

Demography or Violence? A Study of Political Change in Reconstruction-era South Carolina

South Carolina

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Abstract

The era of Reconstruction brought about great change in South Carolina on all levels of life. This project is an examination of the underlying causes of the major political change that occurred during the 1876 gubernatorial election and resulted in the election of Wade Hampton, who would pave the way for the development of the "Solid South" as the first Democratic Governor of South Carolina after the Civil War. This study primarily focuses on the role that violence, and more specifically rifle clubs, played in the 1876 election and trying to answer the question of whether it was the deciding factor in boosting Wade Hampton to the Governor's Office in Columbia.

Introduction and Research Question

This project is basically intended to determine the role that rifle clubs played in the election of 1876 through geographic distribution and voting results.

Results and Discussion

A comparison of the distribution of rifle clubs in South Carolina to the state's electoral returns and demographic makeup reveals that the Red Shirts most likely played a role in the election of Wade Hampton as Governor in 1876. However, this association is not nearly as clear as many historians make it. Although rifle clubs likely influenced the election in counties where the population of blacks and whites was relatively equal, their presence did not prevent any of the overwhelmingly black counties that voted for Chamberlain to vote Democratic. Having said this, the influence of rifle clubs is often overstated. They certainly helped to swing the election to Hampton by influencing the race in key swing counties, making a large difference in a race that was won by only 1,134 votes, with 50.3% of all votes being cast for Hampton and 49.7% for Chamberlain. However, they did not have the effect of intimidating black voters across the whole state, who's unshakable participation is clearly seen in the fourteen counties won by Chamberlain. The close election certainly lends credence to the argument that rifle clubs, although ultimately effective in their campaign of intimidation, failed to produce the crushing victory they had hoped for.

Historical Background

The era of Reconstruction was one of the most critical eras in the formation of political ideals that would endure well into the nineteenth century. After the overthrow of President Johnson's Reconstruction plans, the Radical Republicans implemented their own plan for Reconstruction of the South that was significantly more severe and penalized the South for the role it played in the Civil War. The acceptance of the Fourteenth Amendment brought suffrage to African Americans for the first time—the majority in Southern states such as South Carolina. Black voting behavior resulted in the election of Republicans to positions of power in Southern states. In South Carolina, this was embodied in the 1874 Gubernatorial victory of Massachusetts-born Daniel Chamberlain. Republican takeover of South Carolina politics forced Democrats on the defensive, and in retaliation South Carolina Democrats, led by Martin W. Gary among others, advocated a policy of force and intimidation in order to deter blacks from voting that was modeled on the Mississippi Plan. The election of 1876 was the first major implementation of the Edgefield Plan, the use of the Mississippi Plan in South Carolina, and was manifested in the creation of rifle clubs—organizations who, despite their name, were generally made up of former Confederates and intended only to intimidate black and Republican voters. These clubs were widespread, and in 1877 Chamberlain estimated that their membership at the time of the election was around 14,500, almost 20% of the total white population of the state. Their impact on the election is widely acknowledged by historians and instances of violence and intimidation are well-documented, although their geographic distribution across South Carolina is not.

Location of Individual Rifle Clubs in South Carolina, 1876

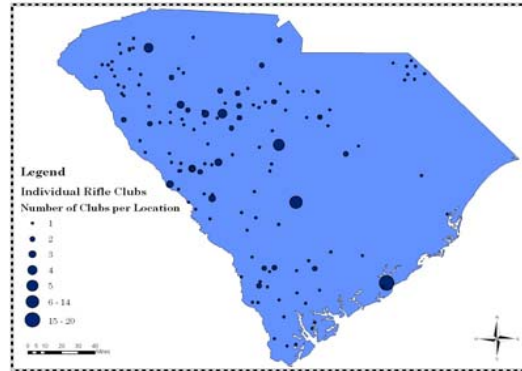


Figure 3. The figure above on the left shows the location of individual rifle clubs in South Carolina around the time of the 1876 election, and reveals instances in which more than one rifle club was located in one place. The map is revealing in a number of ways. It shows that generally, rifle clubs were more prevalent and widespread in the piedmont and upstate, which coincidentally had a greater white population. Despite this fact, it is interesting to note that the largest outbreak of violence involving rifle clubs was in Charleston in 1876. Further, rifle clubs were generally less common in the counties that voted for Chamberlain in the 1876 election—typically counties with a greater black population.

