

Homefront: Black Veterans and Black Voters in the Civil Rights Era

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What is the effect of Black service in World War II on Black political participation? In particular, did Black voting increase more rapidly in areas with veterans after the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA)? While the narrative history of the Civil Rights Movement has long noted the role of Black servicemembers in positions of leadership, we do not know how that translated into broader-scale political activity in the Black community. That is, we do not know whether communities with more veterans became more politically active overall. Specifically, we do not know how to disentangle those results from general changes in Black political participation (Cascio and Washington, 2014).

To answer this question, we combine detailed information on military enlistment for World War II with pre- and post-VRA voter registration data by race to estimate the impact of Black military participation on Black voting outcomes. Exploiting the variation in Black enlistment in World War II with subsequent voter registration data by race, we seek to measure the impact of Black enlistment in Black voter registration. We find that counties with more Black WWII enlistees had significantly higher Black voter registration post-VRA than other counties. Our estimates show that each additional Black WWII en-

listee resulted in roughly two additional Black registered voters after the VRA.

I. Background

More than one million African Americans served in the military in World War II. The segregated military service relegated Black servicemembers to second-class status in most dimensions of the military. Arguments of general inferiority, unfitness for combat, and perceived comparative advantage in support roles led to a uniquely contradictory element of service. Upon returning to the United States, many Black veterans were frustrated by the continuation of segregation and exclusion from the political process, and they began mobilizing for voting rights. Narrative histories of the Civil Rights Movement establish that Black veterans played key roles in the Civil Rights Movement (Morris, 1984; Payne, 1995; Tyson, 1999; Klinkner and Smith, 1999).¹

What is less well researched is whether this military service played a causal and systemic role in political outcomes more broadly. More recent work has stressed that military service did play a role in Civil Rights activism (Parker, 2009a,b). Stressing the mechanism that foreign service gave Black veterans a new racial perspective that they used to challenge White supremacy in the South. Military service could also

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¹ Salient examples abound: Medgar Evers returned from military service and formed a small group of Black veterans to register to vote in 1946 in Mississippi. The veterans were prevented from actually casting their ballots by a White mob on election day. Amzie Moore was similarly motivated by his experience serving in the Army during the War. In particular, he was struck by the maintenance of segregated facilities in remote military installations. He went on to organize the Regional Council of Negro Leadership (RCNL) which worked closely with national organizations on Black voter registration.

give one practical skills (logistics, planning, communication, etc.) that would be key for mobilizing and deploying Blacks in Civil Rights organizations and in developing new organizations with broad geographic coverage. Research on high-risk political participation, voting, has been linked to Black military service (Parker, 2009b), but we do not know if this spilled over to increased participation among non-veterans.

II. Data

A. World War II Enlistment Records

We use the US Army enlistment records for World War II provided by the National Archives Administration (NARA).² The military records recorded the race and the state and county of origin for the enlisted. This information allows us to construct a county-level data of the enlisted by race. Between states, overall mobilization varied between forty and fifty-five percent (Acemoglu, Autor and Lyle, 2004), but the variation within states was substantial and driven by a number of idiosyncratic factors. Since military enlistment was driven by state-level quotas for men, draft boards varied in their application of recruitment criteria, and estimates at the time are that one fifth of the eligible male population would serve in the war, the random nature of county level *variation* in black military service is well established.

B. Southern Voter Registration, 1958 to 1968

The Civil Rights Act of 1957 created the Civil Rights Commission (CCR) to investigate, report and make recommendations regarding civil rights in the US. Among its many activities, the Commission produced three reports regarding the political and voting rights of African Americans in the US South. These reports collected and reported voter registration counts for various states, by county and race. In order to construct voter registration rates by race, we

²For an exhaustive description of their content, see Birchenall and Koch (2015).

divide by the population eligible to vote by race in each county and year.³

III. Econometric Approach

Our empirical approach is a straightforward difference-in-differences specification which exploits county-level variation in enlistment by race and pre/post timing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Since the VRA was a national policy and unrelated to county-level variation in Black WWII enlistment, the estimates from such an approach identify the impact of additional black enlistments on Black voter registration after the VRA. The baseline specification is:

$$(1) \quad \text{registration}_{ct} = \alpha + \gamma_c + \delta_t + \beta \text{enlistments}_c \times \text{post-VRA}_t + \epsilon_{ct}$$

where registration_{ct} is the number of Black voter registrations in county c at time t , enlistments_c is the number of Black enlistments in county c , and post-VRA_t is an indicator equal to 1 if the year is after the VRA of 1965. The coefficient of interest, $\hat{\beta}$, measures the differential change in the number of Black voter registrations after the VRA attributable to additional Black enlistments.⁴

Identification in equation 1 relies on several assumptions that underlie the difference-in-differences framework. First, counties with low levels of Black enlistments must share a common support with counties with high levels of casualties. The

³The denominator is calculated from the 1960 and 1970 Census tabulations available in Haines and Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (2010). The Commission reports made similar attempts to appropriately scale the voter registration counts, and we also provide specifications based on those numbers below. The 1959 and 1961 reports list the registration counts for the previous year, while the 1968 report lists the counts for 1965 (i.e., before the passage and enforcement of the 1965 Voting Rights Act) and 1968 (after the Act's passage and enforcement). We provide estimates for a wide array of samples and including state fixed effects, to ensure that whatever patterns we find are not an artifact of inconsistent data availability.

