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Reconstruction and the State: The Political and Economic Consequences of the Freedmen's Bureau*

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Abstract. Reconstruction was the American state's first sustained peacetime intervention into local communities, and the Freedmen's Bureau was its most important component. Despite its historic nature as the nation's first social program, little scholarship examines how the Bureau affected the lives of Black Americans. I use original data on the locations of Bureau field offices to study its aggregate and individual-level consequences for Black communities in the South. Overall, the presence of the Bureau was associated with significantly higher literacy rates, better labor force outcomes, and higher socioeconomic status, with stronger effects on Black women than Black men. Further evidence suggests that the Bureau was associated with significantly higher voter turnout in elections prior to Jim Crow. Altogether, the findings indicate that the federal state played a larger, and more successful, role in citizens' lives than commonly believed and have important implications for bureaucratic politics, social policy, and American political development.

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Reconstruction was one of the most pivotal moments in the course of American history, and the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands – more commonly known as the Freedmen’s Bureau – was the federal government’s most important contribution to it. Initially constituted by the 38th Congress in March 1865, the Freedmen’s Bureau was charged with “the supervision and management of all abandoned lands, and the control of all subjects relating to refugees and freedmen from rebel states.”¹ Historians, political scientists, scholars of law and administration, and the Bureau’s contemporaries recognize its importance to the postbellum United States and American history more generally. As a federal agency, it was “the nation’s most advanced experiment in social welfare” (McFeely 1968, 65) which “reached into the lives of ordinary Americans to a degree unparalleled in peacetime until the 1930s” (Harrison 2007, 213) and represented “the first broad effort in American history to build the operations of a modern administrative state” (Schmidt 1998, 6). Due to the federal government’s “unprecedented measures to alter the South’s political landscape” (Lieberman 1994, 406), the 41st Congress declared that “no approximately correct history of civilization can be written which does not throw out in bold relief, as one of the great landmarks of political and social progress, the organization and administration of the Freedmen’s Bureau.”²

In this paper, I study the politics of the Freedmen’s Bureau and its consequences for newly freed Black communities in the South. Though the Bureau was initially expected to redistribute southern landholdings by the federal government to freedpersons, it was involved in a wide range of efforts to provide federal support to Black Americans. As Du Bois ([1903] 2005, 38) summarized its work, the “Bureau set going a system of free labor; it established the black peasant proprietor; it secured the recognition of black freemen before courts of law; it founded the free public school in the South.” But though scholars have documented the partisan and interbranch politics that animated the Bureau’s establishment, revision, and closure (e.g., Beard and Beard 1927; Bensel 1990; Burgess 1902; Foner 1983; Lieberman 1994; Peirce 1904) and debated its contributions to the racial politics which followed (e.g., Bentley 1955; Goldberg 2007; McFeely 1968; Stamp

¹<http://legisworks.org/sal/13/stats/STATUTE-13-Pg507.pdf>

²“Charges Against General Howard,” Committee on Education and Labor, July 13, 1870, House of Representatives, 41st Congress, 2nd session, page 17.

1965), little scholarship examines how the Freedmen's Bureau affected the lives of Black Americans. The omission is surprising given the Bureau's role as a flashpoint for postbellum debates over the concentration of federal power and the expansion of federal bureaucracy (Belz 1976; Bentley 1955; Foner 1988; Peirce 1904) and status as the country's first federal social program (Lieberman 1994). Instead, most research on bureaucratic administration of state power begins with the Progressive Era (Carpenter 2001; Keller 1988; McCormick 1986; Skowronek 1982) or studies social policies more limited in scope and implemented after the Freedmen's Bureau (e.g., Skocpol 1992, 1993).

Using an original dataset on the locations of Freedmen's Bureau field offices, I evaluate the consequences of state intervention in the Reconstruction-era South. At the county level, I find that the presence of the Freedmen's Bureau was associated with significantly higher Black literacy rates and smaller Black-white differences in literacy. Using individual level data from the 1880 Census, I find further evidence that Black Americans living in counties with field office locations had significantly better labor force outcomes and higher socioeconomic status. In all cases, the presence of the Freedmen's Bureau had stronger effects on Black women than Black men. Finally, I document the political consequences of the Freedmen's Bureau by providing evidence to suggest that Black voter turnout was higher in counties with field office locations, though this relationship disintegrated with the introduction of new Jim Crow-related voting restrictions beginning in 1890. Altogether, the findings indicate that the federal state played a larger, and more successful, role in citizens' lives than commonly believed and have important implications for scholarship on bureaucratic politics, social policy, and American political development.

POLITICS OF THE FREEDMEN'S BUREAU

The creation, organization, and maintenance of the Freedmen's Bureau was deeply political. Several years before the War's conclusion, members of Northern freedmen's aid associations began petitioning President Lincoln to create an organization dedicated to advancing the rights of freedpeople. As one such petition asked, "Has the Government any moral right to free the slave . . . without seeing to it that, with every chain it breaks, the best within its power is done to keep the freedman from hankering after his master and his bondage, from feeling that his liberty is a burden, his life a

course ...” (quoted in Bentley 1955, 30). These petitions found an eager audience with Radical Republican members of Congress, who recognized the political possibilities such an organization could provide. They were especially drawn to the patronage opportunities the Bureau would create in addition to the ability to influence the votes of millions of newly freed Blacks (Bentley 1955, 55). These incentives motivated congressional Republicans to prioritize the creation of the Freedmen’s Bureau, believing it would be an important part of their strategy for continued political dominance.

Congressional debates in 1864 and early 1865 then centered on how the Bureau should be designed.³ Two key questions concerned whether the Bureau should be a Cabinet-level department or instead should be housed within either the War or Treasury Departments. These questions were not merely academic; instead, its structural location would have important implications for political control of Bureau operations (Lieberman 1994; Moe 1985). Radical Republicans in Congress ultimately acquiesced to a compromise offered by more moderate Republicans, in which the Bureau would be created as an agency within the War Department. Because the nation was at a state of war when the Bureau was ultimately created in March 1865, this choice meant that the Bureau would be under the direction of the president, as commander-in-chief. Upon Lincoln’s death and the war’s conclusion, political control of the Freedmen’s Bureau ignited repeated fights between President Johnson and congressional Republicans. A second Freedmen’s Bureau Act was passed in 1866 to enlarge Bureau operations and expand congressional oversight of it despite Johnson’s veto. Congress then pared back the Freedmen’s Bureau activities in 1868 and terminated it in 1872.

