

LESSON TOPIC

The Impact of Race Upon Our Democracy

OBJECTIVES

- I will be able to explore the relationships between race, population numbers, political parties, and elections.

STANDARDS

- Social Studies 12.G4d: The United States and New York have political party systems, and the political parties represent specific political, economic, and social philosophies. Debate over the role and influence of political parties continues, although they play a significant role in United States elections and politics. The role of political parties and the platforms they represent varies between states in the United States.

READING

Undemocratic Democracy by Jamelle Bouie, pp. 50 – 55

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Vocabulary

Define the following terms.

- Gerrymander –
- Hierarchy –
- Illegitimate –
- Liberty –
- Majority –
- Nullify –

Phrase

Explain what this phrase means in your own words.

*“He may have been elected by a majority of the voting public, but the majority didn’t count.
It didn’t represent the ‘real’ America.”*

DURING-READING ACTIVITY

Confirm-Challenge-Question

As you read through the passage, complete the graphic organizer below.

Confirm What information in this passage confirms the story of American History that you have already learned?	Challenge What information in this article is new to you or challenges the story of American History that you have already learned?	Question What questions do you have about what you have read?

POST-READING ACTIVITY

Reflection

Respond to the following prompts.

3 key words from the reading passage:

--	--	--

2 things I learned from the reading passage:

--	--

1 personal connection I can make with the reading passage:

--

EXTENDED LEARNING

Optional activities for extending your learning.

- 1. Write a poem that connects your personal experiences and emotions to the information in this reading passage.*
- 2. Create a visual by making a poster or drawing an editorial cartoon to illustrate the key themes in this reading passage.*
- 3. Consider connections to social justice advocacy. Determine a person in power you could write a letter to and draft a letter to that person. This could be a mayor, superintendent, owner of a company, etc.*
- 4. Research 3 online resources that connect to the key themes in this reading passage. For example: video clip, news article, virtual field trip site.*

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

By Jamelle Bouie

• To vote for a write-in candidate, completely darken the oval (●) to the left of the blank line and write in the candidate's name. Only votes cast for candidates who filed as write-in candidates can be counted.

For President
Richard Dancel
For Vice President
Ricky Johnson
Integrity Candidate

For President
Henry Clinton
For Vice President
Tom Kuba
Integrity

For President
Darius J. Trump
For Vice President
Michael H. Pore
Integrity

For President
Gary Johnson
For Vice President
Michele Bach

For President
[Faded Name]
For Vice President
[Faded Name]

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

It was clear, at the start of that year, that Congress would have to lift the debt ceiling — the limit on bonds and other debt instruments the government issues when it doesn't have the revenues to fulfill spending obligations. These votes were often opportunities for grandstanding and occasionally brinkmanship by politicians from both parties. But it was understood that, when push came to shove, Congress would lift the limit and the government would pay its obligations.

2011 was different. Congressional Republicans, led by the new Tea Party conservatives, wanted to repeal the Affordable Care Act and make other sharp cuts to the social safety net. But Democrats controlled the Senate and the White House. So House Republicans decided to take a hostage. "I'm asking you to look at a potential increase in the debt limit as a leverage moment when the White House and President Obama will have to deal with us," said the incoming majority leader, Eric Cantor, at a closed-door retreat days before the session began, according to *The Washington Post*. Either the White House would agree to harsh austerity measures or Republicans would force the United States to default on its debt obligations, precipitating an economic crisis just as the country, and the world, was beginning to recover from the Great Recession.