Estimated Number of Rifle Clubs in South Carolina by County, 1876

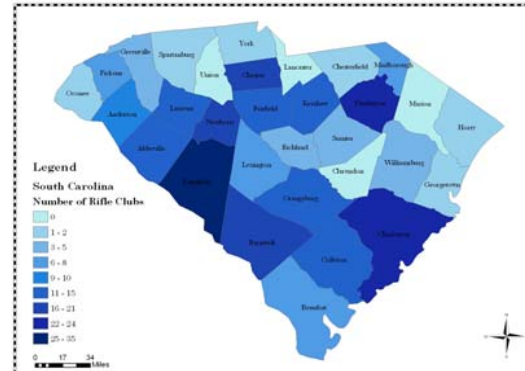


Figure 4. The figure above further describes the distribution of rifle clubs across the state, showing a county-by-county breakdown of rifle clubs. Although the distribution of rifle clubs clearly is prevalent throughout the state, this map corroborates the observation that the counties won by Chamberlain, other than Charleston, are generally on the lower echelon in terms of rifle club number. However, locational data was unavailable for five counties, of which only Lancaster and Marion would possibly impact this conclusion.

Data Collection and Methodology

Data collection was the most difficult and time consuming step in this study. In order to gather information about South Carolina's Rifle Clubs it was necessary to examine both primary and secondary documents. I compiled my list of rifle clubs from these documents, augmenting a list made by Governor Daniel Chamberlain in 1876 of organizations that were active around the state. Documents used included the records of the S.C. House of Representatives, Congressional Testimony, newspaper accounts, memoirs and other first-hand accounts written during the heyday of the Red Shirt campaign. The list included locations of where a majority of the clubs were located, and this was used to determine GPS coordinates for each club, using a combination of S.C. Department of Transportation highway maps, county histories, and Google Earth technology. The finished data includes data on the location, name, and president of each rifle club, and encompasses around 250 clubs.

ArcMap Methodology

For the purposes of this study I started at the lowest level with raw demographic and historical data. My study did not require much GIS manipulation of the data other than getting it in the proper format and into ArcMap; however, the difficulty and time investment in the project was in actually obtaining usable historical data. Perhaps the most difficult step in the entire study was finding coordinates for each rifle club. A great deal of the towns and settlements in which the clubs were formed no longer exist, and this certainly made finding them much more difficult. The next step was importing it into a map of South Carolina selected from a larger HUSCO map of the United States, where the county-level data was then displayed using graduated colors. After adjusting the data divisions into meaningful categories, the maps could then be finalized by tweaking cosmetic details of the legend, compass rose, scale, title, layout and page setup. The data on individual rifle club locations had to be imported as x and y coordinates into ArcMap, where I then displayed it using varying sized points in order to show the instances in which more than one club fell in the same city or town.

Projection Information

Figures 1, 2 and 4 are all from LSU's Historical United States County Boundary Files (HUSCO), and use the North American Datum of 1927 (NAD27) with a Transverse Mercator Projection. Figure 3 uses the Transverse Mercator Projection using UTM Zone 17.

1876 Gubernatorial Election Results in South Carolina by County

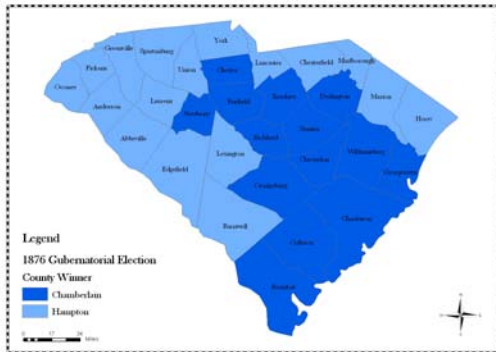
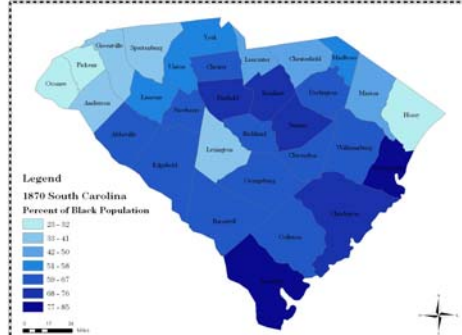


Figure 1. The above map depicts the winner of each county in the election of 1876. Clearly, Hampton's strongest support was in the upcountry and surrounding areas while Chamberlain made a strong showing in the midlands and lowcountry.

Figure 2. The map below provides the demographic breakdown of the state at the time of the 1870 Federal Census. It clearly shows a greater concentration of African Americans than whites, and depicts the black population in terms of a percentage of total county population.

Percentage of Black Population to Total Population, 1870 South Carolina Federal Census



Major Sources

LSU Geoscience Publications—Historical United States County Boundary Files (HUSCO), University of Virginia Library Historical Census Browser, U.S. Congressional Testimony – "South Carolina in 1876" and numerous other primary and secondary sources (see attached bibliography)

Acknowledgements

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