control. My research hypothesis was high exposure to gun violence within the Black community contributes to why Black individuals support gun control more than their White counterparts. My professor for my Scope & Methods course and now thesis advisor, Dr. Mirya Holman was fond of my work and suggested that if I wanted to expand on my paper’s research in the future she would be willing to assist me. Dr. Holman’s words resonated with me and when I returned from studying abroad in Shanghai, China during the spring of my junior year, I decided that I wanted to expand on the paper and turn it into an Honors Thesis. I reached out to Dr. Holman and met up with her to discuss my intended game plan. She was excited that I decided on writing a thesis and posed me with two options. Option A was to continue with my paper from sophomore year and option B was to work on a joint paper with her and fellow political science teacher, Dr. Dancy, that sought to analyze the relationship between slavery, race, politics, and guns. I decided on Option B. I was happy that Option B’s topic was still within the same area of study as my Scope and Methods paper which looked at the relationship between race and guns. As a result of this, I was able to apply many of my sources and knowledge to the new paper. During the spring semester of my junior year, my research question and hypothesis were still in the works. It wasn’t until after reading a book known as Deep Roots (suggested by Dr. Holman and Dr. Dancy) over the COVID-19 quarantine where I slowly developed my research question and began piecing things
together. What I truly loved about the Deep Roots book and sought to convey in my thesis is that, “contemporary politics is, in part, a function of historical forces” (Deep Roots 2018). Essentially, what I aimed to show in this thesis is how history provides us with the ability to see the true nature of modern day trends and relations in society. Within the context of this paper, the history I analyze is slavery and its collapse.

My intellectual direction and motivation for this thesis was aided by the help of many people. I would first like to thank Dr. Mirya Holman for meeting with me at least once a week throughout this 2020-2021 academic school year. She pushed me and provided me with the necessary resources and feedback so that this thesis paper could be a success. Despite teaching multiple courses in this unexpected and life-altering COVID pandemic, she remained committed to ensuring that I stayed on track to complete this thesis. She additionally wrote my recommendation for graduate school and I am now planning on enrolling at the University College London thanks to her willingness to write me a letter. For that I am forever grateful. I’d also like Dr. Geoff Dancy and Professor Patrick Rafail for being my 2nd and 3rd reader and providing valuable feedback and suggestions throughout the year.

I’d also like to thank numerous family and friends but most importantly my mother, father, and girlfriend who have dealt with countless hours of my talking on the thesis and provided me with amazing proofreads and feedback. This paper would be nothing without your support and love.

-Trejon
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Introduction:

For 246 years, chattel slavery was an essential element of the economic, political, and cultural viability of the US South. American slavery manifested the ideals of racism and white supremacy, which have been embedded in the thought processes and social structures of the country to this day. Slavery and racism are inextricably tied to the American identity. Another component linked to the American identity is guns. Guns are considered by many to be a symbol of American culture. Gun ownership in the US is the highest in the world, with more than 393 million firearms in civilian possession (Karp 2018). The increasing accessibility of guns has resulted in gun-related deaths being one of the leading causes of deaths in the United States. A study in 2017 found that about three quarters of all murders in America were gun related (Gramlich 2019).

The increasing number of mass shootings and homicides within the United States has established a national divide and incited debate regarding the enforcement of stricter legislation with regards to the 2nd amendment. The two polarized sides in this debate are those who support restricting accesses to or use of guns - gun control advocates and those who seek to expand and maintain access to or use firearms - gun rights advocates.

The American South has historically had a romantic attachment to the individual right to bear arms of all kinds. The prevalent gun culture of the South is a result of the vast stretch of land which the South encompasses geographically. The frontier of the Old South and the governance of slavery, led the dominant white majority to cling on to their guns as a means of maintaining law & order and defending their homes, community, and property. Following the collapse of slavery, guns came to represent the masculine honor of the South, the defiance of the Confederacy, and the generations of still bitter White
Southerners who grasped onto their guns as a means of preserving the dying traditions of a society built off of white supremacy. The history of the South has been one which has relied heavily on pride, honor, and family—with the family surname being bequeathed in concert with guns.

This thesis aims to comprehend how the legacy of slavery—and its ties with race, and partisanship—influence the probability of a legislator from the South introducing gun rights legislation. In this thesis, I answer this question by analyzing 2,312 pieces of gun rights legislation taken from 2011-2015. I narrow those bills down to the ones being introduced from the region of the US South. With each piece of legislation, I connect the bill to its legislative introducer and each legislative introducer to their respective district.

Since this paper is solely focused on the region of the US South, I display the “legacy of slavery” variable through scoping the share of the population enslaved in Southern counties based upon the 1860 US census. This variable was inspired by the data deriving from a book known as Deep Roots (which will be elaborated further throughout this thesis). My thesis focuses on the district level and interpolates the data from the 1860 census onto modern district boundaries.

Utilizing a full list of legislators from the time period of 2011-2015, I establish the probability that a legislator will introduce a piece of gun rights legislation. This is measured through analyzing how many gun rights bills are introduced by state legislators in the South per legislative session over the span of the 4 year time frame of 2011-2015. I apply my two primary independent variables: legacy of slavery and race & partisanship to see if they have any impact on the probability. I find evidence that race and partisanship certainly do play a role in whether legislator introduces gun rights bills.
White people are far more likely to introduce gun rights legislation than Black people and Republicans are far more likely to introduce gun rights bills than Democrats. I also find that the legacy of slavery plays a crucial role in the probability of gun rights bills being introduced. In addition, control variables displaying geographic factors such as the rural v. urban, the amount of gun dealers, violent crime, and median income also were found to show influence.