For the entirety of its existence, Major General Oliver Otis Howard served as Commissioner of the Freedmen’s Bureau. Eleven assistant commissioners served under him and oversaw Bureau activities in states and districts. These assistant commissioners had wide discretion to direct Bureau activity in their district or state, including decisions to open field offices which were run by sub-assistant commissioners. Local officers submitted voluminous reports on all aspects of Bureau operations to assistant commissioners, who then served as liaisons between local offices and the federal Bureau.

For Radical Republicans, “the Bureau’s primary purpose was the transformation of slaves into

³For detailed discussions of the Freedmen’s Bureau’s creation, see Peirce (1904, chapter 2) and Bentley (1955, chapter 3).

citizens” (Goldberg 2007, 45); to accomplish this mission, it was involved in a stunning range of activities. Following General William Tecumseh Sherman’s Special Field Orders No. 15 issued in January 1865, which directed military officers to distribute abandoned lands off the coast of South Carolina to freedpersons in 40 acre plots, upon assuming his position Commissioner Howard ordered the distribution of land tracts to freedmen that had been abandoned by or confiscated from slaveowners (Lieberman 1994, 415). Land redistribution was never a major part of Bureau operations, however, as it had far less land under its control than could be distributed to the approximately four million newly freed Blacks (Bentley 1955; Foner 1988). Instead, the Bureau appeared to enjoy a great deal of autonomy and expanded its mission to help ensure the civil, political, and social rights of freedpersons. Within a relatively short period of time, the Bureau was involved with providing food, clothing, and medical care; opening schools; helping freedpeople secure justice by establishing special courts; formalizing marriages and helping freedpeople find missing family members; and supervising labor relations (Harrison 2007, 206).

The Bureau generated political controversy for its unprecedented expansion of the federal government into local communities. As Lieberman (1994, 406) writes, the Freedmen’s Bureau was the first attempt by the federal government to impose broad federal authority over individual citizens through bureaucratic means.” After the second Bureau Act in 1866, it “became a full-fledged government, exercising throughout the unreconstructed south, legislative, executive, and judicial authority” (Peirce 1904, 147). Moreover, as the nation’s first social welfare program, its activities and benefits were narrowly targeted. To distribute these benefits, “[l]imitations of governmental authority were practically disregarded” (Peirce 1904, 147). The Bureau was politically fraught throughout its existence, as Southern whites and Northern Democrats decried the expansion of federal power and redistributive character of Bureau operations (e.g., Beard and Beard 1927; Bensel 1990; Burgess 1902; Foner 1983; Lieberman 1994; Peirce 1904).

Despite the political distinctiveness and importance of the Freedmen’s Bureau, existing scholarship provides little systematic evidence about its implications for freedpersons. While historians have debated the long-term contributions of the Bureau to racial politics in the South (e.g., Bentley 1955; Goldberg 2007; McFeely 1968; Stamp 1965), it is less clear whether and how Freedmen’s

Bureau activities contributed to the economic, social, and political positions of Southern Blacks. Identifying these consequences is important not only for evaluating the effectiveness of national efforts to support newly freed Blacks following the Civil War, but it also provides new insight about the capacity of a state's provision of social programs to affect the welfare of its citizens. Moreover, because state policies can affect subsequent politics (Pierson 1994; Skocpol 1985), understanding the consequences of the Freedmen's Bureau for Black southerners may provide new insight about how these experiences shaped Blacks' subsequent attitudes toward government (Campbell 2003; Goldberg 2007; Michener 2018; Soss 1999).

THE FREEDMEN'S BUREAU AND THE SOUTH

The activities undertaken by the Freedmen's Bureau suggest three primary ways in which it affected Black Americans. First, the Bureau's involvement in local education was its longest-running programmatic operation. From 1865 to 1872, the Bureau ran or oversaw more than a thousand local schools for both children and adults (Goldberg 2007). Freedmen's groups and benevolent associations believed education was critical to freedpersons' economic success, and the virtues of education appeared to be shared by freedpersons. According to (Fuke 1999, 302), "educational aspirations occupied a central role in the post-emancipation agenda of the rural black community." The Freedmen's Bureau likely provided educational opportunities that were otherwise not available to freed Blacks, which would have instilled both knowledge and skills that helped increase human capital and create a more informed citizenry.

Second, the Bureau's emphasis on free labor likely had important labor market and economic implications for freedpersons. As part of its work, the Bureau helped write and enforce labor contracts between freedpersons and (white) landowners. Early in his tenure, Commissioner Howard "instructed [Bureau] agents to urge both Negroes and white people to enter into formal, written, Bureau-approved contracts, which should set forth the amount and kind of work the employee was to do, the pay and provisions he was to receive from his employer, and all their agreements about loss of time, extra pay for work beyond the ordinary hours, and the manner of settling any misunderstandings between them" (Bentley 1955, 80). In addition to wages, contracts frequently

contained provisions for medical care, clothing, crops retained by the laborers, and the use of plots for subsistence farming.

To be sure, in many instances the labor contracts approved by the Bureau contained provisions that favored the landowners. As Richardson (1960, 171) reported, “Bureau agents not only approved contracts stipulating low wages, but tolerated contracts worded in such a manner that in the event of a poor harvest the Negro would get nothing.” Despite the unfavorable terms for freedpersons, however, the Bureau may have helped secure better contracts than freedpersons could have negotiated in its absence. Landowners were especially concerned that laborers would not remain with the crop throughout the season and “[i]n most states the Bureau, backed by the Army, was the only agency with authority and power to see that Negroes kept their contracts” (Bentley 1955, 80). Rather than coercing freedpersons to accept whatever meager terms landowners were willing to offer on their own, the planters were forced to accept whatever terms the Bureau-backed contracts contained. The Bureau’s power to enforce labor contracts provided a “measure of justice to the freedmen” (Lieberman 1994, 429). Overall, these accounts suggest that the Freedmen’s Bureau may have helped facilitate more better labor force outcomes than freedpersons may have secured without it.

Third, the Freedmen’s Bureau may have helped secure the opportunity for freedpersons to exercise their political rights at the ballot box. According to Peirce (1904, 147), “regulating suffrage and elections under the Reconstruction Acts” was one of the Bureau’s key roles and contributions. Historians have documented the enthusiasm about freedpersons for participating in politics; as (Foner 1987, 873) writes, “[t]he very abundance of letters and petitions addressed by black gatherings and ordinary freedmen to officials of the army, to the Freedmen’s Bureau, and to state and federal authorities, revealed a belief that the political order was at least partially open to black influence.” To help meet this demand and fulfill their own electoral incentives, Republicans used the Freedmen’s Bureau to oversee voter registration efforts and conduct elections. According to (Cunningham 1991, 375), “Freedmen Bureau officials advised newly emancipated slaves about registration procedures and voting and counselled the slaves about fears of retaliation, particularly economic reprisals from their employers for voting.” These activities were particularly common as Southern states re-entered the Union, where “the bureau took on an explicitly political role

and was involved to some extent with black voter registration and political education” (Lieberman 1994, 417). In doing so, the Freedmen’s Bureau helped secure voting access and, in turn, political influence for freedpersons.