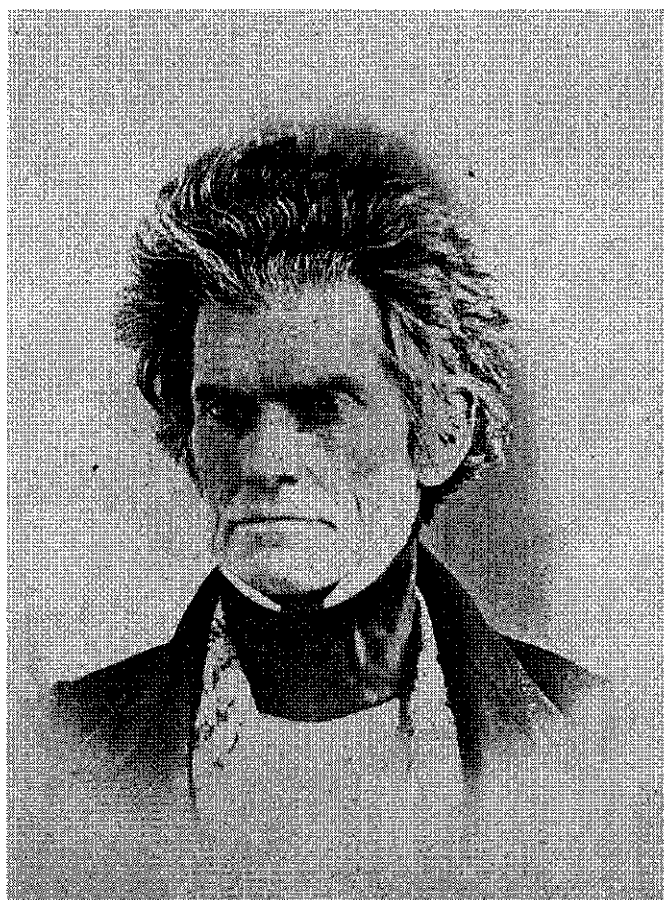
The debt-limit standoff was a case study of a fundamental change within the Republican Party after Obama took office in 2009. Republicans would either win total victory or they would wreck the system itself. The Senate Republican leader, Mitch McConnell, used a variety of procedural tactics to effectively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

majority, after Republicans won the Senate in the 2010 midterm elections, he led an extraordinary blockade of the Supreme Court, stopping the Senate from even considering the president's nominee for the bench.

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

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

The plantations that dotted the landscape of the antebellum South produced the commodities that fueled the nation's early growth. Enslaved people working in glorified labor camps picked cotton, grew indigo, harvested resin from trees for turpentine and generated additional capital in the form of their children, bought, sold and securitized on the open market. But plantations didn't just produce goods; they produced ideas too. Enslaved laborers developed an understanding of the society in which they lived. The people who enslaved them, likewise, constructed elaborate sets of beliefs, customs and ideologies meant to justify their positions in



John C. Calhoun, perhaps the most prominent political theorist of the slaveholding South and an influence on modern right-wing thinking.

this economic and social hierarchy. Those ideas permeated the entire South, taking deepest root in places where slavery was most entrenched.

South Carolina was a paradigmatic slave state. Although the majority of enslavers resided in the "low country," with its large rice and cotton plantations, nearly the entire state participated in plantation agriculture and the slave economy. By 1820 most South Carolinians were enslaved Africans. By midcentury, the historian Manisha Sinha notes in "The Counterrevolution of Slavery," it was the first Southern state where a majority of the white population held slaves.

Not surprisingly, enslavers dominated the state's political class. "Carolinian rice aristocrats and the cotton planters from the hinterland," Sinha writes, "formed an intersectional ruling class, bound together

by kinship, economic, political and cultural ties." The government they built was the most undemocratic in the Union. The slave-rich districts of the coasts enjoyed nearly as much representation in the Legislature as more populous regions in the interior of the state. Statewide office was restricted to wealthy property owners. To even qualify for the governorship, you needed a large, debt-free estate. Rich enslavers were essentially the only people who could participate in the highest levels of government. To the extent that there were popular elections, they were for the lowest levels of government, because the State Legislature tended to decide most high-level offices.

But immense power at home could not compensate for declining power in national politics. The growth of the free Northwest threatened Southern dominance in Congress. And the

Left: From the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. Right: From Bettmann/Getty Images.



Southern college students at the Southern Democratic Convention in 1848, the year that segregationists began to break with the national Democratic Party over civil rights.

slaveholding planter class would witness the rise of an organized movement to stop the expansion of slavery and curb the power enslavers held over key institutions like the Senate and the Supreme Court.