⁴We include time fixed effects δ_t to account for unobservable factors that vary across time, but not counties, in addition to county fixed effects γ_c to control for time-invariant unobservable factors that vary across counties.

second assumption is that there cannot have been any anticipation effects wherein Black voter registration started increasing prior to World War II enlistments. The history surrounding the United States' involvement in the war suggests that this is unlikely.⁵ The third and final assumption required is that of parallel trends, in which the absence of World War II, all counties would have experienced the same growth in Black registration, regardless of their level of Black enlistments. We can estimate an additional specification that lends support to the credibility of the assumption with an event study specification:

$$(2) \quad \text{registration}_{ct} = \phi_t + \sum_{t=1958}^{1968} \delta_t \mathbb{1}(\text{year} = t) \times \text{enlistments}_c + \epsilon_{ct}$$

where we replace the interaction of enlistments and the indicator for being observed in the post-VRA period with a set of interactions between the enlistment rate and each year. If there were no differential trends then the coefficient estimates on the interaction terms in the pre-VRA period should not be statistically different from 0.

IV. Descriptive and motivating statistics

The CCR reports characterize the extent of voter registration by race for several southern states at several points of time through the late 1950s and 1960s. Table 1 notes the summary measures for voter registration and enlistment. The White voter registration rate is consistently greater than fifty percent in most of the southern counties, while for Blacks the voter registration rate is only 1/3 for the top quartile of counties before the VRA. White voter registration is not static over time; it appears to grow over time, though not at the same dramatic rate. Between 1965 and 1968, the number of Black registered voters more than doubles at the median. Not surprisingly, voter registration rates in 1958 were

⁵Similarly, Black disenfranchisement took place long before the generation of Word War II servicemembers were born.

low for Blacks across the South, with substantial geographic variation. There is also substantial within-state variation in Black enlistment.⁶

V. Empirical Results

Table 2 shows the results of both the difference-in-differences and event study specifications. The event-study specifications in Column 1 confirms the parallel trends assumption—only the interaction of the post-VRA year (1968) and Black enlistees results in a change of the time trend.⁷ Overall, the estimates show that post-VRA Black voter registration was significantly greater in counties with more Black enlistees. The difference-in-difference specification in Column 2 shows that Black enlistees increased Black voter registration by roughly two votes per enlistee after the VRA. A county moving from the 25th to the 50th percentile in Black WWII enlistees would have between 268 and 324 additional Black registered voters. Relative to a median of 1,602 Black voter registrations across all counties in 1968, this is more than a 16% increase in Black voter registration, a sizable result. The same specification with county-fixed effects (Column 3) shows a slightly stronger result, at more than two additional Black registrations per enlistee.

VI. Conclusion

Exploiting the variation in Black enlistment in World War II with subsequent voter registration data by race, we measured the impact of Black enlistment in Black voter registration. We find that counties with more Black WWII enlistees had significantly higher Black voter registration

⁶Overall, the enlistment rate in levels tended to be lower for African Americans than for Whites for a variety of reasons, as discussed in Birchenall and Koch (2015).

⁷In a separate set of regressions, we consider Black enlistment rate rather than the number of Black enlistees as the dependent variable. As with the number of enlistees, the estimates show that post-VRA Black voter registration was significantly greater in counties with a higher Black enlistment rate.

post VRA than other counties. Our estimates show that each additional Black WWII enlistee resulted in two additional Black registered voters after the VRA. The results here imply that Black military service increased political participation by Black Americans above the level inspired by broader changes in voting rights. In related results consistent with those presented here, we show that state-level variation in Black enlistment is positively related to several measures of Black political activism during the Civil Rights Era. The likelihood of an NAACP office in the county and the presence of other Black political organizations (SCLS, SNCC, CORE, etc.). Interestingly, the number of Black enlistees is also related to the likelihood of White political organizations and racial violence in the county. In total, the results imply that Black WWII enlistment enhanced both Black political participation and White political backlash.

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TABLE 1—SUMMARY STATISTICS OF COUNTY-LEVEL WORLD WAR II SERVICE AND VOTER REGISTRATION IN THE SOUTH BY RACE.

	White			Black		
	Median	25th	75th	Median	25th	75th
<u>WWII Service</u>						
Mortality	17	9	33	2	0	4
Rate of Enlisted	0.024	0.020	0.029	0.007	0.000	0.011
Enlisted	695	386	1252	221	82	496
Rate of Eligible	0.208	0.151	0.249	0.179	0.131	0.229
Drafted	532	302	994	205	74	483
<u>Voter Registration</u>						
Year						
1958	5,750	3,225	10,900	362	48	953
Rate	0.746	0.533	0.928	0.206	0.085	0.334
1960	6,212	3,310	12,577	400	54	1,204
1965	4,670	1,860	9,188	721	248	1,588
1968	7,610	4,176	14,226	1,602	739	3,060

Note: County-level measures of military service in World War II from NARA enlistment records and mortality records. Voter registration data from CCR reports of various years.

TABLE 2—EFFECT OF BLACK MILITARY PARTICIPATION ON SUBSEQUENT BLACK VOTER REGISTRATION.

VARIABLES	Non-White Voter Registration		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
1960	-66.04 (290.9)		
1965	192.3 (232.2)		
1968	-416.3 (288.1)		
Black WWII Enlistees	2.457*** (0.458)	2.923*** (0.457)	
1960*Black WWII Enlistees	0.909 (0.878)		
1965*Black WWII Enlistees	0.812 (0.675)		
1968*Black WWII Enlistees	4.219*** (0.721)		
Post VRA of 1965		21.92 (275.9)	-124.4* (70.99)
Post VRA of 1965*Black WWII Enlistees		1.931*** (0.734)	2.334*** (0.0675)
Constant	1.059 (155.7)	-44.63 (153.5)	1,252*** (36.19)
Observations	3,158	3,158	3,158
R-squared	0.708	0.646	0.919
Year	FE	Pre/Post	Pre/Post
County	No FE	No FE	FE

Note: Outcome variable is the number of non-White voter registrations. See text for data sources..