

# Homefront: Black Veterans and Black Voters in the Civil Rights Era<sup>†</sup>

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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 more Black 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 service members 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 patterns 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

enlistee 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 service members 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 it (Morris 1984, Payne 1995, Tyson 1999, Klinkner and Smith 1999).<sup>1</sup>

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), emphasizing 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 give one practical skills (logistics, planning, communication, etc.) that would be key for mobilizing and deploying Blacks in civil rights organizations

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<sup>†</sup>Go to <https://doi.org/10.1257/pandp.20211070> to visit the article page for additional materials and author disclosure statement(s).

<sup>1</sup>Salient examples abound: Medgar Evers returned from military service and formed a small group of Black veterans to register to vote in Mississippi in 1946. 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, which worked closely with national organizations on Black voter registration.

and in developing new organizations with broad geographic coverage. In 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 nonveterans.

## 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).<sup>2</sup> The military records recorded the race and the state and county of origin for the enlisted. This information allows us to construct county-level data of the enlisted by race. Between states, overall mobilization varied between 40 and 55 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 Commission on Civil Rights (CCR) to investigate, report, and make recommendations regarding civil rights in the United States. 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 divide by the population eligible to vote by race in each county and year.<sup>3</sup>

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

<sup>3</sup>The 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

## III. Econometric Approach

Our empirical approach is a straightforward difference-in-difference specification that exploits county-level variation in enlistment by race and pre/post timing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.<sup>4</sup> 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

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

where  $\text{registration}_{ct}$  is the number of Black voter registrations in county  $c$  at time  $t$ ,  $\text{enlistments}_c$  is the number of Black enlistments in county  $c$ , and  $\text{post-VRA}_t$  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.<sup>5</sup>

Identification in equation (1) relies on several assumptions that underlie the difference-in-difference framework. First, counties with low levels of Black enlistment must share a common support with counties with high levels of enlistment. The second assumption is that there cannot have been any anticipation effects whereby 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.<sup>6</sup>

the passage and enforcement of the 1965 VRA) and 1968 (after the act's passage and enforcement). We provide estimates for a wide array of samples and include state fixed effects to ensure that whatever patterns we find are not an artifact of inconsistent data availability.

<sup>4</sup>See Cook et al. (2020) for a similar methodology using white casualties.

<sup>5</sup>We include time fixed effects  $\delta_t$  to account for unobservable factors that vary across time but not counties, in addition to county fixed effects  $\gamma_c$  to control for time-invariant unobservable factors that vary across counties.

<sup>6</sup>Similarly, Black disenfranchisement took place long before the generation of World War II servicemembers were born.

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
WWII Service						
Count mortality	17	9	33	2	0	4
Mortality rate of enlisted	0.024	0.020	0.029	0.007	0.000	0.011
Count enlisted	695	386	1,252	221	82	496
Enlisted rate of eligible	0.208	0.151	0.249	0.179	0.131	0.229
Total drafted	532	302	994	205	74	483
Voter registration						
1958 count	5,750	3,225	10,900	362	48	953
1958 rate	0.746	0.533	0.928	0.206	0.085	0.334
1960 count	6,212	3,310	12,577	400	54	1,204
1965 count	4,670	1,860	9,188	721	248	1,588
1968 count	7,610	4,176	14,226	1,602	739	3,060

Notes: 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. Enlistment and mortality counts for service members who lived in county prior to service. Denominator for rates are derived from census counts of service-eligible men (for WWII service) or Black citizens of voting age (for registration).

The third and final assumption required is that of parallel trends in which, in 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:

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

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 50 percent in most of the southern counties, while for Blacks the voter registration rate is only one-third 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 low for Blacks across the South, with substantial geographic variation. There is also substantial within-state variation in Black enlistment.<sup>7</sup>

#### V. Empirical Results

Table 2 shows the results of both the difference-in-difference and event study specifications. Overall, the estimates show that post-VRA, Black voter registration was significantly greater in counties with more Black enlistees. The specification with county fixed effects (column 1) shows a strong relationship between Black military service and subsequent nonwhite voter registration: more than two additional Black registrations per enlistee. The difference-in-difference specification in column 2 shows that Black enlistees increased Black

<sup>7</sup>Overall, 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).

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

Variables	Nonwhite voter registration		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
1960			-66.04 (290.9)
1965			192.3 (232.2)
1968			-416.3 (288.1)
Black WWII enlistees	2.923 (0.457)		2.457 (0.458)
1960			0.909 (0.878)
× Black WWII enlistees			
1965			0.812 (0.675)
× Black WWII enlistees			
1968			4.219 (0.721)
× Black WWII enlistees			
Post-VRA	-124.4 (70.99)	21.92 (275.9)	
Post-VRA	2.334 (0.0675)	1.931 (0.734)	
× Black WWII enlistees			
Constant	1,252 (36.19)	-44.63 (153.5)	1.059 (155.7)
Observations	3,158	3,158	3,158
R <sup>2</sup>	0.919	0.646	0.708
Year fixed effects	No	No	Yes
County fixed effects	Yes	No	No

Notes: Outcome variable is the number of nonwhite voter registrations. See text for data sources.

voter registration by roughly two votes per enlistee after the VRA. A county moving from the twenty-fifth to the fiftieth 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 percent increase in Black voter registration, a sizable result. The event study specification in column 3 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.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup>In 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.

## 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 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, such as the likelihood of a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People office in the county and the presence of other Black political organizations (Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Congress of Racial Equity, 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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