Historians often identify the Bureau’s voting-related work as its most consequential. “Through its control of elections, it did much to secure [freedpersons] the right of suffrage guaranteed by the fifteenth amendment,” (Peirce 1904, 171) argued. Bentley (1955) studied the impact of freedpersons on the 1868 election between Republican Ulysses Grant and Democrat Horatio Seymour and estimated that freedpersons voted overwhelmingly for Grant, casting around 450,000 for the Republican candidate in an election where Grant won the popular vote by about 300,000 votes. As Bentley (1955, 202) concluded, “That those votes were cast, and cast for the Republican candidate, was very largely due to the efforts of the Freedmen’s Bureau.” Due, perhaps, to the Bureau’s success in mobilizing Black voters, opponents of the Bureau criticized it for “acting as a political agency for the Republican party” (Stamp 1965, 132), with many Southern whites convinced that “Bureau officials were using their influence to organize [freedpeople] in support of the Radical Republican cause” (Abbott 1967, 123). During the 1868 presidential campaign, Southern journals characterized the Freedmen’s Bureau as the Republicans’ “most powerful electioneering machinery throughout the South” (Bentley 1955, 200), and Democrat (and future presidential nominee) Samuel Tilden declared that the Bureau’s “principle character” was “a political machine to organize and manage the three millions of negroes” (quoted in Peirce 1904, 169). These accounts all suggest that the Freedmen’s Bureau increased turnout among newly-enfranchised Black voters and, due to the historical relationship between Democrats and slavery, that electoral benefits accrued to Republicans as a result. Due to the efforts of the Freedmen’s Bureau, Peirce (1904, 171) concludes that “[i]t is fair to assert that to the Freedmen’s Bureau is largely attributable the fact that today political lines and race lines are so nearly coincident in the south.”

The historiography of the Freedman’s Bureau reaches somewhat mixed conclusions about its impact. At the systemic level, scholars disagree about the Bureau’s effect on freedpersons. Accounts that emphasize the potential of the welfare state to support marginalized groups reach somewhat sanguine conclusions about Freedmen’s Bureau’s success in integrating freedpersons into

American society (e.g., Bentley 1955; Stamp 1965). A somewhat more recent scholarship, however, characterizes the Bureau as more concerned with reestablishing order and economic productivity than with advancing the rights of freed slaves (Gerteis 1973; Litwack 1979; McFeely 1968), thereby contributing to the establishment of separate civic spheres for southern Blacks and whites. Historical accounts of Bureau activities in single states, however, provide evidence consistent with the account I outlined above. According to Campbell's (1998, 6) study of Reconstruction efforts in Texas, the presence of local Bureau field offices was one of the most important factors that explained variation in the economic and political status of freedpeople. Similarly, in a study of Virginia, Kerr-Ritchie (1999) attributes regional variation in the nature of labor contracts to differences in the local power of the Freedmen's Bureau. In Louisiana, moreover, Rodrigue (1999) credits Bureau presence with preventing a system of forced labor and establishing labor relations that were relatively favorable toward freedpersons. Despite important scholarship that documents the politics surrounding the Freedmen's Bureau and explores its subsequent effects on race relations and southern society, virtually no research assesses its more proximate impacts on Black communities.

At the outset, however, it is not immediately clear that Freedmen's Bureau operations would have had significant impact on newly freed Blacks. First, existing scholarship generally downplays or ignores the effects of nineteenth-century federal bureaucracies on local communities. Canonical studies of modern bureaucracy generally begin with the Progressive Era (e.g., Carpenter 2001; Gailmard and Patty 2012; McCormick 1986), suggesting that administrative institutions lacked the capacity to have meaningful effects at the local level during an era of "courts and parties" (Skowronek 1982). The relatively weak character of federal government combined with popular preferences for local sovereignty, therefore, may weigh against finding much substantive impact of the Freedmen's Bureau. Second, federal support for the Bureau, including appropriations, was rather limited. The March 1865 act establishing the Bureau contained no appropriations for Bureau activities, and though the 1866 act provided more generous funds for the Bureau, these were substantially curtailed in its 1868 reauthorization and eliminated by 1872. Therefore, the federal government may have provided insufficient financial support to allow the Bureau to achieve its stated mission. Third, substantial local opposition to the Bureau existed throughout the South

(e.g., Goldberg 2007; Peirce 1904), which often manifest in intimidation and violence toward both freedpersons and local agents. This opposition may have impeded the Bureau's ability to perform its functions and could have deterred Blacks from seeking out its resources. Evaluating the consequences of federal intervention in local communities to support freedpersons, therefore, is important for understanding the consequences of federal social programs and identifying the effects of national bureaucracy in a period when the federal state is widely understood to have been relatively weak. And while a variety of research traces the social and political effects of state-run projects and social welfare programs in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Campbell 2003; Clinton and Sances 2018; Michener 2018; Nall 2018), relatively little is known about their economic and political impacts in earlier periods of U.S. history (c.f., Chacón and Jensen 2017; Rogowski and Gibson 2015; Rogowski 2016; Rogowski et al. 2018).

DATA

I examine the political and economic consequences of the Freedmen's Bureau using data collected on field office locations in use between 1865 and 1872. These data were collected from the National Archives' holdings on the Freedmen's Bureau, which include information about the name of each local office's location. Each location was then matched to the county in which the field office was located using historical county boundaries. Altogether, these data describe 627 field offices located in 433 counties.

