

What was changed with the edit? What remained the same? How might the changes impact audience understanding or engagement with this topic?

Excerpt from “Undemocratic Democracy” by Jamelle Bouie

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.

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“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 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.”

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“But immense power at home could not compensate for declining power in national politics. Despite the Three-Fifths Clause in Article I of the Constitution, which gave enslavers an almost uninterrupted hold on the presidency from 1789 to 1850, there were clear signs in the first decades of the nineteenth century that the South’s influence was coming to an end. Immigration to the North and the growth of the North’s white population in general, as well as the growth of the free Northwest, threatened Southern dominance in Congress. Major rebellions of enslaved people in Louisiana and Virginia, as well as the rise of Haiti as an independent Black nation, left the owners of enslaved people paranoid to the point of hysteria. A steady stream of escaped enslaved men and women threatened the defense of chattel slavery, as the formerly enslaved unsettled the ideological foundations of the South with their own lives and testimony. And the movement to end slavery, once a small fringe, had gained strength and numbers, as well as new arguments and new advocates. By the 1840s, political abolition had come into its own as a movement with real weight on the stage of American politics.”