Out of this atmosphere of fear and insecurity came a number of thinkers and politicians who set their minds to protecting South Carolina and the rest of the slaveholding South from a hostile North. Arguably the most prominent and accomplished of these planter-politicians was John C. Calhoun. Vice president under John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson, secretary of state under John Tyler and eventually a United States senator representing the state. Calhoun was a deep believer in the system of slavery — which he called a “positive good” that “forms the most solid and durable foundation

on which to rear free and stable institutions”— and a committed advocate for the slave-owning planter class. He was an astute politician, but he made his most important mark as a theoretician of reaction: a man who, realizing that democracy could not protect slavery in perpetuity, set out to limit democracy.

Calhoun popularized the concept of “nullification”: the theory that any state subject to federal law was entitled to invalidate it. He first advanced the idea in an anonymous letter, written when he was vice president, protesting the Tariff of 1828, which sought to protect Northern industry and agriculture from foreign competitors. Calhoun condemned it as an unconstitutional piece of regional favoritism.

The South may have been part of the pro-Andrew Jackson majorities

in Congress, but that wasn’t enough for Calhoun, who wanted absolute security for the region and its economic interests. Demographic and political change doomed it to be a “permanent minority”: “Our geographical position, our industry, pursuits and institutions are all peculiar.” Against a domineering North, he argued, “representation affords not the slightest protection.”

“It is, indeed, high time for the people of the South to be roused to a sense of impending calamities — on an early and full knowledge of which their safety depends,” Calhoun wrote in an 1831 report to the South Carolina Legislature. “It is time that they should see and feel that ... they are in a permanent and hopeless minority on the great and vital connected questions.”

His solution lay in the states. To Calhoun, there was no “union” *per se*. Instead, the United States was simply a compact among sovereigns with distinct, and often competing, sectional interests. This compact could only survive if all sides had equal say on the meaning of the Constitution and the shape and structure of the law. Individual states, Calhoun thought, should be able to veto federal laws if they thought the federal government was favoring one state or section over another. The union could only act with the assent of the entire whole — what Calhoun called “the concurrent majority” — as opposed to the Madisonian idea of rule by numerical majority, albeit mediated by compromise and consensus.

Calhoun initially lost the tariff fight, which pitted him against an obstinate Andrew Jackson, but he did not give up on nullification. He expanded on the theory at the end of his life, proposing an alternative system of government that gave political minorities a final say over majority action. In this “concurrent government,” each “interest or portion of the community” has an equal say in approving the actions of the state. Full agreement would be necessary to “put the government in motion.” Only through this, Calhoun argued, would the “different interests, orders, classes, or portions, into which the community may be divided, can be protected.”

The government Calhoun envisioned would protect “liberty”: not the liberty of the citizen but the liberty of the master, the liberty of those who claimed a right to property and a position at the top of a racial and economic hierarchy. This liberty, Calhoun stated, was “a reward to be earned, not a blessing to be gratuitously lavished on all alike — a reward reserved for the intelligent, the patriotic, the virtuous and deserving — and not a boon to be bestowed on a people too ignorant, degraded and vicious, to be capable either of appreciating or of enjoying it.” It is striking how much this echoes contemporary arguments against the expansion of democracy. In 2012, for example, a Tea Party congressional candidate from Florida said that voting is a “privilege” and seemed to endorse property requirements for participation.

Calhoun died in 1850. Ten years later, following the idea of nullification to its conclusion, the South seceded from the Union after Abraham Lincoln won the White House without a single Southern state. War came a few months later, and four years of fighting destroyed the system of slavery Calhoun fought to protect. But parts of his legacy survived. His deep suspicion of majoritarian democracy — his view that government must protect interests, defined by their unique geographic and economic characteristics, more than people — would inform the sectional politics of the South in the 20th century, where solid blocs of Southern lawmakers worked collectively to stifle any attempt to regulate the region.

Despite insurgencies at home — the Populist Party, for example, swept through Georgia and North Carolina in the 1890s — reactionary white leaders were able to maintain an iron grip on federal offices until the Voting Rights Act of 1965. And even then, the last generation of segregationist senators held on through the 1960s into the early 2000s. United, like their predecessors, by geography and their stake in Jim Crow segregation, they were a powerful force in national politics, a bloc that vetoed

anything that touched their regional prerogatives.