Table 1 displays some of the descriptive statistics associated with these data. First, field offices were found in most, but not all, states of the former confederacy and border states. Most conspicuously, no field offices were maintained in Missouri. While the Freedmen's Bureau was initially intended to operate in Missouri and was accompanied by the appointment of an Assistant Commissioner responsible for Missouri and Arkansas, soon thereafter the Commissioner recorded his belief that the Bureau was not needed in Missouri and that Arkansas should be the focus of his efforts. The Bureau agreed, and there is no record of field offices operating in Missouri after 1866. Second, the number of offices varied substantially by state. The largest numbers of field offices were in a border state (Kentucky) and a state in the Deep South (Georgia), while substantially

fewer were in Alabama (31) and Arkansas (32) with fewer still in Florida (9). Third, Freedmen’s Bureau field offices had varying degrees of coverage within states. About a third of counties in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, and Tennessee were field office locations, while more than 60 percent of counties in both Louisiana and South Carolina were sites of field offices. And fourth, Black populations varied widely in their level of access to Freedmen’s Bureau field offices. Relative to the size of states’ Black populations, field offices were considerably more plentiful in Arkansas and Virginia (more than 20 field offices per 100,000 Black residents) than in Alabama, Delaware, Florida, and Maryland (all fewer than 10 field offices per 100,000 Black residents).

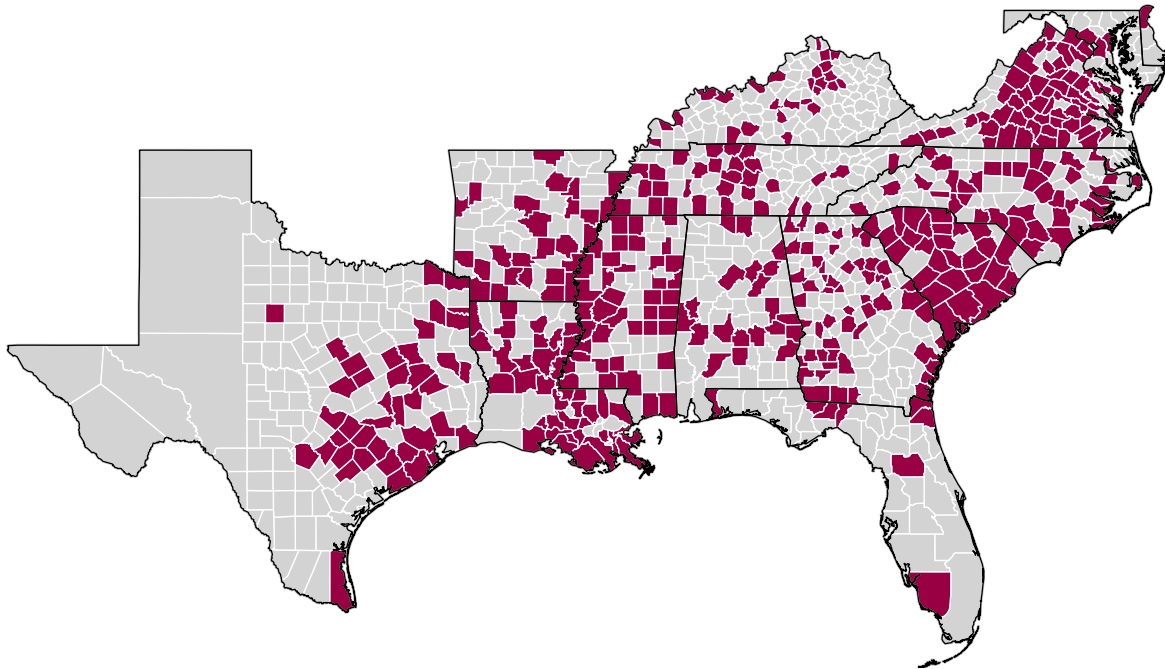
Table 1: Freedmen’s Bureau Field Office Locations in the South

State	Total offices	% of counties with ≥ 1 office	Offices per 100,000 Black residents (1870)
Alabama	31	31.3	6.5
Arkansas	32	36.0	26.2
Delaware	1	33.3	4.4
Florida	9	11.9	9.8
Georgia	91	36.7	16.8
Kentucky	91	22.2	14.9
Louisiana	72	60.9	19.8
Maryland	3	12.5	1.7
Mississippi	57	48.8	12.8
North Carolina	53	40.0	13.5
South Carolina	59	65.2	14.2
Tennessee	38	30.5	11.8
Texas	45	16.5	17.8
Virginia	99	47.9	20.2

As Figure 1 makes clear, Freedmen’s Bureau field offices were not distributed uniformly across the South or within states. Counties shown in red contained at least one Freedmen’s Bureau field office location. The map illustrates the variation across states in how field offices were distributed. Many of these patterns follow geographic physical features associated with slaveholding. For instance, field offices in North Carolina and Virginia were located mostly in counties to the east of the Appalachian mountains, while in Tennessee they were concentrated in counties to the west of the Appalachians. In Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana, virtually every county bordering on the

Mississippi River had at least one field office; similarly, most counties on the Atlantic coast in South Carolina and Georgia had field offices. Field offices in Texas were located mostly in the eastern third, and most of the counties in Florida with field offices were located along its northern border with Georgia. The map also makes clear the wide geographic dispersion of the Freedmen’s Bureau in states like Virginia and South Carolina, while its offices were more narrowly concentrated in states like Alabama and Georgia.

Figure 1: Locations of Freedmen’s Bureau Field Offices, 1865 to 1872



Counties with at least one Freedmen’s Bureau field office are shaded in red. Map depicts state and county boundaries of 1872.

Using the data on field office locations described above, I evaluate the county-level outcomes associated with the presence of a Freedmen’s Bureau field office. This indicator, *Bureau field office*, distinguishes counties with at least one field office from those without any location. The Freedmen’s Bureau was the most prominent sign of the federal government in the postbellum South (Goldberg 2007), and local field offices were the most common way through which newly freed Blacks accessed state resources. In doing so, I assume that residents living in a county with a field office had greater access to its services than residents in counties without one, and that the success of

the Freedmen's Bureau in securing the civil, political, and labor rights of freedpersons was greatest in geographically proximate communities. This is likely to be a conservative strategy for gauging the Bureau's effects; to the extent the Freedmen's Bureau had a general effect on freedpersons across the South, it may be more difficult to produce evidence of a larger impact in more geographically proximate communities.

Following the theoretical account outlined above, I evaluate the effects of field offices on three primary outcomes measured in the states depicted in Figure 1. First, to study the contributions of the Freedmen's Bureau on human capital and educational outcomes, I model the relationship between the presence of field offices and literacy rates. These analyses are conducted at the aggregate and individual levels. Aggregate level data on county literacy rates come from the 1900 Census. These data distinguish Black and white literacy rates, therefore allowing me to evaluate the effects of Freedmen's Bureau field offices on communities most likely affected by their presence while also providing a relevant benchmark for evaluating the impact. At the individual level, I use data for Black respondents included in the 5% sample of the 1880 Census available along with relevant individual-level covariates for gender, age, and sex. The individual-level data allow me to evaluate the effects of the Freedmen's Bureau on outcomes more proximate to the Freedmen's Bureau's existence and to study how the effects varied among demographic subgroups.