My findings provide an opportunity to reconsider the common narrative of gun rights policy in the US, which is driven fully by the NRA’s sponsorship, grade, and donations. The new account looks at how race, partisanship, but most importantly the legacy of slavery influences the introduction of pro-gun legislation. This thesis affirms the significance of American slavery in the current gun rights debate in the South.
Review of Literature:

This literature review covers three major topics: the legacy of slavery, race and guns, and guns and politics. This literature review attempts to find commonalities between these three bodies of scholarship that will ultimately provide the framework for the question and thesis statement of this paper.

This literature review, first, focuses on the long-term implications of slavery and what it suggests about who will advocate more strongly for gun rights in the American South. This will contribute to an understanding of how slavery and its collapse has shaped the contemporary socio-political hierarchy and attitudes of not only Southern Americans, but generally all Americans.

The second focus of the paper will speak to how race plays a role in attitudes towards guns. It will delve into basic findings on the disparities between different racial groups regarding gun ownership and attitudes toward gun legislation.

The last topic covered in this literature review addresses how political affiliation suggests who will most vehemently advocate for gun rights in the South. It will display the great partisan divide between Democrats and Republicans, regarding gun ownership and legislation stances.

From these various scholarships, it is evident that race and partisan affiliation play a definitive role in informing attitudes towards guns and gun legislation. However, there is a gap in scholarship; the gap doesn’t account for the institution of slavery and its collapse as the origin of modern relationships between Americans and their guns. This literature review hopes to shine light on who is most actively introducing gun rights legislation in the South and why.
Legacy of Slavery

It is indisputable that the peculiar institution is what built the United States and established the socio-spatial framework that is seen in the country today. One particular study profoundly displays how slavery and its collapse has shaped modern political attitudes of Southern White people. White people who, currently, live in areas of the South where slavery was prevalent in the Antebellum period, are more likely to be racially conservative and more in opposition to policies that many believe could favor African Americans, such as affirmative action (Acharya, Blackwell, Sen 2018). Additional studies have shown how Southern White people continue to have more negative racial attitudes compared to their Northern counterparts (Valentino & Sears 2005). The particular region of the American South that is analyzed is the Black Belt Region. The Black Belt Region is known to produce the most conservative people in the United States. The authors of the political science book, ‘Deep Roots,’ based their research on an investigation from political scientist V.O Key that stated that the Black Belt region of the American South was the backbone of the ‘Old South’ and the peculiar institution. The Black Belt region had the richest soil that supported large plantations-- fit for chattel slavery. Therefore, higher populations of Black people live in the Black Belt region as a result of slavery. White elites hailing from this area have controlled the economic, political, and social leadership of the South and have defended their political system, which is built on white supremacy. Glaser (1994) affirmed that the Whites of the Black Belt have the deepest and most immediate concern with regards to maintaining white supremacy. Living in an area where Blacks have a real opportunity to hold political power leads Whites to be more antagonistic to Blacks (Glaser 1994).
During and after the Reconstruction Period, in response to the erasure of slavery, White people coordinated to provide an informal social infrastructure to regain as much economic and political power as possible (that was previously guaranteed to them during slavery) (Acharya, Blackwell, Sen 2014). This informal infrastructure included racially targeted violence, anti-black norms, segregation, and—to the extent legally possible—racist institutions. (Acharya, Blackwell, Sen 2014). Despite the era of Jim Crow and blatant racial resent/terrorism no longer being enacted in the American South, conservative attitudes have been passed down through the generations of White Southerners. These conservative attitudes amongst Southern White people can be seen through harboring high levels of racial resentment and supporting Republican candidates, the death penalty, and gun rights (Acharya, Blackwell, Sen 2018).

Racial conservatism has been central to the continued realignment of Southern White’s Republican partisanship since the Civil Rights era (Valentino & Sears 2005). One body of scholarship found that it is possible that the continual and everyday use of force-- inherent in the peculiar institution-- carved out the channels for implementing real violence in the slave South (Cohen 1996). Slavery was maintained through violence and the threat of violence which was both individual and collective. One of the key tools that was used to reinforce this violence and racial hierarchy was the gun. The slave South was more approving of defensive violence, as shown by gun control regulations, self-defense rules, and defense of home and property laws, than was the North (Cohen 1996). Cohen (1996) also proves from his study that Southern legislators feel more favorable toward the possession of guns and more opposed to gun control. All of these findings clearly
indicate that slavery is a root cause of conservative attitudes, amongst some Whites, towards guns.

**Race and Guns**

Guns have become a symbol of American culture. According to data released by Pew Research Center, about 1/3 of families own guns in America (Morin 2015). These findings resulted from a mass survey provided to thousands of individuals across the country regarding gun ownership. Of that 34 percent, 41 percent are White and only 19 percent are Black (Morin 2015). That means Black people are two times less likely to own a gun than White people in America. From this statistic alone, a large disparity in gun ownership between Black people and White people can be easily identified. The difference between Democrats’ and Republicans’ view regarding gun ownership only further emphasizes the polarization with respect to this issue. 49 percent of people who identified as Republican owned guns compared to only 22 percent of Democrats (Morin 2015). This disparity reflects the disparity between Blacks and Whites because, based on what is known about race and party affiliations, Blacks have been more likely to affiliate with the Democratic Party. In regards to stances on gun control, another scholarly work found from mass surveying that 78 percent of Blacks supported stricter gun legislation compared to 57 percent of Whites (Stollwerk, Ray 2018). This proves that Whites oppose gun control at a far greater degree than Blacks do (O’Brien, Forrest, Lynott, Daly 2013).