Anti-lynching laws and some pro-labor legislation died at the hands of lawmakers from the "Solid South" who took advantage of Senate rules like the filibuster to effectively enact Calhoun's idea of a concurrent majority against legislation that threatened the Southern racial status quo; the spirit of nullification lived on. When Northern liberal Democrats added a civil rights plank to the party platform at the 1948 presidential convention, in an effort to break the Southern conservatives' hold on the party, 35 delegates from Mississippi and Alabama walked out in protest: the prologue to the "Dixiecrat Revolt" that began the conservative migration into the eventual embrace of the Republican Party.

Calhoun's idea that states could veto the federal government would return as well following the decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, as segregationists announced "massive resistance" to federal desegregation mandates and sympathizers defended white Southern actions with ideas and arguments that cribbed from Calhoun and recapitulated enslaver ideology for modern American politics. "The central question that emerges," the *National Review* founding editor William F. Buckley Jr. wrote in 1957, amid congressional debate over the first Civil Rights Act, "is whether the white community in the South is entitled to take such measures as are necessary to prevail, politically and culturally, in areas which it does not predominate numerically? The sobering answer is *yes* — the white community is so entitled because, for the time being, it is the advanced race." He continued: "It is more important for any community, anywhere in the world, to affirm and live by civilized standards, than to bow to the demands of the numerical majority."

It is a strikingly blunt defense of Jim Crow and affirmation of white supremacy from the father of the conservative movement. Conservatives drove the groundswell that made Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, an opponent of the Civil Rights Act, the 1964 Republican Party nominee for president. He lost in a landslide but won the Deep

South (except for Florida), where the white people of the region — among the most conservative in the country, a direct legacy of slavery and the society it built — flocked to the candidate who stood against the constitutional demands of the black-freedom movement. Goldwater may have insisted that there are "some rights that are clearly protected by valid laws and are therefore 'civil rights,'" but he also declared that "states' rights" were "disappearing under the piling sands of absolutism" and called *Brown v. Board* an "unconstitutional trespass into the legislative sphere of government." "I therefore support all efforts by the States, excluding violence, of course," Goldwater wrote in "The Conscience of a Conservative," "to preserve their rightful powers over education."

Later, when key civil rights questions had been settled by law, Buckley would essentially renounce these views, praising the movement and criticizing race-baiting demagogues like George C. Wallace. Still, his initial impulse — to give political minorities a veto not just over policy but over democracy itself — reflected a tendency that would express itself again and again in the conservative politics he ushered into the mainstream, emerging when political, cultural and demographic change threatened a narrow, exclusionary vision of American democracy. Writing in the 1980s and '90s, Samuel Francis — a polemicist who would eventually migrate to the very far right of American conservatism — identified this dynamic in the context of David Duke's campaign for governor of Louisiana:

"Reagan conservatism, in its innermost meaning, had little to do with supply-side economics and spreading democracy. It had to do with the awakening of a people who face political, cultural and economic dispossession, who are slowly beginning to glimpse the fact of dispossession and what dispossession will mean for them and their descendants, and who also are starting to think about reversing the processes and powers responsible for their dispossession."

There is a homegrown ideology of reaction in the United States,

inextricably tied to our system of slavery. And while the racial content of that ideology has attenuated over time, the basic framework remains: fear of rival political majorities; of demographic "replacement"; of a government that threatens privilege and hierarchy.

The past 10 years of Republican extremism is emblematic. The Tea Party billed itself as a reaction to debt and spending, but a close look shows it was actually a reaction to an ascendant majority of black people, Latinos, Asian-Americans and liberal white people. In their survey-based study of the movement, the political scientists Christopher S. Parker and Matt A. Barreto show that Tea Party Republicans were motivated "by the fear and anxiety associated with the perception that 'real' Americans are losing their country."