Second, to evaluate the Bureau's work in protecting the labor rights of freedpersons, I study the effects of field office locations on labor market outcomes using occupational income scores and the Duncan socioeconomic index, both of which are also available at the individual level for the 5% sample in the 1880 Census. These indicators serve as measures of Black Americans' employment outcomes and upwards mobility. In both sets of individual level analyses, I take care to distinguish the effects among age-appropriate populations which were most likely to benefit, directly or indirectly, from Freedmen's Bureau programs.

Third, I examine the political consequences of Freedmen's Bureau locations using two-party county-level votes for Democratic candidates in presidential elections. These data were obtained from ICPSR study #8611 and describes the two-party percentage of the vote in presidential elections from 1872 to 1900. Because field offices likely helped protect Black access to the polls engrained

voting practices which encouraged Black participation, I expect that counties with field offices reported larger vote shares for Republican candidates, particularly as the size of the Black population increased. However, because Southern states revised their constitutions to exclude Black citizens from voting beginning in 1890, I expect that the relationship between field office locations and Black voting behavior reversed beginning with the 1892 presidential election.

I use a cross-sectional approach to evaluate the effects of the Freedmen's Bureau. In an ideal world, its locations would have been randomly assigned such that its presence would be orthogonal to county-level characteristics. Moreover, its relatively short presence precludes a differences-in-differences design that would utilize panel data with the distribution of field locations and outcome variables collected over time. As the best available alternative, I regress the outcome variables described above on *Bureau field office* in a cross-sectional setting under the assumption of no selection on observables (or unobservables). In all models, I include state fixed effects in addition to a range of potential confounding variables. Therefore, the estimates for *Bureau field office* control for differences across states that are constant across counties and reflect differences in outcomes within a given state based on the distribution of field offices. Moreover, as described below, the models include a number of covariates to address potential issues of confounding.

Despite the lack of an identification strategy based on random assignment, the potential biases in this empirical strategy weigh against the likelihood of finding support for the posited relationships. The greatest, and most likely, threat to inference would concern the allocation of field offices to counties that would provide the *least* opportunity for newly-freed Blacks to access or benefit from the services offered by Freedmen's Bureau field offices. In this case, I would expect to observe *negative* relationships between field office locations and both literacy and voting patterns. This concern suggests that, to the extent the analyses below introduce biases, they weigh against the likelihood of recovering estimates of a positive relationship between their locations and county- and individual-level outcomes.

RESULTS

I begin by evaluating the effects of the Freedmen's Bureau on literacy rates. The left columns of Table 2 show the relationship between county-level Black literacy rates from the 1900 Census, measured as a proportion, and the locations of Freedmen's Bureau field offices. I estimate models that control for a variety of factors that could confound the relationship between field offices and literacy. Model (1) includes controls for county-level demographic factors measured from the 1860 Census that could be correlated with the presence of field office locations, including total population and Black percentage of the population. Counties with larger populations and with higher concentrations of Black residents may have been particularly likely to receive field offices. To this specification, Model (2) adds the latitude and longitude of each county's centroid to account for factors specific to geography which may explain varying rates of literacy and/or provision of field offices. Model (3) further adds political covariates for each county using the percentage of the vote cast for pro-slavery candidates in the 1856 (James Buchanan) and 1860 (John Breckinridge) presidential elections, which may account for the political characteristics of counties that relate both to the presence of field offices and levels of local opposition to the interests of Black freedpersons. State fixed effects are included in all models and heteroskedastic-robust standard errors are reported. The results are population-weighted.

I supplement these models of Black literacy rates with a measure of the difference in literacy rates between Blacks and whites at the county level. This *Black-white literacy gap* describes the extent to which white literacy was higher than Black literacy, measured in proportions, where larger values indicate counties where white literacy was increasingly higher relative to Black literacy. Using this measure allows me to focus on how the presence of the Freedmen's Bureau may have affected Black literacy specifically, rather than the general features of a county that may have had more common effects on both white and Black literacy.

As Table 2 shows, the results of both sets of analyses are consistent with the hypothesis that the Freedmen's Bureau affected the accumulation of human capital among Black Americans. The results shown in columns (1) through (3) show that Black literacy rates were about 3.2 percentage points higher in counties with Freedmen's Bureau field offices. The coefficient estimate is quite

stable across all three model specifications. Columns (4) through (6) further show that the presence of Freedmen’s Bureau field offices was associated with significantly smaller gaps in literacy between Blacks and whites in the year 1900. The difference in literacy rates between Blacks and whites were about 2 percentage points lower in counties that had been the site of field offices, and these results are again quite similar across model specifications. Overall, the results in Table 2 provide evidence of a link between Freedmen’s Bureau field operations and educational and human capital outcomes among Black Americans.

Table 2: Freedmen’s Bureau Field Office Locations and Literacy (County-level analysis)

	<i>DV = Black literacy rates (1900)</i>			<i>DV = Black-white literacy gap (1900)</i>		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Bureau field office	0.032* (0.006)	0.032* (0.006)	0.032* (0.006)	-0.018* (0.006)	-0.020* (0.006)	-0.021* (0.006)
(Intercept)	0.478* (0.012)	0.593* (0.254)	0.624* (0.252)	0.309* (0.011)	-1.111* (0.244)	-1.125* (0.247)
N	834	834	834	834	834	834
MSE	.073	.073	.073	.075	.073	.073
State fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Demographic controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Geographic controls		✓	✓		✓	✓
Political controls			✓			✓

Note: Entries are linear regression coefficients and heteroskedastic-robust standard errors, weighted by county population. The dependent variables are listed above each set of columns and describe literacy rates among Black residents as a proportion (models 1–3) and the difference in the proportions of literate whites and Blacks (models 4–6), where larger values indicate lower literacy among Blacks relative to whites. *Demographic controls* include total population and Black percentage of the population, both measured in the year 1860. *Geographic controls* include the latitude and longitude of each county’s centroid. *Political controls* include the county’s vote for pro-slavery presidents in 1856 (Buchanan) and 1860 (Breckinridge). * indicates $p < .05$ (two-tailed tests).