A recent study found that racial prejudice influences white opinion regarding gun regulation in the contemporary US (Filindra & Kaplan 2015). The two authors’ hypothesis is, if a White gun owner is racially prejudice, then they are more likely to
oppose gun control (Filindra, Kaplan 2015). Filindra and Kaplan (2015) define racial resentment based not on the traditional ideas of racism, but rather on morality and values. There is a common belief amongst these racially prejudice gun owners that Blacks are lazy and heavily dependent on government intervention and legislation to progress in a capitalist society. Gun control reflects government intervention, and racially prejudice gun owners feel as if this gun control is infringing on their whiteness and superiority.

This disparity in gun ownership and attitudes between Black and White people are a result of the racist origins of gun control in the US. The history of gun control has been one of discrimination, oppression, and arbitrary enforcement (Tahmassebi 1991). Whereas, the legislative intent behind gun control statues was to decrease crime, violence and thereby ensure public safety, the underlying purpose was to keep blacks, immigrants, and native Americans (BIPOC) in check (Tahmassebi 1991). White people in America have utilized gun control as a means of preserving their monopoly on instruments of force for decades. Gun control has historically discriminated against minorities and poor people in this country. In the Antebellum era, state “Slave Codes” prohibited slaves from owning guns (Ekwall). Postbellum, states persisted in prohibiting blacks, now freemen, from owning guns under laws renamed “Black Codes” (Ekwall).

**Guns and Politics**

The partisan divide regarding gun legislation is a rather recent phenomenon. It wasn’t until 1980 that the NRA, for the first time since their founding in 1871, chose to influence electoral politics by endorsing Ronald Reagan and aligning with the Republican party (Winkler, Atlantic 2011). Ever since then, there has been a notable disparity
between Democrats and Republicans regarding gun ownership and attitudes to gun control. One study found that only Democratic senators swing back and forth on gun control during their tenure in office (Bouton 2014). The election proximity has a pro-gun effect on the voting behavior of Democratic senators. The reason for this is because politicians prefer to support interests of a vocal minority of single-issue voters, such as the NRA, on issues that are of secondary importance to rest of electorate (Bouton 2014). The NRA can reliably deliver votes because gun rights supporters are more likely to be single issue voters. These votes have a drastic effect on the outcome of the election which is why certain Democratic senators will vote pro-gun to keep their seat in office. Republicans, on the other hand, will always vote pro-gun because their policy preferences are aligned with their re-election motives (Bouton 2014). One survey collected from Pew Research Center clearly shows the partisan divide between Democrats and Republicans over guns. Some of the eye-opening findings include: 49% of individuals who identified as Republican owned guns compared to 22% of Democrats, 65% of Democrats see gun violence as a ‘very big’ problem compared to only 32% of Republicans, 72% of Republicans support allowing concealed carry of guns in more places compared to 26% of Democrats, and 64% of Democrats say there would be fewer mass shootings if there was greater restrictions to obtain guns compared to 27% of Republicans (Oliphant 2017). From these statistics alone, it is evident that these two sides are polarized in the debate regarding gun policy.

It is understandable why the NRA and the Republican party would align with each other. Both Republican partisanship and gun rights are inextricably tied. Values associated with gun culture in the US include individualism and opposition to
governmental intrusion into private citizens’ lives (Wolpert & Gimbel 1998). The current Republican party’s principles are very similar to those of gun rights advocates in that they advocate for conservative ideals such as limited government, a free and unregulated market, and rugged individualism. In addition, both gun rights and the current Republican party have upheld the maintenance of white supremacy. Gun rights supporters will always look to the 2nd Amendment in defense of keeping their guns. It is important to note that there is a hidden history of white supremacy in the individuals rights discourse of the 2nd Amendment (Emberton 2006). Gun rights advocates, today, support the concept of the individual right to self-defense for keeping their guns. This initial view was championed by the South Carolina KKK as justification for violating the 2nd amendment rights of the members of the Negro militia (Cornell & Florence 2010). After the Civil War, defeated Southerners attempted to re-establish their political dominance through militia (upholding white supremacy) that undermined the legitimacy of (Lincoln) Republican efforts at political reform by arresting, disarming, and assaulting black freedmen (Emberton 2006). Groups that engaged in these attacks against black freedmen included the KKK, rifle groups, and White leagues. These groups viewed the arming of a Black man as a threat to their power and the political order of the South (Emberton 2006). Fast forward to about a hundred years later, “the Black Panthers’ brazen insistence on the right to bear arms led whites, including conservative Republicans, to support new gun control” (Winkler, Atlantic 2011). What can be concluded from this is that White gun-owning individuals support the 2nd amendment only when it is benefitting them. The importance of the gun (signifying white pride and having American freedom/rights) has been passed down amongst White families via behavioral path dependence.
The Republican party, ever since the 1960s, reinforced and upheld white supremacy in the US through the Southern Strategy. The Southern Strategy was a plan enforced by the Republican party to politically realign the civilians of the US South to the Republican agenda. The strategy reframed the processes of racialization and economics that had previously dominated the political economy of the nation (Inwood 2015). It resurrected a broadly conservative agenda in the USA in the 1970s via neoliberalism (Inwood 2015). The Republicans took advantage of simmering class and race hostiles in the country by restoring historic class/race alliances between poor/working-class Whites and economic elites who had become destabilized through the US Great Depression and the growth of the Keynesian state. (Inwood 2015). By blending Southern ideologies of race and class, the Southern Strategy recreated historic patterns of white supremacy to a ‘softer’ and ‘subtler’ form of racism that is no less detrimental.
Data Collection and Methodology:

The collection of data and methodology for this thesis was inspired by previous research conducted by Dancy and Holman (2019) that analyzes the role political geography plays in whether gun control or gun rights legislation is introduced/sponsored by state legislators. Another body of scholarship that influenced the methodology of this paper was the book, Deep Roots, by Acharya, Blackwell, Sen (2018) that analyzes the legacy of slavery and how it has influenced Southern politics. The data for this research will derive from the data sets of Dancy and Holman (2019), Acharya, Blackwell, & Sen (2018) and the NCLS (National Conference of State Legislators).

The Dancy and Holman data is a comprehensive composition of all legislation addressing guns from 2011-2015. The data solely focuses on whether the legislation was introduced, not whether it was passed into law. The reason for the selection of legislation from the years of 2011-2015 was a result of its availability on the online database LegiScan. Out of 500,000+ bills found on the database, Dancy and Holman were able to detect 5,000 bills that related to gun rights expansion and control measures. Out of those 5,000 bills they found 2,312 bills related to gun rights. My research will analyze these bills to determine who is introducing gun rights legislation, focusing specifically on race and party identification, and how frequently they are introducing it. Understanding the race and partisanship of the legislator should help clearly determine whether a legislator introduces pro-gun legislation or not.

Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen’s data consists of the recorded count of enslaved people in the South deriving from the 1860 US Census. The 1860 Census was measured
because it represents the last record of enslaved people before slavery was abolished in 1865. Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen were looking at the proportion of each county’s population that was enslaved to explain the legacy of slavery in influencing Southern socio-political institutions and behaviors.

My thesis utilizes the 1860 counties’ data of enslaved people from Deep Roots, the demographics of state legislators from NCLS.org, and the gun legislation data from Dancy and Holman to determine whether slavery influences who will be most active on gun rights legislation in the South. When looking at the correlation between slavery and socio-political behavior in the South, it becomes clear that areas that once had a high percentage of enslaved people are more politically conservative today (as is proven by Deep Roots). White people coordinated to provide an informal social infrastructure to maintain as much economic and political power as possible, that was previously guaranteed to them during slavery. This thesis takes that knowledge a step further in claiming that within this heightened political conservatism lies the support of gun rights.

Historically, the gun has been a symbol of white economic, political, and social power. Guns have historically been associated with White Americans due to the racist origins of gun control which have deliberately prevented BIPOC from obtaining them. Some White people in America have utilized gun control as a means of preserving their monopoly on the instruments of force. Previous research has found a correlation between racial resentment and support for gun rights indicating that, “the gun rights narrative is color-coded and evocative of racial resentment” (Filindra & Kaplan 2015). Filindra & Kaplan’s research found that more racially prejudice a White person is the more likely
they are to be pro-gun and anti-gun control. Guns have been a marker of white privilege in this country. Therefore, pro-gun legislation is a means of preserving white identity, supremacy, and political power in America today. My claim is that slavery contributes to who makes the decisions to introduce pro-gun legislation in the South and how frequently they are introduced. It’s very likely that my research will uncover that these decision makers are generally Southern White Republicans. Slavery’s effects can still be seen today through the opinions of representatives and lawmakers with respect to whether pro-gun legislation is enforced or introduced.

The independent variables in this thesis are the historical 1860 enslaved population data and the race and party affiliation of the state legislators. The dependent variable is the average N of gun rights bills introduced by those legislators. I anticipate a positive relationship between the 1860 enslaved concentration data and the average N of gun rights bills introduced by White state legislators. Historically high enslaved population counties will influence the state legislators of those counties to introduce pro-gun legislation at a greater number than that of low enslaved counties.

**Dependent Variable: Average N of Gun Rights Bills Introduced**

My dependent variable looks at the set, “of 4,725 bills that were definitely related to gun rights or gun control, to 2,454 bills relating to gun control and 2,312 bills relating to gun rights” and the background of the state legislators who introduced them, including: race, partisanship, and district (Dancy & Holman 8). Thanks to Dancy and Holman, the racial, political, and district information of all the legislators from the 2011-2015 via LegiScan was already compiled.
From that information, I sought to establish a table that categorizes those identities and the average N of gun rights bills introduced based upon those identities. Based upon the historical and socio-political information presented in the literature review, I anticipate the group, that will introduce the highest average N of gun rights bills to be White, Republican Legislators from high enslaved population districts.

I measure the average N by the looking at the number of gun rights bills being introduced by all Southern state legislators. This information was able to be accessed from the LegiScan data. What I found is that the average state legislator, during their time in office, introduces less than one gun rights bill per legislative session. Most legislators, nationally, don’t even introduce one piece of gun rights legislation. The average is created by dividing the amount of gun rights legislation introduced by each legislator in the data set over 4 years of gun rights legislation (2011-2015) being analyzed via LegiScan. We determine that any Average N above 0.5 indicates that the state legislator has a high probability of introducing pro-gun bill introduction.