The scholars Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson came to a similar conclusion in their contemporaneous study of the movement, based on an ethnographic study of Tea Party activists across the country. "Tea Party resistance to giving more to categories of people deemed undeserving is more than just an argument about taxes and spending," they note in "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism"; "it is a heartfelt cry about where they fear 'their country' may be headed." And Tea Party adherents "worries about racial and ethnic minorities and overly entitled young people," they write, "signal a larger fear about generational social change in America."

To stop this change and its political consequences, right-wing conservatives have embarked on a project to nullify opponents and restrict the scope of democracy. Mitch McConnell's hyper-obstructionist rule in the Senate is the most high-profile example of this strategy, but it's far from the most egregious.

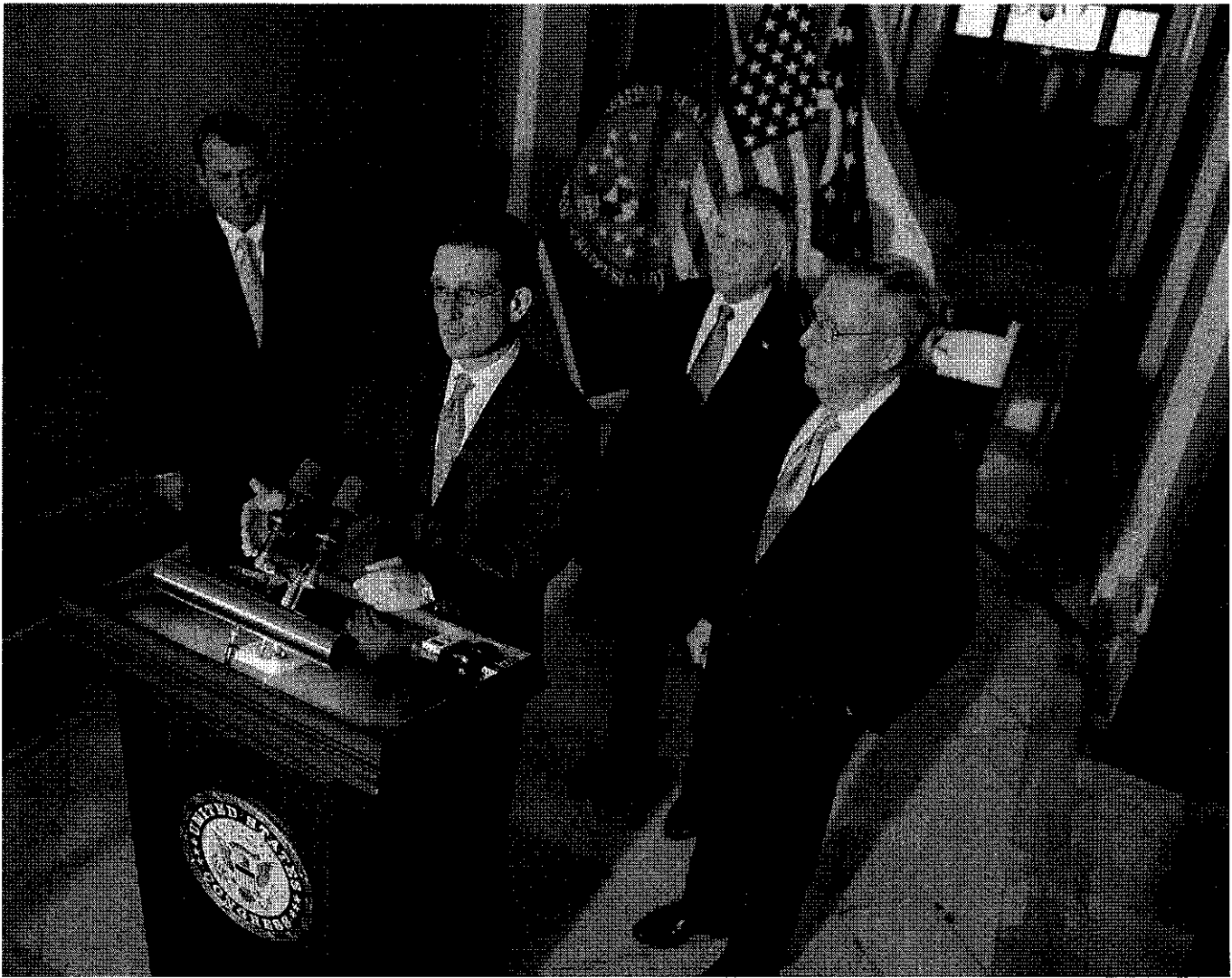
In 2012, North Carolina Republicans won legislative and executive power for the first time in more than a century. They used it to gerrymander the electoral map and impose new restrictions on voting, specifically aimed at the state's African-American voters. One such restriction, a strict voter-identification law, was