Though the results in Table 2 provide new evidence to establish a link between the Freedmen’s Bureau and access to educational outcomes among Black Americans, they are limited in three key ways. First, the data are from the 1900 Census, several decades after the conclusion of Freedmen’s Bureau field operations. While it is plausible – and perhaps likely – that the effects of Freedmen’s Bureau operations would persist across the longer term, it is also possible that other intervening events between roughly 1870 and 1900 could have contributed to the patterns documented above.

Unfortunately, however, the Census does not provide estimates of county-level literacy among Blacks and whites prior to 1900. Second, aggregate literacy statistics in the year 1900 are less informative than we might like about the effects of the Freedmen's Bureau on individuals most likely to have received services from them, as these statistics include literacy rates among people that would have been 30 years of age or younger, and who never accessed Freedmen's Bureau services. And third, the county-level estimates do not allow me to evaluate how the effects of the Freedmen's Bureau may have varied among various groups of Black Americans.

Therefore, I supplement the county-level analyses above with individual-level data from the 5% sample of the 1880 Census. I include entries for Black Americans living in the states indicated in Figure 1 along with basic demographic information available for each of them, including age and sex. I include individuals 14 years of age and older, as these populations would have been most likely to access literacy and other educational opportunities available from the Freedmen's Bureau. Using individual Census respondents as the unit of analysis, I estimate models similar to those shown in Table 2 while also accounting for respondents' age (squared) and sex. The dependent variable is an indicator for whether an individual is literate, which I use to estimate linear probability models. Standard errors in these models are clustered on county.

The results are shown in Table 3. The results from the four models are strongly consistent with those shown in Table 2. The coefficients indicate that literacy rates among Black Americans living in counties with field office locations were two to three percentage points higher than Black Americans living in counties that did not have field offices. These results are substantively significant in addition to statistically significant. The overall literacy rate among Black Americans in the South in 1880 was 23.8%; thus, the coefficient estimates imply that the locations of field offices were associated with roughly a ten percent increase in literacy rates.

While the Freedmen's Bureau dedicated substantial resources to educational opportunities for African Americans, it also provided resources to help freedpersons secure labor contracts and other job opportunities. The combination of these services may have help advance social mobility and provide greater incomes among Black residents of the South. I evaluate this hypothesis using two measures of individual-level income and socioeconomic status from the 5% sample of the 1880

Table 3: Freedmen’s Bureau Field Locations and Literacy: Individual-level Evidence from the 1880 Census

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Bureau field office	0.018* (0.009)	0.023* (0.009)	0.035* (0.007)	0.034* (0.007)
(Intercept)	0.174* (0.013)	0.434* (0.015)	0.445 (0.288)	0.543 (0.289)
N (individuals)	503,651	503,651	503,651	503,651
N (counties)	732	732	732	732
MSE	.423	.417	.414	.414
State fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Demographic controls		✓	✓	✓
County controls			✓	✓
Political controls				✓

Note: Entries are linear regression coefficients and standard errors, clustered on county. The dependent variables are listed above each column. *Demographic controls* include individuals’ ages (squared) and sex. *Geographic controls* include the latitude and longitude of each county’s centroid, county population in 1860, and percent of Black population in 1860. *Political controls* include the county’s vote for pro-slavery presidents in 1856 (Buchanan) and 1860 (Breckinridge). * indicates $p < .05$ (two-tailed tests).

Census: occupational income score and Duncan socioeconomic index. Because the values of these dependent variables are right-skewed, I use the logged versions of both and estimate models similar to those displayed in Table 3. These models are estimated among individuals 25 years of age and older, who would have been most likely to access resources offered by the Freedmen’s Bureau during its existence.

Table 4 displays the results. The first four columns display coefficient estimates for occupational income score and the last four columns display coefficient estimates for the Duncan socioeconomic index. Locations of the Freedmen’s Bureau are strongly associated with labor market success for Black Americans. Across each model, the coefficient estimate for *Bureau field office* is positive and statistically significant. The estimates indicate that Black individuals residing in counties with Freedmen’s Bureau field offices had higher 4 to 8 percent higher incomes and socioeconomic status than Blacks living in counties without a field office.

The results presented above provide strong and consistent evidence of an association between the

Table 4: Freedmen’s Bureau Field Locations and Socioeconomic Status: Individual-level Evidence from the 1880 Census

	<i>DV = Occupational income score (logged)</i>				<i>DV = Duncan socioeconomic index (logged)</i>			
Bureau field office	0.075* (0.020)	0.084* (0.019)	0.041* (0.019)	0.039* (0.019)	0.074* (0.017)	0.081* (0.018)	0.045* (0.017)	0.044* (0.016)
(Intercept)	1.808* (0.035)	2.434* (0.038)	0.946 (0.642)	1.071 (0.713)	1.628* (0.026)	1.983* (0.032)	0.173 (0.599)	0.254 (0.665)
N (individuals)	307,588	307,588	307,588	307,588	307,588	307,588	307,588	307,588
N (counties)	729	729	729	729	729	729	729	729
MSE	1.284	0.932	0.928	0.928	1.161	0.889	0.885	0.885
State fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Demographic controls		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
County controls			✓	✓			✓	✓
Political controls				✓				✓

Note: Entries are linear regression coefficients and standard errors, clustered on county. The dependent variables are listed above each set of columns. *Demographic controls* include individuals’ ages (squared). *Geographic controls* include the latitude and longitude of each county’s centroid, county population in 1860, and percent of Black population in 1860. *Political controls* include the county’s vote for pro-slavery presidents in 1856 (Buchanan) and 1860 (Breckinridge). * indicates $p < .05$ (two-tailed tests).

geographic presence of the Freedmen’s Bureau and the post-Civil War fortunes of Black Americans. I further consider the possibility, however, that the Freedmen’s Bureau had greater effects among some groups than others. In particular, I evaluate the possibility of heterogeneous effects by sex. To do so, I estimate models for each of the three dependent variables studied above using the individual-level 1880 Census data and interact the *Bureau field office* indicator with respondent sex. If the Freedmen’s Bureau provided varying benefits between men and women, I expect to find a statistically significant coefficient on the interaction terms.

The results are shown in Table 5, which show estimates from the fully specified models along with the interaction terms described above. The results provide consistent evidence that the Freedmen’s Bureau had larger effects for Black women. As the first column shows, the coefficient estimate for the constituent term *Bureau field office* indicates that Black men living in counties with a field office location were about 3 percentage points more likely to be literate. While Black women were less literate overall than Black men, as the negative coefficient for *Female* shows, the presence of a field office increased the probability of being literate by one additional percentage point for women than for men. Put differently, the effect of field offices on literacy was about a third larger

for women.