**Independent Variable 1: Race and Partisanship**

**Table 1.** Summary Data on Racial Identity of Legislators in U.S South (NCLS.org 2015)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STATE</th>
<th>% OF WHITE LEGISLATORS</th>
<th>% OF BLACK LEGISLATORS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TEXAS</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARKANSAS</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOUTH CAROLINA</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tables 1 and 2 present a 2015 breakdown of state legislator racial identity and party affiliation across the U.S South. The data was acquired from ncls.org which provide various demographic summaries of state legislatures and their legislators. I sought to select states that historically had joined the Confederacy before the Civil War. The selection of Southern states that were once a part of the Confederacy is used to highlight the legacy of slavery. All of these states, at a point in time, supported and benefitted off
the peculiar institution. The 2015 NCLS data set was selected so that it could be easily be paired to the bills from 2011-2015 (for accuracy) that were collected by Dancy and Holman via LegiScan. With the size of state legislative bodies ranging from 135 people in Arkansas to 236 people in Georgia, the amount of Black legislators range from about 15 people in Arkansas to 59 people in Georgia. What can be deduced from the first data set is that White legislators are represented at least 2.5 times more than that of Black legislators in every state presented. The second data set also shows how the Republican party controls 50% or more of every Southern state’s legislative body (with the exception of Virginia in 2020). These two data sets display that the legislative bodies of these 11 Southern states are governed and dictated by primarily White and Republican legislators.

As proven through the literature review, both of these identities have had historical ties to the support of gun rights in America. From the data above, it is quite evident that Whiteness and Republicanism dominate the makeup of state legislatures in the South. This prevalence should result in the probability of a legislator introducing gun rights bills increasing.
Independent Variable 2: Legacy of Slavery

Figure 1. Map of 1860 Slave Concentration from the US Census using modern county boundaries (Deriving from Deep Roots 2018).

Figure 1 displays the basis for my argument in this thesis: the legacy of slavery in the US South influences that average N of gun bills introduced by state legislators. The legacy of slavery is tested by analyzing at the share of the population enslaved from the 1860 US Census. My independent variable was inspired by the research conducted by Acharya, Blackwell, Sen (2018), which looked at the legacy of slavery and how it influences the politics and attitudes of Southern Whites today. Their ultimate conclusion is that, “history plays a deep and important role in how we understand contemporary political attitudes, and by extension, contemporary politics” (Acharya, Blackwell, Sen 21).
The way in which history shapes these contemporary beliefs is via channels of institutional and behavioral path dependence. This concept of path dependence in Southern politics suggests that, “significant historical forces, and the attendant political economic and political incentives that they produce, can create patterns that pass down through generations over time – and these patterns can outlast the original institutions and incentives” (Acharya, Blackwell, Sen 12). Acknowledging path dependence is crucial in understanding the relationship between slavery and the support, backing, and introduction of gun rights legislation in the US South.

The unit of analysis that was used in Deep Roots was the county. My unit of analysis is the district. The story of this paper is primarily about a story of place. In the context of this paper, this place of focus is the American South. The US South was a region whose entire economic system relied off the backs of enslaved Black individuals forced into free labor. What Deep Roots successfully conveys is that slavery, its collapse, Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights Movement greatly influenced White Southerner’s racial and political attitudes. Where a person lives is generally a strong foreteller of their heritage and social/political behaviors. That is why the focus of this paper is on the individual and the place. In the theme of this paper, the individual is the legislators and the place is the districts’ of the American South.

One of the major obstacles of this thesis was trying to adjust the county boundaries of the state to match that of the historical boundaries of the Antebellum South. In many cases, there are many more counties that exist today than that did in the Old South. Thankfully, the authors of Deep Roots resolve this issue by using, “areal
weighting to interpolate data from the 1860 Census onto modern county boundaries” (Acharya, Blackwell, Sen 219). I will composite the district level data of enslaved people, inspired by Deep Roots, with the district data displaying the average amount of gun rights bills introduced by state legislators (from Holman and Dancy)—to eventually find a correlation between the two, which I predict will be positive.

I split the districts into categories of either high enslaved or low enslaved. It was found that about 35% of the Antebellum South was enslaved during 1860. High slave is anything above 35% and low enslaved is anything below that.

It can be said that legislators act within the interests of themselves and their constituents. Legislators represent the people of their area. If those people hail from high enslaved population areas, then it can be concluded, thanks to Deep Roots, that many of these White individuals should be some of the most conservative people in the country. Within that heightened political and racial conservatism lies the support for gun rights. As a result, it would make logical sense that the legislators of that particular area would be inclined to sponsor and introduce gun rights legislation that benefitted the people and get reelected—in efforts to maintain government power.

**Control Variables**

While the focus of this paper is on how The Legacy of Slavery, Race, and Partisanship impact the introduction of gun rights legislation, it is important to factor in additional variables that may also be of influence to pro-gun legislators. Additionally, just knowing a legislator’s party or race is not enough to determine whether they will introduce gun rights legislation. While the previous data shows that Southern White
Republicans introduce gun rights legislation the most out of any other group analyzed, who is to say that their race and party are the sole determinants of that. It is known that there are many Republicans that do not sponsor or introduce gun rights bills, just as there are Democrats who do. It is important to look deeper into outside factors that may have some control on why these instances occur. As a result, it calls attention to how interest groups and certain characteristics of the population in districts may contribute to the law-making behavior of state legislators.

