

Reconstructing Democracy: Grassroots Black Politics in the Deep South After the Civil War

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Review

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Behrend, Justin *Reconstructing Democracy: Grassroots Black Politics in the Deep South after the Civil War*. University of Georgia Press, \$59.95 ISBN 9780820340333

Black Politics and Grassroots Democracy

How did a newly emancipated people, many of them illiterate and nearly all economically marginalized, create a new, grassroots democracy in the wake of the American Civil War? How did the politics they created challenge existing racial, economic, and gender hierarchies and Southern oligarchy? What does their initial organizing and reaction to the ensuing backlash teach us about both how democracy takes root and politics becomes integrated into daily life? In this meticulously researched, greatly detailed monograph, Justin Behrend answers these questions and more, providing an important new perspective into an understudied subject. Behrend, an Associate Professor of History at SUNY-Geneseo, adapted *Reconstructing Democracy* from his doctoral dissertation at Northwestern University, and parts of the book show its origins as a dissertation. However, the overall prose is quite lively and Behrend's focus on individual actors to illustrate larger themes works very well. Additionally, Behrend has created an online database of over 400 black politicians from the era; the database contains demographic information on each politician as well as their political positions and miscellaneous information. The database speaks to the depth of Behrend's research and provides a valuable classroom resource.

The subtitle of the book, *Grassroots Black Politics in the Deep South after the Civil War*, is actually a bit of a misnomer—the book focuses on the Natchez District of Mississippi and Louisiana rather than the entire Deep South. While the Natchez District does offer a strong case study to extrapolate to the larger South, its comparatively large free black population (as Behrend notes, the largest in Mississippi), and proximity to the Mississippi River (and resulting strategic and economic importance) also make it somewhat unique. Still, for

Behrend's purposes of studying grassroots democracy and the black and white coalitions that made such democracy possible, the uniqueness of the Natchez District works well. Particularly important are the development of political networks, and the ability of African Americans to expand those networks and create communities and organizations. The Natchez District, comprised of numerous political boundaries, and encompassing an area both urban and rural, allows Behrend to make connections lacking in studies of exclusively urban or exclusively rural areas. Temporally, Behrend begins with emancipation, and carries the study through the Exoduster migration of 1879. The monograph contains eight chapters divided into three sections, "Constructing Democracy," "Maintaining Democracy," and "Constricting Democracy."

It is in the first two sections where the book really shines, particularly as Behrend uses the life of John R. Lynch, formerly enslaved person and three-term congressional representative to examine the intersection between economics, education, and community networks that defined the era's political activity. However, the book does more than simply highlight national figures like Lynch and Hiram Revels; it provides insights into little-known people and episodes, expanding our understanding of political development. For example, readers learn how William McCary, the first black sheriff and tax collector of Adams County, MS, was able to create a coalition to support his political activity, or, how, in 1876, black women activists in Concordia Parish, LA showed up to the polls to challenge black men who were holding fusion ballots rather than Republican ballots. Behrend uses these examples, and many others, to draw distinctions, make connections, and challenge assumptions about what constituted grass root politics. Among the assumptions challenged is the assumption that it was a given that African Americans of the era would automatically be Republicans—Behrend notes that at various times and places, African Americans were Republicans, Democrats, and fusionists, and these labels were not always static. Likewise, coalitions and partnerships were often evolving, with black candidates in rural areas sometimes relying on white patrons as a means to gain political power.

There is a great deal to praise in *Reconstructing Democracy*—it is a highly readable, well-structured, and impressively written addition to the scholarship of the post-Civil War era. Using extensive endnotes, Behrend convincingly grounds his argument in the latest secondary literature and a wide variety of primary materials; however, the lack of a bibliography is an unnecessary drawback to a fine volume. That is a small criticism of this original and influential work.

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