The second and third columns reveal generally similar patterns when evaluating income scores and the Duncan socioeconomic index. As with literacy, Black women in counties without field office locations had significantly lower values of these measures compared to Black men. However, the coefficients on the interaction terms show that field office locations provided significantly greater benefits to Black women than to Black men. While the presence of field offices did not eliminate gender-based disparities in the labor force and socioeconomic status, our estimates imply that the disparities between Black men and women were approximately 5 to 7 percent smaller in counties with them. The results from these models further imply that the effects of field offices on Black economic incomes came primarily through their effects on women. The coefficients for *Bureau field office* in the second and third columns are small in magnitude and not statistically distinguishable from zero, providing no evidence of an association with economic outcomes among men.

Overall, the local presence of the Freedmen's Bureau is associated with significantly better educational and economic outcomes for African Americans, particularly among Black women. These analyses provide new evidence about how state intervention in local communities can affect residents of those communities. The Freedmen's Bureau was likely to have effects that extended beyond educational and economic outcomes, however; given its role in supporting the enfranchisement of new Black voters, it was also likely to have important political consequences. I now investigate this expectation in greater detail.

POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE FREEDMEN'S BUREAU

To study the association between the Freedmen's Bureau and political outcomes, I compare the presidential votes across counties on the basis of the presence of field offices. Chiefly, I expect that the presence of the Freedmen's Bureau supported Black turnout and, in turn, benefited the Republican Party. Three key factors generate this expectation. First, the Freedmen's Bureau was closely involved in Black registration efforts in the South. Black residents who had greater access to the Freedmen's Bureau were likely to have greater opportunity to register and learn how to vote. Second, as Lowe (1993) documents, Freedmen's Bureau field offices played an important role in

Table 5: Freedmen’s Bureau Field Locations and Variation by Sex: Individual-level Evidence from the 1880 Census

	Literacy	Income score	Socioeconomic index
Bureau field office	0.029* (0.007)	-0.007 (0.021)	-0.018 (0.021)
Female	-0.049* (0.003)	-1.823* (0.035)	-1.572* (0.039)
Bureau field office × Female	0.010* (0.004)	0.089* (0.045)	0.120* (0.045)
(Intercept)	0.544 (0.289)	1.092 (0.715)	0.282 (0.665)
N (individuals)	503,651	307,588	307,588
N (counties)	732	732	732
MSE	.414	.928	.884
State fixed effects	✓	✓	✓
Demographic controls	✓	✓	✓
County controls	✓	✓	✓
Political controls	✓	✓	✓

Note: Entries are linear regression coefficients and standard errors, clustered on county. The dependent variables are listed above each column. *Demographic controls* include individuals’ ages (squared). *Geographic controls* include the latitude and longitude of each county’s centroid, county population in 1860, and percent of Black population in 1860. *Political controls* include the county’s vote for pro-slavery presidents in 1856 (Buchanan) and 1860 (Breckinridge). * indicates $p < .05$ (two-tailed tests).

identifying and supporting a local Black political class. The empowerment of local Black political leaders could have generated more enthusiasm for voting among local Black residents. And third, the presence of a Freedmen’s Bureau field office likely served as a sign of the federal government’s interest in ensuring voting access for Black residents of those regions. While individual-level data on voting outcomes is not available for this time period, I expect that Republican presidential candidates fared better in counties with field office locations. Because not all states had been readmitted to the union for the 1868 presidential election, the analysis begins in 1872.

For each election year from 1872 to 1900, I regress the percentage of the vote received by Democratic presidential candidates on *Bureau field office*, state fixed effects, and the battery of

covariates used in the fully specified models estimated above (Black percentage of the population in 1860, county population in 1860, county latitude and longitude, and percentage of the vote received by pro-slavery candidates in 1856 and 1860). Because the increase in the votes received by Republican candidates depends on the size of the Black population, however, I also include the interaction between *Bureau field office* and the Black population in 1860. Bureau field offices should have negligible effects on vote totals in counties with small Black populations because their increased turnout rates would have little impact on the overall vote totals; however, the effects should be more substantial in counties with larger Black populations. I further expect that the effects of field office locations would persist over time, as more Blacks become registered to vote and socialized into the political process, while the support provided for local Black politicians would create political institutions that could continue to mobilize Black voters. However, these effects were unlikely to have persisted indefinitely. Specifically, the introduction of harsh new voting restrictions in state constitutions that coincided with the rise of Jim Crow around 1890 would have likely undercut the persistence of these associations. Therefore, I examine how the relationship between field office locations and presidential election outcomes changed around this time.

The results of these analyses are displayed graphically in Figure 2. Each plotted point shows the difference in support for Democratic candidates based on the presence of a county field office. The dark red points show the results for counties with large Black populations, which I operationalize as counties with the 75th percentile value of Black percentage of the population in 1860 (approximately 50%). The gray points show results for counties with the 5th percentile value of Black percentage of the population in 1860 (approximately 5%).⁴ The horizontal lines are the 95% confidence intervals associated with these estimates and the dashed vertical line shows the null hypothesis of no difference in voting patterns based on the presence of a field office.

The figure reveals three important results. First, prior to the 1892 election, in counties with large Black populations, the presence of a field office is associated with greater support for Republican candidates. Republican candidates in these counties received between 2 and 5 percentage points

⁴The results are not dependent on this particular specification. In additional analyses, I distinguished counties with Black populations in 1860 that were at or above the median county, and interacted this indicator with the presence of a *Bureau field office*. The substantive patterns when using this alternative specification are consistent with those reported in the paper and the inferences remain unchanged.