Regarding interest groups, one particular group, the NRA, stands out amongst the pack. The National Rifle Association of America is a gun rights advocacy group that is best known for their efforts to loosen firearms restrictions and combat important gun regulations. The NRA has extreme influence on the gun policy debate in the US and, “Representatives from both parties are more likely to introduce gun rights bills when they receive donations from the NRA” (Dancy & Holman 19). While the NRA does matter, the district level population factors also are worth highlighting.

There are numerous reasons to believe that local attitudes on guns, especially in districts, are a relevant variable influencing legislative activity. This country’s political system is built off the notion that democratically appointed officials would not solely advance their own interest but the interest of the people that elected them. These elected representatives were chosen to represent their respective geographic area. As a result of this, legitimate legislators should act and behave differently depending on the interests of their home district. Ways to determine the interests of a district’s population in regards to guns can be based on elements such as the amount of gun sellers in a district, rural vs. urban, median income, and proximity to gun violence.
Since finding data on the demand for gun rights in the South, based upon the amount of gun owners is very challenging, tracking the amount of gun sellers is the best solution. The Dancy and Holman research found that, “The number of licensed gun sellers in each legislative district is positively associated with gun rights legislation sponsorship” (17). It is reported that in the US alone there are over 60,000 gun dealers. The amount of gun dealers were defined on the basis of “two ATF classifications: ‘Dealer in firearms other than destructive devices (including gunsmiths)’ and ‘pawnbroker in firearms other than destructive devices.’” (Garfield, Business Insider).

What the author, Leanna Garfield of Business Insider, found was that if, “gun manufacturers, collectors, and importers [were to be included], the national figure would be higher (132,799). Gun dealers would outnumber public schools (98,000 as of 2014)” (Business Insider 2017). It only makes sense to believe that more gun dealers there are in a district, the more likely that the representative of that district is going to protect the right to bear arms due to the economic demand.

The rural vs. urban divide is also another important determinant on a legislator’s policymaking behavior. One study found that 46% of rural citizens reported having a gun in the house compared to 19% of urban citizens (Igielnik & Brown 2017). As was stated in a separate article by Dancy and Holman, “Politicians who hope to succeed in predominantly rural areas can therefore mobilize support by rallying around a defense of the Second Amendment” (186, Journal of Law & Policy).

Median income has also shown to be influential in a legislator’s lawmaking decisions regarding gun rights. Studies have displayed how the higher the median income
of a household the more likely a legislator from that district will introduce gun rights bills.

The last component to determine a population’s gun rights policy attitude is in regards violent crime rate. There are multiple studies that have found that areas with violent crime, generally involving assaults with guns, are more likely to be skeptical towards making firearms more accessible. Exposure to gun violence contributes to repulsion towards guns. It would be correct to assume areas with higher crime rates should have positive attitudes towards gun control. This proximity to violence in districts has intersections with race and geography, that are worth noting. Dancy and Holman found that, “gun rights legislation is not prevalent in districts with higher crime rates, but is more prevalent in those that have larger rural populations, have a higher percentage of White occupants, and have greater gun commerce” (175, Journal of Law & Policy). A study that scoped on death certificate data on homicides/suicides between Blacks and Whites across the US was conducted by researchers Riddell, Harper, Cerda, and Kaufman (2018). Through their analysis of 84,113 homicides and 251,722 suicides, they discovered that Black males experienced 27 more gun homicides (per 100,000 people) than White males (Riddell, Harper, Cerda, Kaufman 2018). While those statistics are rather shocking, they reflect the nationwide comparison. Since black people statistically are more prone to gun violence in the forms of homicides and police violence, they wish to see restrictions and bans on the use of guns because of the damage and despair guns have caused in their community. This finding allows for one to understand a credible reason why Black people are more likely to support gun control today. Black people also tend to hail more in urban areas compared to White people. White people, “have become
a minority of the population in most urban counties since 2000, while remaining the majority in 90% of suburban and small metro counties and 89% of rural ones” (Parker, Horowitz, Brown, et.al 2018).
Findings:

What best predicts the probability of gun rights legislation being introduced?

What role does slavery and its collapse play in the support/introduction of pro-gun bills?

As described throughout this thesis, there are three general prevailing accounts for the reasons behind the amount of gun rights bills introduced. Common wisdom holds that the region of the US South, Republicans, and NRA-sponsored politicians hold significant influence in whether a legislator will introduce gun rights bills. My paper digs deeper into why these respective groups love their guns and how this is interconnected with several other variables. While being a Southern Republican sponsored by the NRA most likely increases the probability of a legislator introducing gun rights legislation, this thesis turns to alternate explanations as well such as the race of the legislator and the legacy of slavery in these Southern states. The focus of my paper analyzes the impact that race, partisanship, and slavery have on the average amount of gun rights bills introduced by a state legislator. My dataset allows me to evaluate these concepts head on utilizing in-depth statistics.
What my data discovered was that race and partisanship play a significant role in the introduction of gun rights bills nationwide and in the South. We start with Chart 1 which provides the breakdown of how race, partisanship, and geography play a role in the average N of gun rights bills introduced. The chart makes some patterns evident.