designed to target black North Carolinians with "almost surgical precision," according to the federal judges who struck the law down. When, in 2016, Democrats overcame these obstacles to take back the governor's mansion, the Republican-controlled Legislature tried to strip power from the office, to prevent Democrats from reversing their efforts to rig the game.

A similar thing happened in Wisconsin. Under Scott Walker, the governor at the time, Wisconsin Republicans gave themselves a structural advantage in the State Legislature through aggressive gerrymandering. After the Democratic candidate toppled Walker in the 2018 governor's race, the Republican majority in the Legislature rapidly moved to limit the new governor's power and weaken other statewide offices won by Democrats. They restricted the governor's ability to run public-benefit programs and set rules on the implementation of state laws. And they robbed the governor and the attorney general of the power to continue, or end, legal action against the Affordable Care Act.

Michigan Republicans took an almost identical course of action after Democrats in that state managed to win executive office, using their gerrymandered legislative majority to weaken the new Democratic governor and attorney general. One proposed bill, for example, would have shifted oversight of campaign-finance law from the secretary of state to a six-person commission with members nominated by the state Republican and Democratic parties, a move designed to produce deadlock and keep elected Democrats from reversing previous decisions.

The Republican rationale for tilting the field in their permanent favor or, failing that, nullifying the results and limiting Democrats' power as much as possible, has a familiar ring to it. "Citizens from every corner of Wisconsin deserve a strong legislative branch that stands on equal footing with an incoming administration that is based almost solely in Madison," one Wisconsin Republican said following the party's lame-duck power grab. The speaker of the State Assembly, Robin Vos, made his point more explicit. "If you took



Eric Cantor, a Virginia Republican who was then the House majority leader, speaks to reporters in April 2011 during the lead-up to a standoff with President Obama over raising the debt ceiling.

Madison and Milwaukee out of the state election formula, we would have a clear majority — we would have all five constitutional officers, and we would probably have many more seats in the Legislature.” The argument is straightforward: Some voters, *their* voters, count. Others — the liberals, black people and other people of color who live in cities — don’t.

Senate Republicans played with similar ideas just before the 2016 election, openly announcing their plans to block Hillary Clinton from nominating anyone to the Supreme Court, should she become president. “I promise

you that we will be united against any Supreme Court nominee that Hillary Clinton, if she were president, would put up,” declared Senator John McCain of Arizona just weeks before voting. And President Trump, of course, has repeatedly and falsely denounced Clinton’s popular-vote victory as illegitimate, the product of fraud and illegal voting. “In addition to winning the Electoral College in a landslide,” he declared on Twitter weeks after the election. “I won the popular vote if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally.”

The larger implication is clear enough: A majority made up of

liberals and people of color isn’t a real majority. And the solution is clear, too: to write those people out of the polity, to use every available tool to weaken their influence on American politics. The recent attempt to place a citizenship question on the census was an important part of this effort. By asking for this information, the administration would suppress the number of immigrant respondents, worsening their representation in the House and the Electoral College, reweighting power to the white, rural areas that back the president and the Republican Party.

You could make the case that none of this has anything to do with

slavery and slaveholder ideology. You could argue that it has nothing to do with race at all, that it’s simply an aggressive effort to secure conservative victories. But the tenor of an argument, the shape and nature of an opposition movement — these things matter. The goals may be colorblind, but the methods of action — the attacks on the legitimacy of nonwhite political actors, the casting of rival political majorities as unrepresentative, the drive to nullify democratically elected governing coalitions — are clearly downstream of a style of extreme political combat that came to fruition in the defense of human bondage. ♦