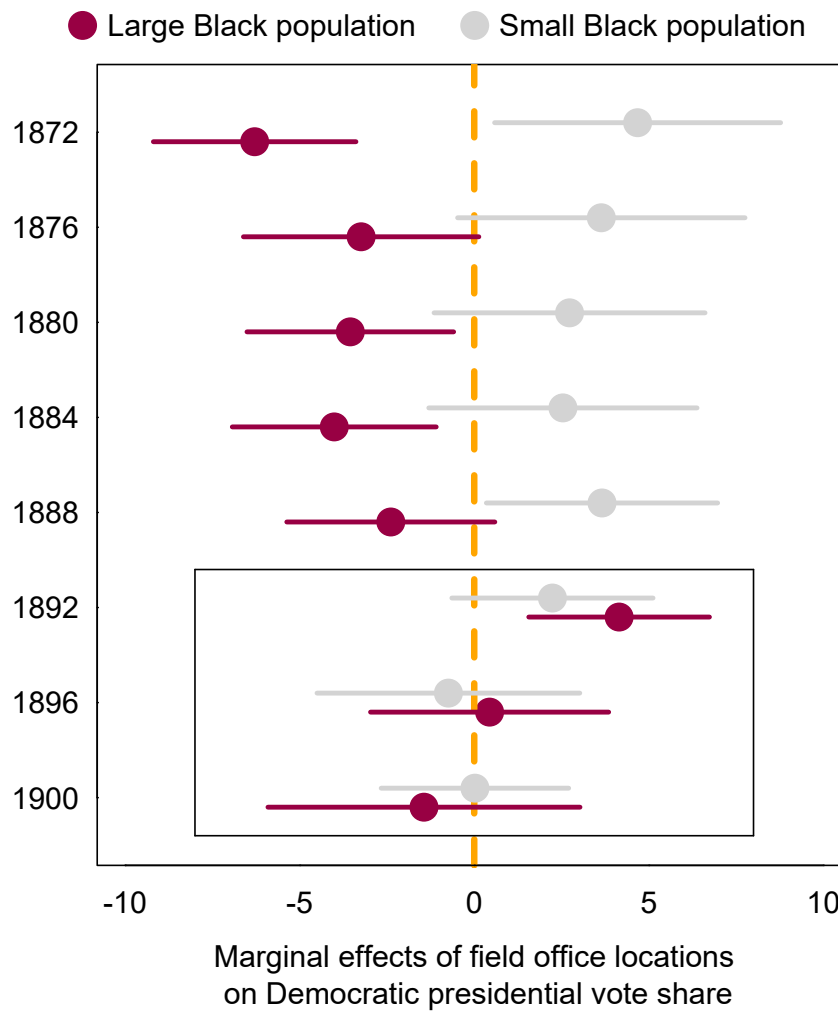
more support compared to otherwise similar counties that lacked a field office location. Somewhat speculatively, yet intriguingly, the magnitude of this relationship could have been large enough to affect which candidate carried several states in this time period. For instance, in the controversial election of 1876, the Republican (Hayes) won South Carolina by less than 0.5 percentage points, and Louisiana by less than four percentage points. Given the concentration of field offices in these states, it is possible that the presence of field offices could have helped Hayes win the state; and without winning these states, it may have been unlikely that other Southern states would have thrown their support from Tilden to Hayes in the Compromise of 1877.

Second, the reverse was generally true for counties with small Black populations. Field offices were associated with *more* support for Democratic candidates in these counties, which could reflect greater electoral hostility among whites toward Blacks in these areas. Overall, then, the effects of field offices on political outcomes was significantly moderated by county racial composition.

Third, and perhaps most interestingly, these two patterns disappear with the rise of Jim Crow and new voting restrictions on African Americans. In the elections of 1892, 1896, and 1900, there are no significant differences in the political consequences of field offices based on the Black percentage of the population. In both 1896 and 1900, moreover, field offices have no association with voting outcomes regardless of the size of the Black population. Therefore, any effect the Freedmen's Bureau may have had on local political outcomes appeared to have been undone by the imposition of new voting restrictions on African Americans.

The results presented above complement the findings regarding the association between the Freedmen's Bureau and educational and labor force outcomes. By serving as an indicator of the state in regions where slavery had previously been dominant for decades, if not centuries, the evidence is consistent with the hypothesis that the Freedmen's Bureau helped ensure the political power of newly-enfranchised Blacks. The informal institutions and behaviors that were affected by the Freedmen's Bureau appeared to persist for several decades; yet as the federal government retreated from intervention in the South, white Democrats revised formal institutions to disenfranchise Black voters and suppress their potential political power.

Figure 2: Freedmen’s Bureau Field Locations, Black Population, and County Presidential Vote Shares



Points show the differences in Democratic presidential vote shares for counties with and without Freedmen’s Bureau field office locations. Points shown in grey indicate counties with 5% Black population (the 25th percentile value) and points shown in red indicate counties with 50% Black population (the 75th percentile value). The horizontal lines indicate the 95% confidence intervals. Points in the inset box indicate years following the adoption of Jim Crow laws in the South.

CONCLUSION

The Union’s victory in a war fought over slavery raised clear questions about how to protect and advance the civil, political, and economic rights of newly-freed Blacks. A coalition of politically motivated Republicans and voluntary associations turned to bureaucracy as the answer. The Freedmen’s Bureau represented an historic use of federal power to intervene in local communities

during peacetime. While the Freedmen's Bureau existence may have been short-lived, the results presented in this paper indicate that its impact was anything but limited. The data suggest that the Bureau's geographic locations were associated with more favorable educational and economic outcomes and greater political influence for Black individuals and communities.

In providing new evidence in support of the efficacy of state-based social welfare programs, the results in this paper suggest that the nineteenth-century American state was stronger than depicted by conventional accounts. Consistent with structural accounts of the Freedmen's Bureau's disbandment (e.g., Lieberman 1994), the relatively limited capacity of the nineteenth-century American state may have reflected *political* opposition to federal government rather than an inherent weakness of the federal bureaucracy to perform tasks assigned to it. Not only may the structural attributes of bureaucracy reflect political decision making processes (e.g., Moe 1985), but so too does the *choice* to entrust new responsibilities to the state. In addition, the findings on offer may suggest an additional explanation for the Freedmen's Bureau's demise in which the Bureau was *too* successful in advancing the rights and status of freed Blacks such that northern whites were responsive to calls for its disbandment.

The data and methods used in this paper have several important limitations, however. First, the 'treatment' – the assignment of Bureau field offices to counties – was not randomized, which presents inferential challenges for interpreting the coefficient estimates displayed above. While it is likely that the findings represent an underestimate of the association between the Freedmen's Bureau and Black economic and political outcomes, the degree of bias remains unknown. Detecting more robust identification strategies is an important opportunity for future research. Second, and setting aside the issue of identification, the treatment as characterized here is relatively blunt. Not all freedpersons may have been equally likely to access the resources offered by the Freedmen's Bureau; for instance, some laborers may have been more likely than others to utilize the Bureau's assistance when entering into labor contracts. Given the recent availability of detailed Bureau records containing the names of individuals, future research could focus on matching these archival records with individual Census data. Finally, the data presented here do not provide an assessment of the social impact of the Freedman's Bureau. Some scholars have argued that the Freedmen's Bureau institutionalized

separate labor markets for Black and white Americans, helping to perpetuate segregation. The data used in this project do not allow me to distinguish these effects, or to characterize whether the Freedmen's Bureau was optimally designed given the stated goals of its proponents.

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