**Chart 1.** Breakdown of Legislators’ Avg. N of Gun Bills Introduced based upon Race, Partisanship, and Geography

With regards to race, out of the 2,312 bills relating to gun rights, White legislators (Average N= 0.61) introduce gun rights legislation about 3 times more frequently than Black legislators (Average N= 0.18), nationwide. When comparing racial groups in the South, White legislators (Average N=0.69) introduce gun rights bills 5 times more often than do Black legislators (Average N= 0.12). This clearly shows that race and geography are key indicators of pro-gun bill introduction.
When looking at partisanship in the South, it is quite clear that the Republican party strongly supports gun rights legislation. The GOP legislators in the South (Average N=0.908) introduce gun rights bills 4.5 times more often than do Southern Democratic legislators (Average N=0.208). While Southern Black Republicans (Average N=0.723) indicate to be active on gun rights bill introduction, the statistic is rather insignificant due to the minuscule number of Black Republican legislators in the South.

When compiling data on race, partisanship, and geography, we find that my predictions were correct. White Republicans in the South are introducing the most gun rights legislation compared to any other group in America with an average N of 0.910. The group that introduces gun rights legislation the least are Black Democrats in the South, with an average N of 0.081. From these findings alone, it is quite evident that gun rights legislation is heavily influenced by political, racial, and cultural purposes. The data shared below from The Legacy of Slavery synthesizes these causal factors, proving their relevance beyond the simple sheer will to want to keep one’s guns for protection and/or recreational purposes.
Next, we evaluate the influence of slavery and its collapse on the introduction of gun rights legislation. Chart 2 depicts the visible discrepancy between high enslaved and low enslaved districts in the South, with regards to pro-gun bill introduction. These high enslaved and low enslaved districts were constructed by utilizing the Deep Roots 1860 county data of enslaved populations in the South and interpolating it with the current districts of the South.

One can see that out of every category, except Black Democrats in the South, high enslaved districts result in more gun rights bills being introduced than low enslaved districts. We see that the group that is most active on gun rights legislation are White Republicans in high slave districts with an Average N of 1.212. The second most active pro-gun introduction group are Republicans in high enslaved districts with an average N
of 1.106. The group that is least active on gun rights bill introduction are Black Democrats in high enslaved districts with an Average N of 0.078. Black Southern Democrats are the only group to have negative correlation with regards to gun rights bill introduction. High enslaved districts results in less gun rights bills being introduced compared to low enslaved districts.

When adding the legacy of slavery component to the discussion surrounding gun rights bill introduction, we see that, quantitatively, it results in a higher average N than that of just race and partisanship. We know that the group that introduces the most gun rights legislation are Southern White Republicans with an average N of 0.910. When the legacy of slavery is incorporated, we see that Southern White Republicans from high enslaved districts have a noticeably higher average N of 1.212.

What this implies is that my data findings correspond with that of the Deep Roots findings. Once high enslaved population areas result in individuals, politicians, and legislators from that area being more politically conservative on array of issues, which have been aligned with the modern day Republican party-- including gun rights. What Deep Roots proved and what I also affirm is that within that extreme conservatism lies the maintenance of white supremacy. As has been discussed previously, guns have been a symbol of white pride and identity in America. Slavery and its collapse has led to racially conservative Whites to latch onto to their guns as a means of political power and white pride. While this can quantitatively not be proven, previous research and literature can support this claim.

We next evaluate the degree to which my variables influence the introduction of gun rights bills in Table 3 (below). I present my core variables of interest, a model with a
full set of controls, and models showing how those core variables intersect. My core variables include: the legacy of slavery, race, partisanship and control factors including: the number of gun sellers, the percent of the district classified as rural, violent crime rate, NRA grade, the median income, etc.

What we see from the first column in this table is being a Republican is statically significant (as shown by the 3 stars) in determining whether a legislator introduces gun rights bills or not. The Republican variable has the highest numerical coefficient in the first column with a 0.4549, displaying the greatest degree of influence on the dependent variable (compared to the other controls). The second column displays a statistically significant positive relationship with the legacy of slavery variable. As the share of the enslaved population in 1860 grows larger, the probability increases of a legislator introducing gun rights bills. The slavery variable has the highest coefficient out of all of the controls in the second column with a 0.5030. Since the legacy of slavery variable has a larger coefficient than that of the Republican variable it can be inferred that the legacy of slavery has the greatest degree of influence on the introduction of gun rights bills. Columns 3 and 4 of Table 3, expound on the relationship between slavery & race and slavery & partisanship which are further explained in Figures 2 and 3.

Table 3. Gun Rights Legislation Core Variables and Controls

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Standard errors in parentheses
Dependent variable: Number of gun rights bills introduced ^ p<.10, * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001
Figure 2. Relationship between Legacy of Slavery and Race of Legislator w/ regards to Gun Rights Bill Introduction

Figure 2 displays how slavery influences the probability of White and Black legislators introducing gun rights bills in the South. The figure is looking at the intersection between race and slavery (two of my independent variables) which I predicted would influence the introduction gun rights bills. When looking at the line that represents White legislators, we see an upwards trend. What this implies is as the share of enslaved population from 1860 increases so does the probability that White legislators will introduce gun rights bills. In comparison, we see the opposite trend occurring amongst Black legislators. There is a downward trend implying that the higher the enslaved population the less likely that Black legislators will introduce gun rights bills.
These findings further validate my argument, influenced by Deep Roots, that high enslaved population areas result in White people from those areas being the most politically conservative on an array of issues such as gun rights.

**Figure 3.** Relationship between Legacy of Slavery and Partisanship of Legislator w/ regards to Gun Rights Bill Introduction

Figure 3 depicts how slavery impacts the likelihood of Democrats and Republican lawmakers from the South introducing gun rights bills. This figure just like the one above is looking at the intersection between my independent variables: partisanship and the legacy of slavery. One can see that as the share of the enslaved population increases so does the probability that both Republican and Democratic legislators will introduce gun rights bills. This may come to surprise as previous literature and findings suggest that gun rights bills are surely an extension of the Republican party’s agenda. While it is common
knowledge that the Republican party has ties to pro-gun advocacy, it is not correct to assume that Republicans only introduce gun rights and Democrats only introduce gun control. This figure clearly shows how partisanship is not the sole indicator of whether a legislator introduces gun rights legislation. While we see that the probability increases for both party’s legislators it is important to see how the slope for Republicans is far steeper than that of Democrats. This implies that probability for Republicans introducing gun rights bills is far greater than that of Democrats. As was stated earlier in this paper, anything above an average N of 0.5 most likely indicates that the legislator is a gun rights supporter/introducer. Despite the slope for the Democrats slowly increasing with the share of the population enslaved, their peak average N lies around 0.5, suggesting that introducing gun rights per legislative session is still rather unlikely for the Southern Democrats
Conclusion:

American glorification of guns and conflicting interpretations of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} amendment have caused the nation tragic loss in the form of casualties of gun violence. Recurring news reports of homicides and mass shootings have caused the nation’s lawmakers to engage in a crucial debate over the loosening or tightening of gun restrictions. The two sides in this debate include gun rights advocates and gun control advocates.

From the various scholarly works included in this paper, it can be concluded that slavery has influenced the socio-economic and political hierarchy of not only Southern politics, but the entire US political system. Studies have shown how once high enslaved population areas have contributed to an extremely conservative approach and racial bias amongst Southern White people. This conservative stance includes actively supporting Republican candidates, the death penalty, and gun rights.

Racial identity plays a crucial role in a person’s association towards guns in America. This is shown through disparities in gun ownership, gun attitudes, and reasons for gun ownership. Multiple sources have proven how White people are more likely to own guns and oppose gun control. One particular study found that the more racially conservative a White person is, the more likely they are to oppose gun control. Gun control in America has its origins in racism and discrimination against minority populations. Throughout America’s history, there have been laws and codes put in place to prevent BIPOC from obtaining and using guns. Guns are viewed as a sense of white pride and supremacy amongst many White gun advocates.
Partisanship is another factor that contributes to an individual’s position on guns in the US. There is a noticeable divide between the Democratic and Republican party members regarding gun attitudes and legislation. This polarization on the issue of guns is a relatively recent phenomenon. In fact, Gun control did not become a partisan issue until the 70s and 80s. The NRA (which ironically didn’t start off as a gun control opposition group) publicly endorsed Reagan and the Republican Party. Prior to that endorsement and alliance, the NRA was not engaged in electoral politics. Around the same time there was a conversion of Southern Whites (of all socio-economic classes) to the Republican party, known as the Southern Strategy. The Southern Strategy reframed processes of racialization and economics that had previously dominated the political economy of the nation since slavery.

In summary, this thesis has provided great value in understanding how slavery, race, and partisanship have influenced whether Southern legislators introduce gun rights legislation. Our results show that Southern White Republican legislators hailing from once high enslaved population districts introduce gun rights legislation at a far greater degree than their low enslaved population district counterparts. There is a positive relationship between the share of the enslaved population and the probability that White legislators introduce gun rights bills. Intersecting a legislator’s Whiteness and Republican affiliation with a legacy of slavery only enhances the probability.

As a result of political stalemate in Congress and the Supreme Court on cases such as Heller vs Washington DC and McDonald v. City of Chicago, state legislatures have become the key decision-makers for gun legislation. Gun legislation generally makes up a significant amount of all legislation introduced, with more than 1% of bills
being introduced in 2015. Because of these instances, looking at bills from this time period and understanding who is introducing these bills and why, are essential. This paper showed us that gun rights legislation is a result of political and cultural urges. The political and cultural legacy of the South is rooted in white supremacy as a result of slavery and its collapse. For many gun rights advocates in the South guns are simply a representation of white nationalist pride and identity.

I conclude this paper by taking a step back from the quantitative findings and asking some important questions as food of thought. While this paper found that a relationship between the legacy of slavery and gun rights support exists in the US South, how do we truly know that slavery and white supremacy are the reason behind my findings? What do my results truly tell us?

On one hand, they confirm what many scholars, political scientists, and historians have observed: once high enslaved population areas in the South result in more conservative White people who are (on average) more affiliated with the Republican party, more against policies that promote racial equality, and more racially resentful than other areas in the South. In addition, the more racially conservative a White person is the more likely there are to be in support of gun rights. We also know that guns have been monopolized throughout America’s history to be catered towards and used by White people. From these past observations alone, we know that a correlation exists between Whiteness, conservatism, and guns in America.

On the other hand, as Deep Roots has proven, areas where the institution of slavery
was an essential component of White people’s cultural, economic, and political lives result in current Whites being more conservative, especially considering issues of race. This clearly shows how the past plays a role in modern day politics. It’s not that more conservative people live in these areas, it’s that these areas are more conservative as a result of their past (Acharya, Blackwell, Sen 75). While my paper did not test the mechanisms through which one could see how slavery and white supremacy truly play a role in modern day policymaking, further research can hopefully expand on this paper to find the ways in which we could evaluate these mechanisms.
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